



# Information

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One sunny and beautiful day.

Nicole decided to end her husband's life.

A husband who dragged and forced her to become his wife, and locked her up.

A husband who has put her whole family in misery.

But she didn't know then.

She didn't expect all that to be an irrevocable mistake.

\*\*\*

In her first life, he taught her hate.

In her second life, he taught her the pain of an unrequited love.

In her first life, she was his only wife.

In her second life, she became his most loyal confidant.

In her first life, she aided and abetted his pain, she ended his life.

In her second life, now she's trying to save him.

So Nicole, when she returned in time,  
decided to become the mistress of her ex-husband, Grand  
Duke Valentine.

To gain the power to protect themselves.

She needed the strength to protect her precious Grand Duke  
Valentine and her family.

# **Chapter 0**

# Prologue

“Ah, heut...”

*Klak. klak.* <sup>1</sup>This is sound of clattering

There was a constant squelching sound of flesh touching flesh.

“A little, slowly. It’s feels so weird..... It’s.... Please....”

Nicole said as if in a confusing dream.

“No way.”

Raul grabbed Nicole by the shoulder.

He put his palm between the bed and her head and protected her head.

It seemed like a caring act, but the truth is, Nicole was unable to move and had no choice but to keep letting him pierce her bottom.

“*Huu, uet...*”

Nicole only let out a hot breath with her knees spread out as he pounded her g\*nitals.

“Huh, oh, *ung*, please stop..... How many times have I already..... You’ve done it several times.”

*Klak. Klak.*

There was a moist squelching sound coming from their joined flesh. Raul turned his back lightly.

*Toong. Toong.*

As his g\*nitals rubbed, Nicole's body became softer and tightened around Raul. Her inner walls that touched his was w\*t.

*"Huu, heuk!"*

Nicole shook her slim lower abdomen, feeling the peak that was about to come.

*"Haaah... Hang in there, not yet."*

Raul leaned over. Their upper bodies rubbed together.

Through their touching flesh, she could feel Raul's strong and tight muscles wriggling in sweat.

His lips bit Nicole's lower lip.

It's cold.

A stark sound tickled her ears.

*'I feel like I'm going to be swallowed up.'*

This man is a ruler, a male.

Anything caught in his grasp will be devoured.

So Nicole hated everything her husband gave her.

From the food she eats, to the clothes she wears. A prison-like room, the confusion and even the horror he gives. Even the humiliation of being a possessed.

*"Huu, eut... eut..."*

And this kind of feeling right now.

Even this muddy pl\*asure that comes from their muddy bottoms.

Nicole hated everything about this marriage.

*"Why do you look like that?"*

He moved his hand to her cheek and looked into Nicole's eyes.

*"Huh, uh... uh... uh....."*

Raul held Nicole's lower jaw gently and prevented her from looking away.

*"Look at me, I'm your husband. The husband you seduced, and whom you dragged yourself into bed with."*

Raul whispered. Tears trickled down Nicole's eyes.

Her whole body trembled. Her sobbing grew stronger.

*Puck, puck.*

His thick g\*nitals lined with thick veins stuck in contact to her hole and hit it violently again.

It was as if a big stick is hitting her body in and out.

Whenever Raul's g\*nitals hit her insides and went out, she felt a sense of emptiness. On the contrary, when it came deep, it felt so tight that it filled her whole body to the point that it made her sob automatically.

Nicole looked at the ceiling with a shrill moan.

For the past five years, her husband Raul hasn't spent the night with her. Finally, their marriage was completed today.

And over those five years, Raul took Nicole's everything and destroyed her.

Fragmented pleasure poured into such her broken and shattered body.

*"Oh, haah. Ugh....."*

Tears streamed down. Raul leaned over Nicole and licked the tears.

As if her tears aren't free.

*"Ah, ah, ah!"*

Nicole's pointed n\*pple shook in the air following Raul's movement.

Her nerves were on edge. Her hair shook like a wave, and every time he drove in, her white flesh around her gaping hole and her b\*ttocks shook gently.

*"Hu, heut..... It's so... strange...."*

Her eyes were foggy before she knew it. So she doesn't know if this is a dream or a reality.

Nicole wanted this to be real. Today's decision was something that was hard to do twice in reality.

Raul's massive g\*nitals haunted Nicole for a long time. In time, it was not until Nicole was half faint with pl\*asure that Raul inserted his g\*nitals deep into her depths.

*“Hu, heuk. Heuk!”*

Hot cl\*max spread throughout her body. Is this her third, or is it her fourth?

Blurry s\*men flowed down her hole that seemed to be overflowing.

‘Is it over?’

Nicole opened her eyes and looked at Raul. *Sigh*, she stretched out her arms and hugged Raul.

It was almost an unconscious move.

And Nicole thought desperately.

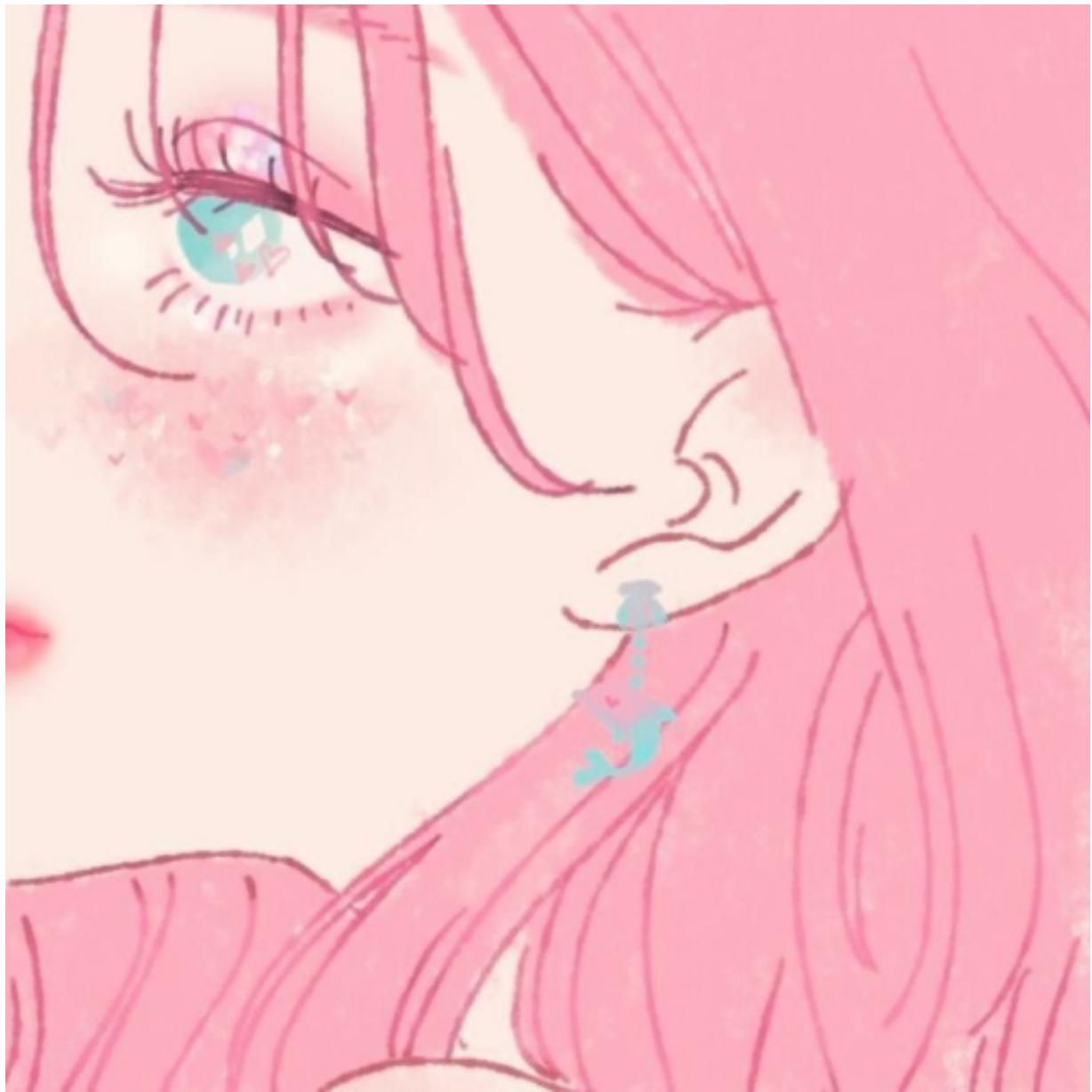
The best and most beautiful man in the world. the treasure of the empire, the only Grand Duke of Valentine.

Let the end of this man be tainted with her own death.

Because tonight’s love affair is completed.

Nicole decided to die with him. Today was the last day of her life that she decided.

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## Footnote

- 1  
This is sound of clattering

# Chapter 1

-5 hours ago

Nicole sat on the dressing table and looked at herself quietly in the mirror.

In the mirror, a pale woman in a thin sky blue silk pajama was sitting.

Today was Nicole's fifth wedding anniversary.

⟨Long live the princess!⟩

⟨Honor to Grand Duke Valentine, who protects the capital!⟩

At the same time, today was also the Coming-of-Age Ceremony of the youngest princess, the golden leaf of the imperial family. The Imperial family and the Grand Duke offered free food and alcohol to the citizens.

Already, the grand fireworks display has ended and joy overflowed throughout the capital.

Grand Duke Valentine, the owner of this grand residence, attended the imperial party.

Thanks to this, every employee of the Grand Duke was also given a vacation.

The only people left out today were Grand Duke Valentine and Nicole.

'There are days when this big house is this quiet. Good for me.'

Her husband would have attended the feast of the princess' coming of age today.

〈The fake Grand Duchess of dirty, traitorous descent will be divorced, and the princess will be the new Grand Duchess.〉

A rumor that has been circulating throughout the capital for some time now. Thanks to this, it is said that even dogs passing by on the street curse the Grand Duchess.

The news came to Nicole's ears, too. But now Nicole is no longer angry about the little things. On the contrary, it was very peaceful.

'Today has finally come.'

Nicole, 25 years old, reflected on her decision.

The most precious Grand Duke in the world. The beautiful man who defends the capital and gets everyone's praise.

The arrogant guy who doesn't look at her and only knows himself.

'He never touched me throughout our marriage. But tonight will be different.'

Then Nicole will kill her husband. And Nicole will die, too.

'I will finally be at peace.'

Even in these numerous accusations of being in the position of a fake Grand Duchess of traitorous descent. Even in this death row where she never knows when she's going to die.

She will finally be liberated from this punishment-like life.

She decided to disappear quietly as if she had never been unhappy in this world.

\* \* \*

Each unhappy couple in the world has their own reasons.

But a wife as awful and disgraceful as Nicole would be rare.

'It's natural that it doesn't make sense for someone with a traitorous family like me to become a Grand Duchess.'

At one time, Nicole's family was one of the seven most powerful aristocrats in the capital.

However, 25 years ago, her family was involved in a major treason case and ended up in contempt.

Being a descendant of a traitor in an empire meant that she could not survive. Even if they are alive, they are reduced to state-owned slaves.

Nicole's mother, Freya, was the eldest daughter of a traitorous family. Her mother lived in the deep mountain with her family.

She doesn't know exactly when her father and mother met.

But what is certain is that by the time Nicole grew up, she had already had their third and youngest baby.

‘When I was young, it was frustrating to live in hiding. It’s only after I left did I realize it was paradise.’

There was a time when she was shy and aloof with her parents, but her relationship with her siblings was always good. The house they lived in was remote but peaceful.

‘My siblings, my treasure. Isabel, Jay.’

Yveschapel was a family that produced genius healers.

And the Yveschapel lineage was uniquely connected through matrimony, that is, through mother and daughter.

At the time of Yveschapel’s downfall, the imperial family thought it was regrettable that their lineage would be cut off.

In addition, Yveschapel is said to have been a wealthy family in the pharmaceutical business.

Raul’s father, the predecessor Grand Duke Valentine, was rewarded by the imperial family for his services at the time.

In the imperial family, it was better to give the Yveschapel family than to give themselves an award.

Just in time, the wife of the previous Grand Duke Valentine died of illness shortly after giving birth to Raul, and the position of the Grand Duchess was empty.

(All members of the Yveschapel family will be immediately executed, but those who have shown healing power will be made into slaves of the imperial family. The eldest daughter, the heir to the Yveschapel family, will be married to the Grand Duke Valentine.)

'The Grand Duke of Valentine is a close relative of the Imperial family.'

So through this marriage, after obtaining a descendant with healing powers, and taking all of their possessions-

'The useless Grand Duchess must have meant to die.'

It was a terrible marriage agreement, an old, old gloom.

It is said that Freya, Nicole's mother, was famous for being a great healer and a beauty during her time.

The marriage agreement Freya should have received was not achieved as she fled. However, the Valentine family did not forget the marriage agreement and finally found Nicole's family who lived in hiding.

'I still remember that day vividly.'

With a harsh sound, the door of their cabin opened and knights rushed in with their boots echoing loudly through the small space. Nicole greeted them alone while doing the laundry leisurely.

'I didn't know anything until that moment.'

Even the fact that she is the eldest daughter, the heir, to the Yveschapel family.

\* \* \*

She could see the town burning in the distance.

The man entered their house, with a number of villagers cut out.

It was instantaneous for him to find Nicole hiding in the backyard after walking.

'His bloody figure was very devilish.'

Later, Nicole found out.

There was no other reason why she saw blood in the village.

He killed them just to vent his anger on the villagers who hid the dirty Yveschapel's bloodline.

They lived in complete hiding. The villagers didn't even know they existed. 'You're a devil, really.'

He was wearing a long coat. A handsome face. Mysterious eyes shining purple.

It looked very beautiful, but he was like a lion from hell to Nicole.

⟨You don't have to kneel.⟩

He looked down at Nicole and said.

Nicole's elaborate laundry all morning was thrown on the floor and trampled on the knights' feet a long time ago.

'Did my younger siblings hide safely?'

Her mother had always trained her children as if to prepare for this day.

⟨Please, let me go. There's nothing in this house. I...⟩

⟨My bride is not good at lying.⟩

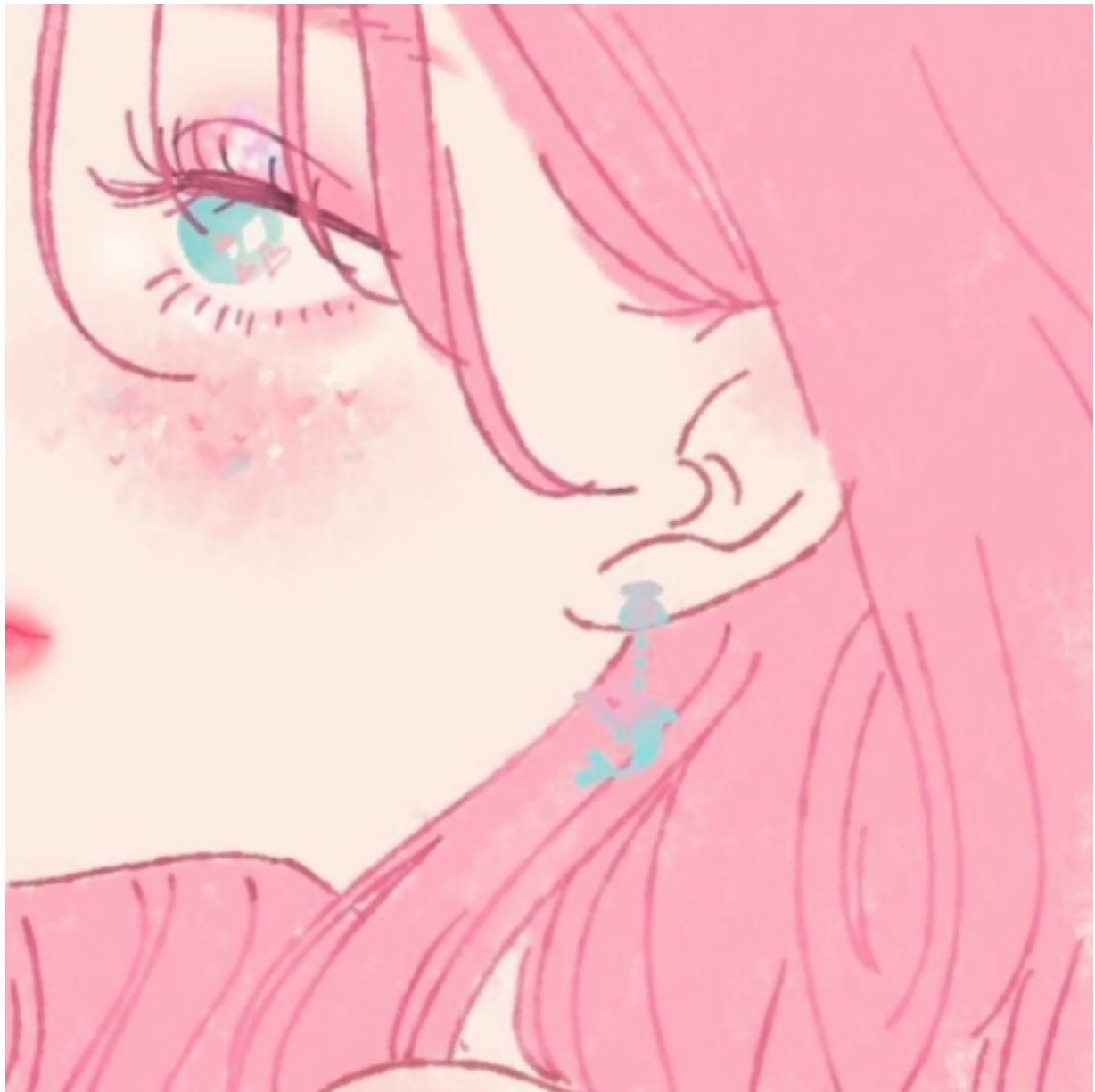
He slowly approached and raised Nicole's chin. His hands were too big, and the grip was strong.

⟨Should I say it's nice to meet you? As soon as we're born, we're so deeply entangled. Your life is mine until your life is over.⟩

Nicole's life has since fallen to hell.

So it was no exaggeration to say that it was a devil's whisper.

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# **Chapter 2**

☆\*: . . . . :\*☆

At the time, Nicole's mother, Freya, had a severe lung disease.

And the former duke, Grand Duke Valentine, who was originally Freya's fiancee, died a decade ago.

In the end, the engagement agreement was inherited by Nicole and Raul.

They abandoned Freya, who was useless, in the cabin and took only her brother and sister.

'At that time, my mother was so sick that she couldn't last more than a few days. But my father.....'

Their misfortunes had only just begun.

Her father went out very occasionally to sell herbs and buy what the family needed.

His outing took a very long time. This is because her father crossed the mountain from the opposite direction and headed to very far villages in fear of people's suspicion.

They were dragged away, and a few days later her father returned.

Her father, who returned, found that her mother, whose lung disease had worsened, died.

The children disappeared and the house was a mess.

And the people of the Grand Duchy threatened her father. They said that if he doesn't keep his mouth, he won't be able to survive.

Late in the fall of that year, her discouraged father took his own life.

'I didn't even know about my father until a year after I got married!'

After that day, Nicole became extremely hateful of Raul.

'My siblings, unlike me, are treasures that show healing power. So he couldn't have let my brothers go.'

In spite of her mother's training, the two were quickly discovered where they were hiding. Raul enlisted Isabel and Jay in the Knights Templar.

'He treated my siblings like slaves.'

Jay died when Nicole was married for two and a half years.

At that time, Raul was in the countryside.

There was a big accident in the village. Rebels attacked and caused rebellion.

And Raul was seriously injured when he was caught up in a big explosion.

The capabilities of healers were not limitless. If healers use healing power beyond their abilities, the healer himself could be injured or killed.

Jay was worried that if he could not treat Raul, he would harm his sisters.

So, as a result of excessive use of healing power, he eventually died of exhaustion.

'When I heard that Raul was hurt, I prayed so hard that he would rather die. Was I punished for it?'

⟨I'm sorry. Mom warned me that I could get hurt if I overuse my healing power. But at least my oldest sister won't be in trouble because of me. Because I saved the Grand Duke.⟩

Later, Isabel told her it was Jay's will.

Nicole has almost lost her mind since then. But there was still a reason for her to live.

Nicole's most precious treasure. It was Isabel.

⟨My treasure. My beautiful Isabel. I'll protect you.⟩

Nicole had her first seizure since Jay's death. And half crazy, she pounced on Raul.

Then the cruel Raul began to take control of Nicole's everything.

Food, sleep time, daily medicine.

Nicole had to live in half captivity in exchange for defying him.

⟨If something happens to Isabel, I can't live. It would be difficult if I die now. Because you need a doll to fill the position of the Grand Duchess. And you haven't taken all the possessions of the Yveschapel family yet! So, now let Isabel be free.⟩

What did Raul say? She doesn't even remember. I'm sure he's threatened her or she threatened him.

After that, Raul treated Isabel like an ordinary noble lady and became her guardian.

If Isabel had lived well, Nicole might have been able to stand it.

'I'm a fool who almost fell for his deception for even a second.'

Isabel was a thrifty woman. She always made their family happy with her bright and lovely appearance.

'But you ended up ruining Isabel.'

Last year, Isabel was forced to marry a knight under the command of Grand Duke Valentine.

Isabel's husband was a very wealthy knight. However, there was a rumor that the man was remarried, and his first wife was beaten and had run away.

After marriage Isabel was always covered from head to toe.

〈Everyone knows that she lives with the younger brother of Grand Duke Rain. The sound of crying echoes throughout the city.〉

A few months ago, Isabel cut her wrist.

Isabel's attempt to take her life failed. Isabel, who survived, held Nicole and begged.

〈Sister. I can't stand it anymore. Avenge me. We have the knowledge of pharmacy that we learned from you. If we work together, we can do something about it. He took everything from us!〉

Isabel's face had long been shaded.

Nicole decided when she saw her figure. She'll do as Isabel says.

So Nicole made a medicine.

It was the poison of the night.

An ancient poison created long ago. Now few people in the world have forgotten and remembered.

Those who take this poison for a long time become a living poison. Therefore, it took time to complete the poison.

Nicole sipped away at the pills for weeks without anyone knowing it.

And tonight, she drank the last remaining dose.

‘The person who sleeps with me, who drank this poison, will die.’

It is said that many ancient warriors also fell before this poison.

This is because beautiful men and women were given long-term doses of the poison, and then was made into human poison and sent into their bedrooms.

High-class prostitutes were used in this method.

Tonight, Nicole put herself in such a role.

Nicole smiled contentedly at her thin self in the mirror.

She has been suffering from chest disease for a long time and has been taking neurotic drugs. Still, her appearance could be deceived by makeup overnight.

'I'm glad I'm not that ugly yet.'

Her mother, Freya, was a great beauty, and their father was also a handsome man.

But compared to Isabel, Nicole was not even a beauty.

However, her chaperone once said to her face, "You have a humble face."

'I'm nervous, but..... I can do it. I can do it.'

Nicole took the counter out of the drawer.

This small machine, which moves with a ticking sound every time it is pressed, was originally intended to count.

Tick-tock.

However, Nicole calmed down by pressing the counter when she couldn't calm down because of anxiety since she was young. It's been a long habit.

'I need more medicine...'

Nicole swallowed a new tranquilizer that Isabel secretly made.

This is her first night blessed by her.

She can't have a happy heart like a new bride, but it's still a night where she'll get everything she wants.

And it's time for her husband to come back soon.

☆\*: . . . :\*☆

It is said that the closer the bedroom of the wife and husband is, the better the couple's family is.

But the Grand Duke and Duchess Valentine's bedroom was quite different.

Raul renovated the bedroom he used, specifically the inner room.

Although there was a small powder room and bathroom for Nicole's use only, it was not a big room overall.

And the important thing was that she could never go outside without going through Raul's bedroom.

In other words, the room was connected to monitor Nicole from morning to night.

Nicole locked her door tightly and held her breath when the man was in the room.

Sometimes when she ran into him, she felt intimidated and avoided his eyes. Rarely, she cried or screamed hysterically when he talked to her.

As time went by, Raul treated Nicole like old furniture.

Furniture that he leaves at home because there is no reason to throw away, but he doesn't need to use.

'It's my first time staying here while waiting for the devil to come back.'

Nicole stepped on the carpet barefoot and stepped out to Raul's bedroom.

Soon there was the sound of shoes ringing in the hallway. Nicole knew who the owner of these footsteps was.

☆\*: . . . :\*☆

Kyiiiiik

There was a door opening. Then Nicole was sitting on Raul's bed.

"What are you doing here?"

As soon as Raul saw Nicole, he wrinkled his brows.

Broad shoulders and tall height, an atmosphere of inhuman severity

He's a person whom she doesn't get used to even after years. Seeing him for the first time in a long time, Nicole shrank unconsciously.

But she soon straightened herself out.

'I'm not scared of this guy today.'

What is she afraid of? She's been poisoned and she's about to die

"Is there a reason why your wife can't come to her husband's bedroom?"

"You're usually disgusted when you make eye contact with me, right?"

He loosened his cravat and took off his leather gloves and threw them into a chair.

The bones in the back of his hand stood out during the rough movement.

"I have something to say."

"..... you? I'm surprised."

Raul's sarcastic response was not surprising. So far, Nicole has said more than three words in front of him only when she cries or stares at him with hatred.

“I heard a rumor about you and Princess Celia.”

Raul’s movements stopped moving. And he looked up and down at her.

“It’s jealousy that made you talk to me for the first time in three months. Interesting. I’ve never allowed you to feel that way.”

“I know I belong to you. But do I have to get permission from you for my feelings?”

“Nicole.”

Nicole was startled by the unfamiliar way he spoke her name.

“You should have done your duty to be allowed to be jealous. Being my wife.”

Nicole couldn’t help laughing.

“No one in the world thinks I’m your real wife anyway. When will I be poisoned? Or they wonder if I’m going to be thrown into the streets naked. Don’t you think so?”

“Yeah. This is how we talk. Keep talking.”

His relaxed way of speaking made Nicole’s teeth crack.

“I’m not a fool either. I’ve read a lot of books in your study, and sometimes I hear rumors. Now that you’ve been married for five years, you’ve stolen as much of the Yveschapel family’s remaining property as you want.”

He sighed softly.

“Do you believe that I have been stealing the property of the Yveschapel family, which has been ruined so far? Did the Grand Duke of Valentine look so desperate?”

“They say the more money, the better. You also have a lot of power, but now you want a princess.”

The words chilled Raul’s eyes.

“And so.”

He opened his mouth.

“What does my wife want from me? What makes you angry as usual?”

“.....Are you angry at me for saying such a thing?”

“Of course, you know? This mansion is empty today.”

“I went to the festival held to commemorate the coming-of-age ceremony of the princess.”

“.....”

“But you’re suddenly making me angry while you’re in front of me and in your pajamas nonetheless.”

He strode up to Nicole and leaned over.

Slowly. His hand approached and almost touched Nicole's hair. Nicole slowly closed her eyes and opened them.

"I just realized that there was no point in rebelling anymore. There's nothing I can do since I've been brought to this house anyway."

"....."

"If you tell me to die, I'll do it if you tell me to divorce you. You can kick me out tomorrow without a penny. You could turn me into an idiot and sell me off somewhere to get it done more neatly. Yes, that's fine, too."

He doesn't just throw away things when he's disposing of them, but burns them too.

There was no way to keep a woman alive who had been around him for five years and might have heard this and that kind of information.

Nicole looked him in the eye.

It was the first time in five years of marriage that she looked into his eyes for so long.

The dark purple eyes were mysterious and beautiful. Blending with black hair, he looked disgustingly seductive.

God is unfair. The devil is a devil, but why did he make it so pretty?

(t/n: if villain bad why so hot 🔥)

“What do you want to be so obedient?” Tell me because I’m interested.”

Raul’s face, which seemed to cross the line when he came closer, turned away. Standing upright, he stepped back and put his hand on the chair, his face was calm.

“Embrace me.”

Nicole said. Then Nicole got up from her seat and took a step closer to him.

“We didn’t even have our first night. I found out that a marriage could be annulled if the aristocratic couple didn’t have their first night. It’s unfair for me to be kicked out of my position as a Grand Duchess. I want to be treated as a person who is not an object by you even for one night.”

Nicole approached and stroked his clothes.

There was a national event tonight.

He left his wife and went to the ball again today.

There were numerous decorations on his fancy coat.

Maybe it’s a medal bought for someone’s misfortune. This man will continue to create countless unhappy lives like her.

“If you spend a night with me, I’ll be satisfied with it and leave you. With no grudges or regrets. It’s what I always thought from the day I came into your grasp.”

“First night? Do you really think that’s meaningful?”

“That’s my right.”

“There’s nothing I can’t say now.”

Raul said. Suddenly, contempt and faint fatigue flashed across his face.

“You’re such a tired, horrible woman. The most useless and annoying thing I have.”

Raul said.

“You’ve been keeping me until now because I’m useless. Because you needed a stupid girl who don’t know. Don’t you think so?”

Raul did not answer. Nicole felt it was a positive thing.

“Sell yourself to me for the night. And now you can marry a woman who will help you in the future like the princess. You like to be efficient, don’t you?”

Nicole said. Nicole plucked up her courage and grabbed Raoul by the collar.

“I’ll ask you one thing.”

Raul wrapped his gloved hand around Nicole’s lower jaw and stopped her head from moving

“Are you sure this is what you mean?”

“I know I’m crazy. But this is how sensible I am.”

Nicole said. Her heart was bursting. For the first time in her life, she expressed her intention to this man and spoke against him as if she was defying him.

Raul took his hand off her cheek. And firmly put his hand on Nicole’s waist.

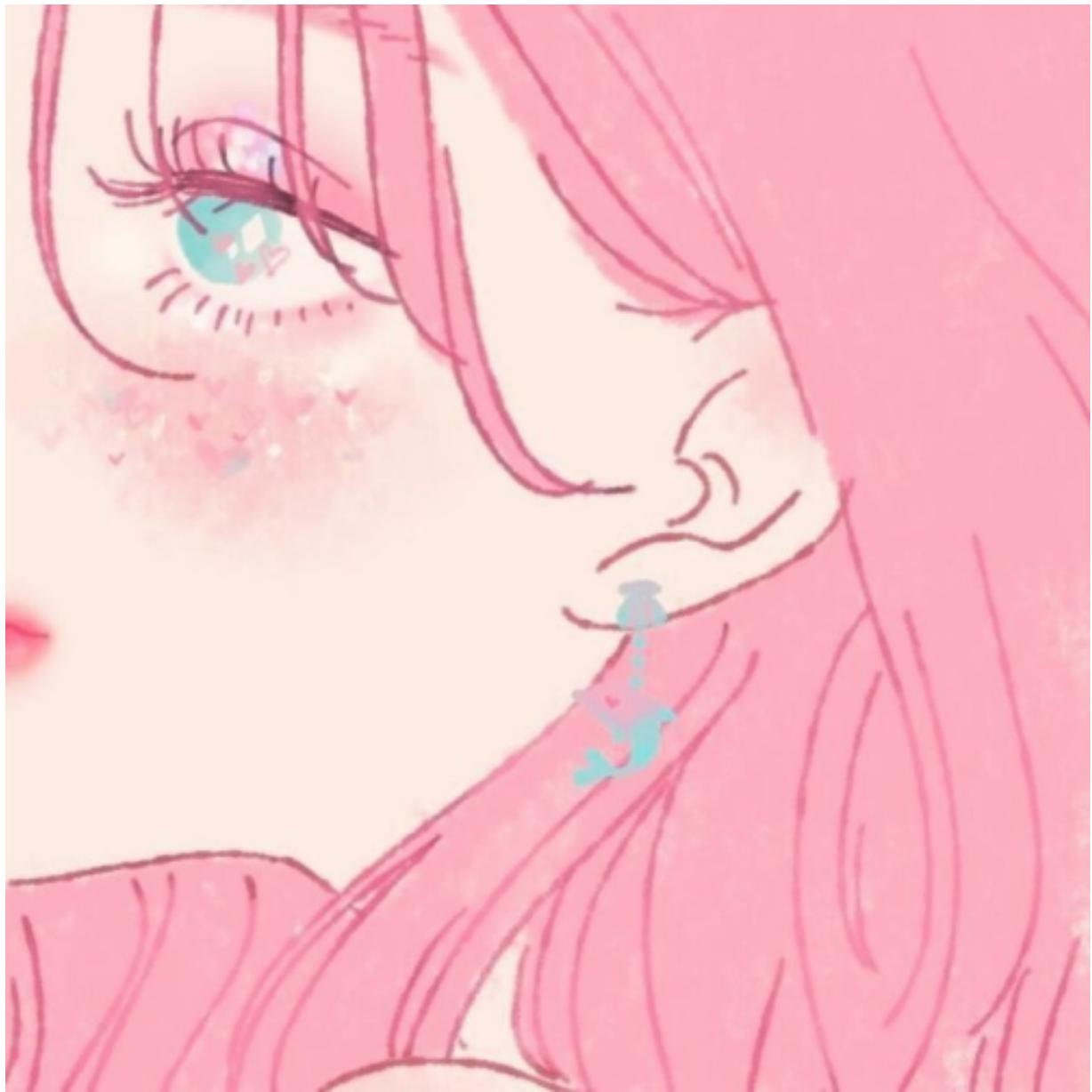
“Yes, that’s good.”

He leaned over her again. Nicole's face was covered with his shadow.

Raul's expression was not clear.

"Remember this one thing. That you started it first."

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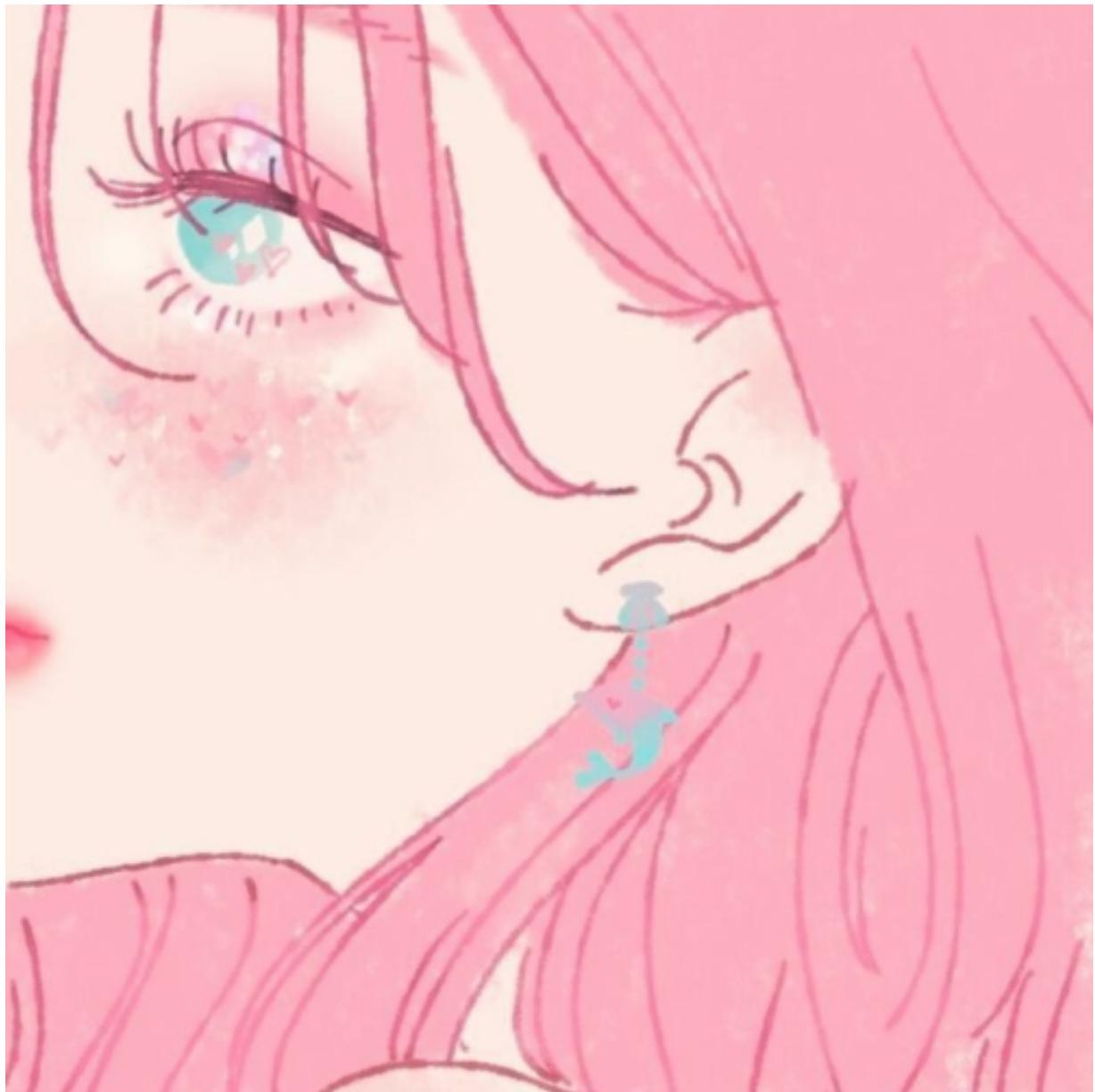


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# **Chapter 3**

And Raul picked up Nicole just like that.

“Ah!”

Nicole forgot the situation for a moment and sounded embarrassed. The next moment Nicole was lying on Raul’s bed in an instant.

It was the first time she laid in his bed in their entire marriage.

Nicole usually wore the same brown dress all the time because she had no business going out. She’s afraid she’ll get in the way of this guy if she wears fancy clothes.

But Nicole today was dressed in a light, sky blue, silky slip adorned with gold thread.

This luxurious underwear was the most valuable piece of clothing she wore during her marriage.

Raul looked at Nicole. Her white skin, her skinny body, her eyes that began to tremble faintly with fear.

He swallowed a small sigh. Poisonous. It's like a person who puts food that doesn't look very appetizing at the table.

It gave Nicole a little humiliation.

Raul reached out and grabbed Nicole by the neck.

"Damn it. You're really annoying and gets on my nerves."

Raul said.

"If you're going to kill me, hold me first then kill me. Then even if you kill me, I won't be a demon and chase after you.

I know you sometimes have nightmares.”

His grasp on her neck slowly loosened. Nicole reached out and swept Raul’s smooth cheek with the back of her hand.

“I don’t want to be kicked out of this house without knowing anything. This marriage... Complete it.”

He laughed in amazement. But the next moment he whispered.

“Open your mouth.”

He said.

Raul bit his glove with his teeth and took it off at once. His leather gloves fell on the bed.

Nicole opened her mouth obediently.

‘Why are we doing this? Does s\*x always start like this?’

Raul was like a person who's checking the health of a livestock. He observed the inside of her mouth and looked at her face carefully.

His finger fell off.

'No, I'm embarrassed. What is this?'

Nicole flinched. Then, she swung her arm wrong and brushed her finger against Raul's top.

His coat had numerous decorations.

Her white skin was torn and her fingertips began to bleed.

"I told you to act carefully in everything."

Nicole was born with weak skin. Whenever she fell, she got bruises quickly, and when she brushed against something pointed, her skin was torn.

One day she accidentally touched his new collection of ornaments.

Nicole had a long scar on her leg. Then blood was scattered on the carpet and that day he was really angry.

Nicole couldn't even come out of the room for two days.

It was a kind of punishment. This hard-nosed man hated getting the carpet dirty. He was a man who's terribly fond of his possessions.

"I didn't mean to offend you."

At the next moment, Nicole seemed to be out of breath. He put the tip of her finger in his mouth and began to suck it slowly.

The tip of her tongue seemed to be paralyzed.

"Ha...."

Her shoulders trembled and her toes curled.

The first step is to feed her blood to her opponent

The second is the saliva from her mouth

Third, the best thing is to let the sweet secretions from her body touch the other person.

<Your sacrifice will be remembered. Even your breath is a win for your pleasure-seeking opponent.>

It was an article written in the literature on the poison “Night Beast.”

‘He drank my blood.’

Nicole wanted to jump with joy.

“Are you smiling? Why?”

“Because you didn’t reject me.”

Nicole stared at him in silence. And acted on impulse.

First, she kissed Raul.

She thought she might get slapped or kicked out. She gently opened her eyes, and the man’s face came closer.

“Heut!”

Raul touched her lips once again.

Their lips overlapped.

“Ah, uh....”

It’s cold.

Kissing was very different from what she read in the book.  
It’s hot and it’s muddy.

She thought a kiss is mouth to mouth, but his thick tongue moved more freely than she thought.

He tickles the tip of her tongue, touches the roof of her mouth, or comes under her tongue.....

‘I’m suffocating, but it feels weird.....’

The stars seemed to splash in front of me.

Kissing was a heavier sensation than she thought. At the same time, her lips were quite numb.

“Ha!”

He finally bit Nicole’s lower lip hard and let go.

Nicole frowned. His hand came into her nightgown without hesitation.

“Didn’t you wear underwear?”

He asked, Nicole barely nodded.

“If you try to do this in front of another man, I’ll kill you. I’ll throw Isabel’s body on it. Whether I live or die, the rules don’t change.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Nicole blinked her eyes. What does that have to do with this situation?

But she couldn’t think deeper. This is because her slip was torn with a sound.

She was easily n\*ked in the blink of an eye.

Her white skin was exposed under the light. Raul glanced over her.

“It’s strange. Is it because you rarely go out? Your knees are always red. Your body is this pale. Elbows and wrists. You look pale.”

“Is that your type?”

“If it’s my wife’s body, I should learn things that are not to her taste.”

D\*sgusting man. Even in this situation, Raul trying to play with me was uncomfortable.

Raul smiled small after seeing Nicole’s wrinkled forehead.

“Put your face on it. I’ll do what you want.”

Raul’s palm slowly rubbed down her body.

Holding her, every time his hard, rough palm rubbed against Nicole’s soft, supple body, she felt hot.

At last his hand reached Nicole’s knee.

“A, All of a sudden.....”

Raul put his hand under Nicole’s knee and raised it sharply.

Raul, who slowly looked at the place covered with pale cilia, said as if he was impressed.

“It’s w\*t.”

He leaned down slowly.

Then, unannounced, he put his hand in and widened between her legs.

Nicole unwittingly tightened her lower abdomen with the feeling of wind coming through her legs. Her dense hole flinched.

“.....because I’m a person, too.”

Nicole said. Why does her heart beat so loud and her head hurt?

She hates him.

So that is why she wants to kill him.

It was a deeper emotion than love. This was hate.

“Focus.”

Raul, who pulled Nicole’s palm, said.

He pulled Nicole’s hand over his cheek.

She was more surprised by it than when Raul touched her body without hesitation.

When Nicole tried to pull out her hand in surprise, Raul held her hand tighter and refused to let go.

“Look at me.”

He whispered.

“Do you really want this?”

“Yes, I told you. Even if this marriage ends, I hope there is evidence.”

“You have a strange positive side. I can’t believe you’re still dreaming of a divorce lying down like this.”

Nicole’s chest was heaving. She looked at Raul nervously.

He loosened his hand and gently patted Nicole on the cheek.

“Relax. I’ll eat you up as you wish so that you don’t get hurt. It belongs to my precious wife. Wouldn’t it be better if you don’t get hurt?”

Nicole tried to respond to his remarks as if he was mocking her first experience.

But she forgot to say it. Raul widened the gap between Nicole's legs with his hands.

"Ah..."

In embarrassment, Nicole almost closed her legs. But Raul buried his face between Nicole's legs.

"Oh, my god!"

For the first time in her life, her legs are spread open in front of someone else's eyes. There, Raul stretched out his tongue and began to lick it slowly.

In addition, he presses it with the tip of his tongue and pokes all over her folds.

"Oh, heut..."

It was strange.

Soon, I\*quid began to splash from her bottom.

Then he gently pressed the upper part of her p\*bic area with his front teeth and the small pointed nub below it.

“Ugh, ah!”

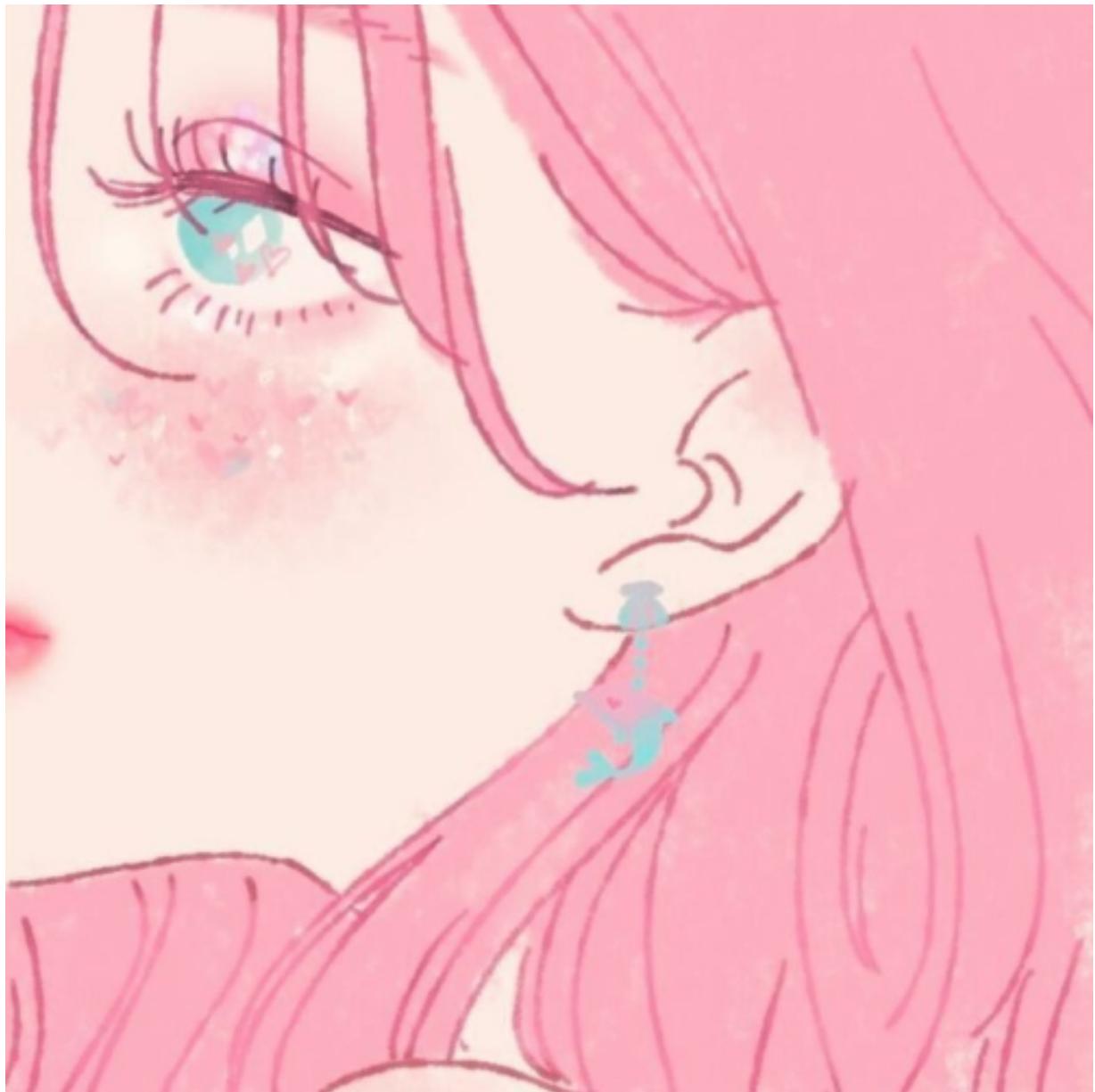
Nicole’s leg was completely relaxed and her back jumped up.

“It’s much better to hear you scream than to hear you talk nonsense.”

He lifted his eyes between her legs and whispered at her.

Nicole felt a thrill under her stomach when she met his eyes. Too much transparent I\*quid flowed to her perineum, and sticky juice dripped down.

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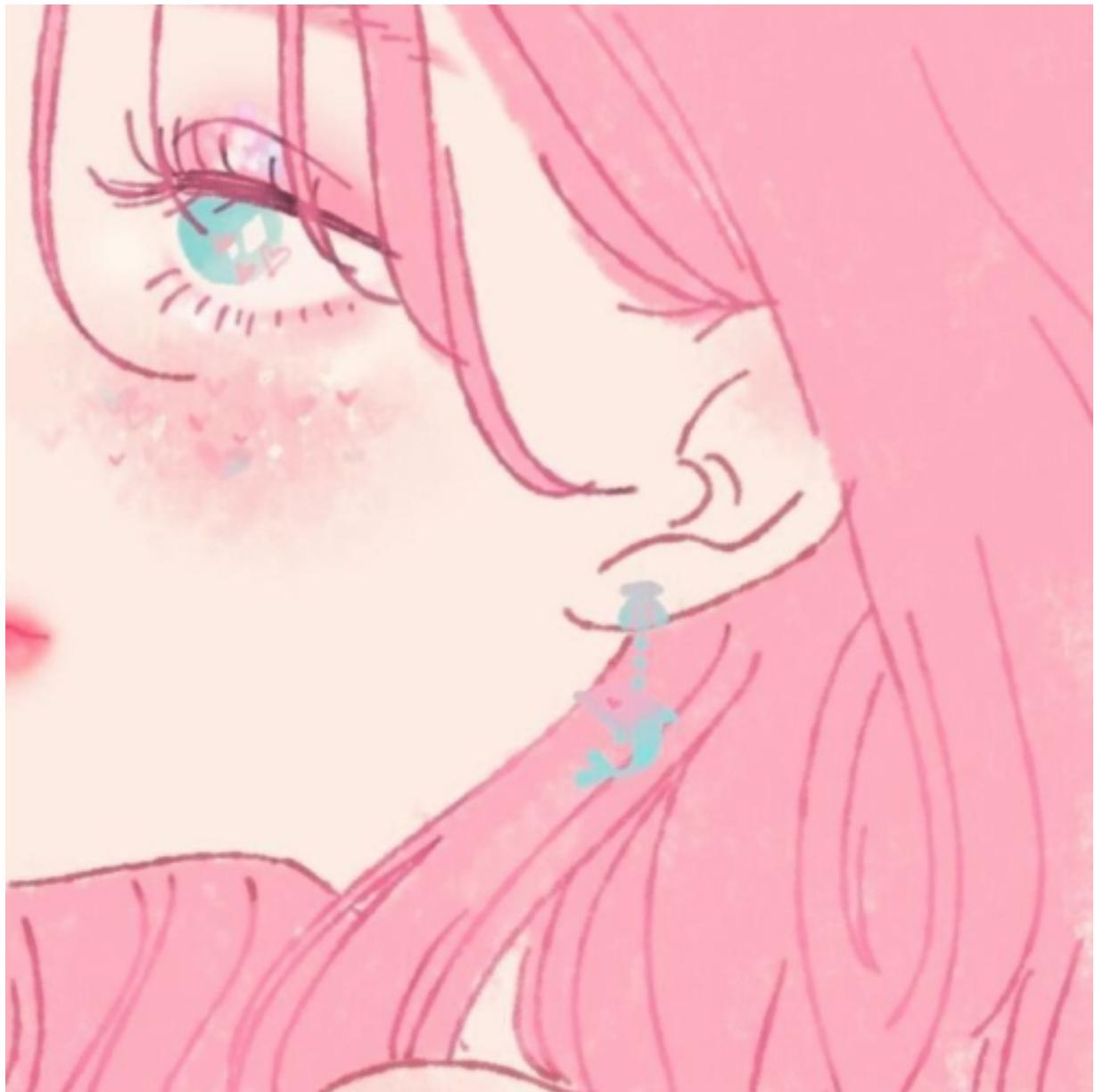


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# **Chapter 4**

In the meantime, Raul's hand was constantly rubbing her cl\*toris slightly with his hand as if he was loving it.

“Ugh, ung....”

Raul held her thighs tightly with his big palms to prevent Nicole from escaping.

When one hand was released, one of Nicole's thighs rose reflexively into the air. Raul stroked Nicole's cl\*toris a little faster, as if scolding her thigh, which seemed to be about to collapse.

Nicole shook her head, shaking the inside of her thigh at the same time.

“It’s, ah....”

Raul, who had released her for a while, climbed onto her.

His large hand clenched Nicole’s head.

It’s like he’s keeping her fixed so that she doesn’t run away.  
Their lips overlapped again.

“Huuu, hu, heut.....”

This time his long fingers dug into Nicole’s dense hole. And inside Nicole’s body, his fingers moved up and down.

Squeak, squeak.

There was a tingling sensation in her lower abdomen. Her hips moved up and down on their own, and she kept sticking out her voice forward.

“At this rate, it’s going to be pierced with just my fingers.  
Stop staring.”

With that said, Raul pushed his middle finger, index finger, and two fingers into Nicole's hole.

That alone was tight. He began rubbing his fingers against her as if they were rubbing inside.

She felt a tingling sensation.

"Ha, uh, uh....."

It was painful to be in contact with the body of this hateful man.

But Nicole's bottom was getting more and more heated up.

Nicole managed to pull herself together.

'All I want is to sleep with this man today and poison him with my body.'

It was good to exchange saliva while kissing and drinking her blood.

However, the most certain thing is to have s\*x with the person.

“Come on....”

Nicole grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Don’t pester me. Don’t change your mind later.”

Then his finger slipped out. Nicole reflexively put her hand on his shoulder.

And Raul took off his clothes one by one. His exposed body was solid and perfectly sculptural.

To find the body of a man you want to kill as beautiful. It was a d\*sgusting and strange feeling.

And Nicole's eyes grew as soon as she saw his p\*nis popping out.

'Why is it so big?'

Nicole had never seen a man n\*ked. In fact, this side was close to a blank paper.

'Is this how it's supposed to be?'

His dark red g\*nitals were already up. His veins stood out and were thick.

"Wait..."

"Spread your legs. Relax."

At that, Nicole shook and slowly spread her thighs out. Nicole's calves rose in the air.

Slowly, from the end, he began to insert his gl\*ns. The place where it touched was hot as if it was on fire.

Nicole couldn't breathe because of his rod that is pushing into her.

"Ah, uh, ah....."

Nicole gritted her teeth and endured.

"Don't bite."

Raul said. Before she knew it, he leaned down while looking at her chapped lips.

His p\*nis settled to the end as soon as their lips touched.

'It's too big....'

Nicole was barely breathing, gasping.

It felt like the inside of her pelvis was twisted. The volume and pressure were so great that she wanted to cry.

A damp I\*quid trickled down through her legs. It smelled like light blood.

Tears streamed down from her eyes.

“Don’t cry.”

He leaned down slowly.

“That’s what you wanted. Then you should be happy.”

“Heuk!”

Squelch, squelch.

He began to move slowly.

“Breathe. It’s all right.”

Nicole raised her chin instead of answering. It was a move that actively attached their lips together.

Raul bit Nicole and licked the blood off her bitten lips.

No matter who comes first, their top and bottom are all tangled up.

“Ugh, uh, uh.....”

The sound of their flesh hitting together, deep and hot, filled the room. Her mind kept getting hazy.

Her pelvis is stiff. Her senses became sensitive and dull repeatedly. Stars splashed in front of her eyes with intense pain and a strange feeling of fullness.

Puck, puck.

At the same time, she was embarrassed to hear the sound of I\*quid squelching at her bottom.

'I hate you. It's so hateful. I will definitely drop you in hell.'

Nicole shouted to herself.

She doesn't even know how the time has passed since then. Her whole body became heavy, and then the sense of her lower part became more sensitive.

At the moment when her hatred reached its peak, a thrilling feeling penetrated her lower part.

".....Argh!"

Slowly, the pain disappeared and the stiff feeling disappeared.

Instead, there was a rush of new pleasure. It disappeared. It was the moment Raul pushed deep inside.

"Ah, no, no, no, no!"

A splashing pl\*asure pierced her inside. Before she knew it, Nicole lost her mind and struggled and grabbed the bed sheet.

Raul cushioned Nicole's head and bed as she was pushed up. At the same time, he grabbed Nicole's shoulder and pulled her as she was trying to escape.

"Where are you going? I told you not to change your mind."

The excitement ran to the top of her head. Nicole now seemed to her that her swaying body wasn't even hers.

The splashing sensation became stronger like a wave, and Nicole curled her toes and uttered a sobbing sound.

"Huh, aaahhhhhhhhhh. Ugh...."

It wasn't long before the cl\*max came.

By the time something hot is poured on her body, Nicole feels the opposite of intense pain. She was exhausted by two emotions.

“You did well for your first time.”

Sweat from his forehead fell on Nicole’s forehead. He whispered over Nicole’s hair.

When the heavy thing that occupied her lower part came out, there was a sound of hitting as if the wind was escaping.

‘Is it over now?’

Nicole, who had been driven to the brink, looked at him vaguely. She’s twitching from her lower abdomen to her thighs.

Nicole blinked her blurry vision. It was that moment.

“On your stomach.”

Raul said. In an instant, Nicole grabbed his arm and fell on the bed.

“H, hold on a second.”

Nicole shook her shoulder when something that hadn’t shrunk in volume touched her b\*tticks.

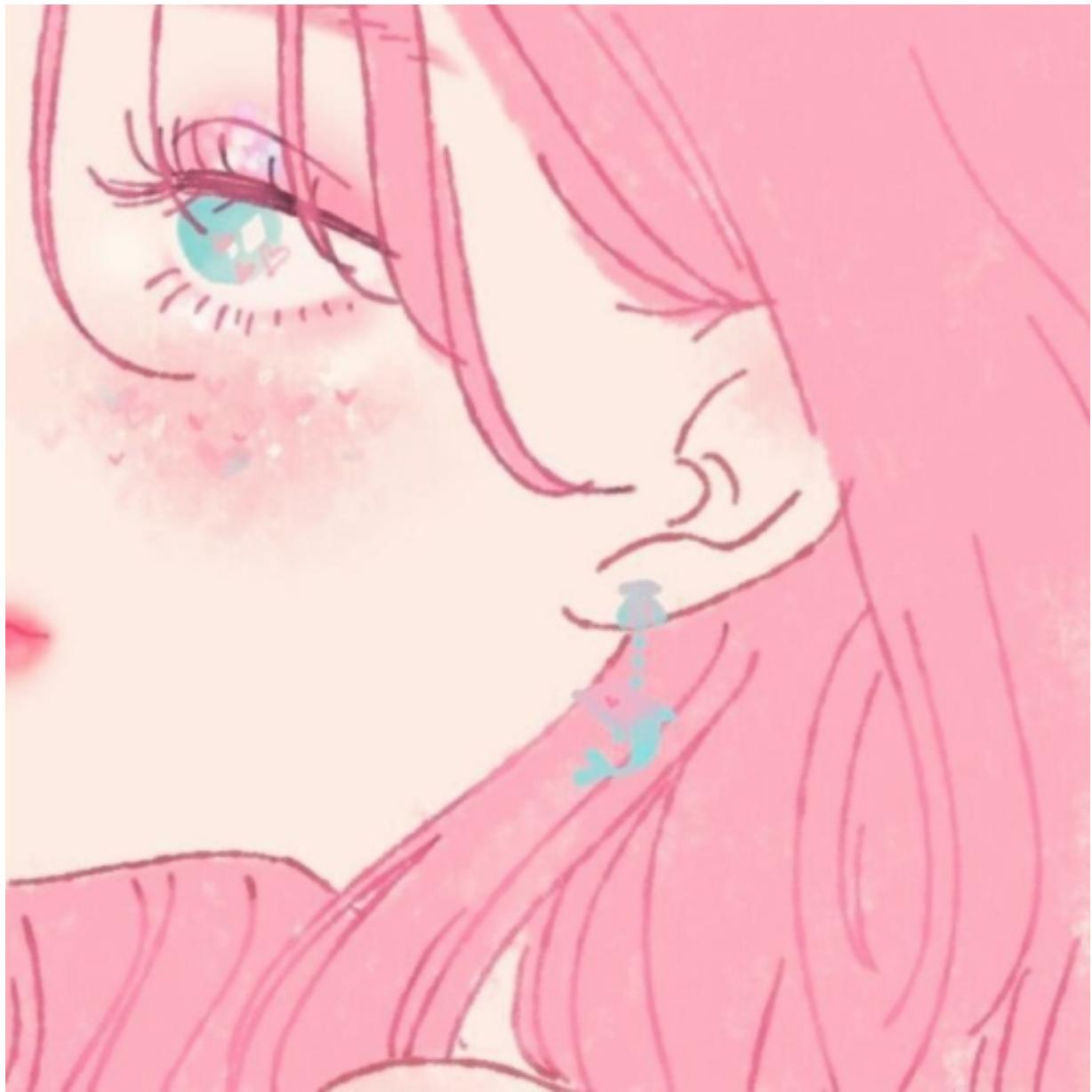
‘Why, why isn’t he stopping?’

Nicole was so surprised. How much do men usually do it?

“There is blood, poor thing.”

He spoke insensibly and again pushed his p\*nis in.

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# Chapter 5

“Heuk, huu, haah! Heut, please.... Heut....”

The third time, she does not remember clearly but she seemed to have cried and begged him to stop.

But he didn't stop. She told him to stop many times, but he didn't listen.

'This is enough. This devil..... Even a monster will die, too.'

For a certain assassination, it is not a waste even if her body breaks.

It's over. This will be the last memory of her life.

And Nicole fainted, flooded by orgasm, covered with energy and excitement.

☆\*: . . . . :\*☆

It was that day.

Nicole and Raul saw each other after three months because of his local business trip.

And Raul, who faced her for the first time in a while, drove Nicole crazy again.

〈Leave me alone. I want you to treat me like I'm dead. I hate even the way you breathe.〉

Nicole hesitated at first, but soon felt the limit of her patience and screamed again.

Raul uttered such cold words to Nicole.

〈Stop thinking.〉

〈.....〉

〈Say what I tell you, and just do what I tell you. I don't even expect you to act like a normal person, so just act like a doll.〉

Listening to Raul's hateful words is now over.

The fear of being left in this man's family register even after death is over.

Now she will finally be happy. Through the comfort of death.

☆\*: . . . . :\*☆

When she opened her eyes again, she felt something sweet.

'How long have I been sleeping?'

She checked the time in a hurry. It was four in the morning.

Fortunately, she only slept for two hours.

'I didn't die unconscious, I see.'

It was already time for her body to have enough poison. Nicole carefully turned her head and checked the space next to her.

'Is he dead? He's not lying next to me, is he?'

But Nicole's bedside was empty.

Her stomach throbbed. Her messy bottom was cleaned as if someone had wiped it off, and there was only a thin layer of silk on her body.

'I'm sure all the maids are out tonight. Who did it?'

Nicole thought. That noble, arrogant man couldn't have dressed me.

She doesn't know if he'll grab her by the hair and drag her down to the floor as soon as the sex is over.

Kiiik.

Then the door to Raul's study opened.

Raul was entering the room with a calm face. Raul was neatly dressed and no trace of what had happened in this room was seen.

'What? The poison didn't work?'

Nicole was confused for a moment. Looking at him like that, Raul opened his mouth quietly.

"If you're up, get dressed. And sit down."

What lay beside Nicole was a soft dress she often wore when she was alone. A plain dress, with few decorations, just like commoners' clothes.

Nicole followed Raul's instructions as if hypnotized. Her buttoning hand trembled.

'Isabel is a brilliant pharmacist. We secretly tried to concoct the Night Beast poison. There's no way our poison won't work.'

Nicole bit her lip. Then Raul spoke peacefully.

"If it's poison, I'm listening."

Nicole raised her head. Her pupils dilated.

"Now you, what did you say....."

"You wanted to die with me, Nicole?"

He spoke kindly. And one step closer to Nicole.

Nicole stepped back without realizing it.

“No matter how much we swore an oath of marriage to die together, if we die on the same day, we might fall into the same hell. Wouldn’t it be unfortunate if you run into me again in hell?”

“.....Did you know?”

Nicole spat out.

“I took my eyes off you for a while, but you’re amazing. You always surprise me. But your hiding place is obvious. There’s a recipe for poison.”

“.....”

Nicole’s eyes darkened.

She might be strangled right now. Or she might be beaten to death. Nicole was nervous.

“Did you notice from the beginning?”

“From the moment I entered this room.”

“.....”

“Looking at the color of your tongue and veins, you really were poisoned.”

Nicole’s whole body trembled. She felt as if she was melting.

“Are you mocking me? For your lies, I.....”

“I ordered you to sit down. You belong to me in this life, and you have to listen to me.”

Nicole was caught by him and forced into bed.

Nicole did not even resist. She felt like a wobbly straw doll.

“I told you to relax. Nicole, you succeeded.”

Raul leaned over Nicole’s shoulder.

Nicole couldn't understand the situation. What the hell is he talking about?

"I'm going to die soon."

Only then did Nicole feel that his face was strangely pale.

His strong fingertips on her shoulders were trembling slightly.

The window was half open before she knew it. The light wind creaked, shaking the window, and the moon out of the clouds shaded his face.

Nicole was overwhelmed by his presence and could not say anything.

"Before that."

"....."

“There’s something you need to know about this medicine. Taking this medicine won’t kill you with me.”

Raul had a knack for speaking clearly in other people’s ears, no matter how low his tone is. It’s the same tonight.

“The host of this medicine can only be a male or a female. And if you have sex with someone with enough energy, the poison is transferred to the other person. Of course you’re poisoned too, but not enough to die.”

“You think I’ll believe such a thing.....”

“You’ll live, I’ll die. Even if you don’t believe it, that’s the truth tonight.”

Ding ding.

Nicole felt like a large bell was ringing in her ear.

It wasn’t peace that awaited her tonight.

It was further confusion.

His grip weakened. Nicole jumped up from her seat.

Kuuk.

Then he suddenly coughed. There was faint blood on his palm when he took his hand off his mouth.

⟨Drop in body temperature, change in pupil's color, and hemoptysis.⟩

This man always taunted people, but he never lied. Nicole had a hunch that his words were true.

“Come here.”

He held Nicole's hand. And when Raul's hand fell, what lay on her palm was a strong silver ring.

On the outer rim of the ring, the symbol of Raul's family was engraved on the center.

'This is an heirloom, only given to the families of the seven great families, including the families that have been destroyed.....'

Raul used to wear this ring, a symbol of his family.

"This ring has a hidden function. It's a magic tool that can recognize and save documents. It contains everything you're curious about. Get out of here and read it. And don't ever show up in the capital again."

Nicole's hands began to heat up as if it were on fire.

There was blood on Raul's fingertips. Raul caressed her cheek with his bloody hand.

"You'll let me.....run away?"

"Yeah. If they see you like this, you'll be torn to death by the people. You'll probably be a murderer."

".....don't talk crazy. You're... You're....."

Nicole finally understood the situation.

This man knew all about it, but he was beaten by Nicole.

“Why did you?”

This selfish man with everything in the world. Why would this bloody man do this?

“I lost everything when I met you.”

Nicole spouted confusedly.

“I know.”

“.....”

“I know, Nicole. So this is it.”

Nicole's voice is hoarse. Her head was in a state of chaos....  
And she couldn't say anything.

He said with his eyes closed as if he was holding back something.

"I should've listened to people. I shouldn't have married you. You ended up being my weakness. You're such a sick and foolish woman. I'll never....."

"....."

"Most of all, you made me unable to take my eyes off a woman like you."

Raul's eyes were very cold when his hand fell off.

"Go now. You were going to kill me anyway and you were going to die, too."

Nicole looked toward her room unconsciously.

“What a fool. Are you looking for this?”

Raul picked up a small bottle of medicine on the table. It was only then that Nicole found out what it was.

It was an extra poison that Nicole prepared just in case.

Raul threw it on the floor. As the bottle broke, poison was scattered on the floor.

“In the morning, the butler will come to wake me up and find my body. You still have time before that. I’ve prepared for this kind of scenario, so meet my confidant knight, Bastard. He’ll tell you how to escape.”

He sounded as if he was going easy on her. It’s as if he’s treating her like a child.

Raul said Bastard would come to a boat house in a nearby park that he had designated as an emergency shelter in advance.

“I don’t want anyone to see me die. So get out of here.”

Nicole faltered back. She wanted to get away from Raul. She wanted to escape from this incomprehensible reality.

“I’m crazy that I’d rather die than let you sleep with another man.”

He murmured at the end.

As soon as the door closed, Nicole seemed to hear his voice.

☆\*: .o. .o.:\*☆

Raul slowly leaned his back on the bed.

‘Did I write down all the wills about my secret service, the Shadow?’

He thought silently as he looked at the ceiling, which he had seen over the years and got used to. Then he closed his eyes slowly.

He was looking at the burning village. Soon his subordinate Bastard came and whispered to him.

〈One of the villagers wrote a letter. It seems that the remnants of the rebels are hiding in this village and living as slash-and-burners. Some people say they've seen children perform healing powers.〉

Raul slowly turned his horse around and headed for a small house in the mountains.

Bastard said quietly.

〈I think the Yveschapel people are right. If you want to use it as a pass to prevent the national marriage with the emperor, it would be the cleanest choice to bring only one daughter with healing power and deal with it. The power of the Yveschapel family that the emperor wants is healing power.〉

〈I'll see that and judge it.〉

The little house looked peaceful and warm.

He went out into the backyard through a low back door.

Palak. White sheets hung on the clothesline and fluttered. There was a shadow of someone floating behind it.

⟨You are...⟩

A woman popped out.

She was still full of girlishness as if she had just become an adult.

Her eyes were big and her body was small and thin. It was a pretty face rather than a beauty.

⟨Have we met somewhere?⟩

Nicole said quietly.

Soon the sound of horse hoofs rang out. Anxiety spread across Nicole's face in an instant.

Whistle. The wind blew. The white cloth covered Nicole's face. Raul was staring at her.

Somehow he couldn't take his eyes off her.

Then the knights stormed into the backyard. They knelt down on Nicole.

Raul slowly approached her. He stared at the woman who would be his wife for a long time.

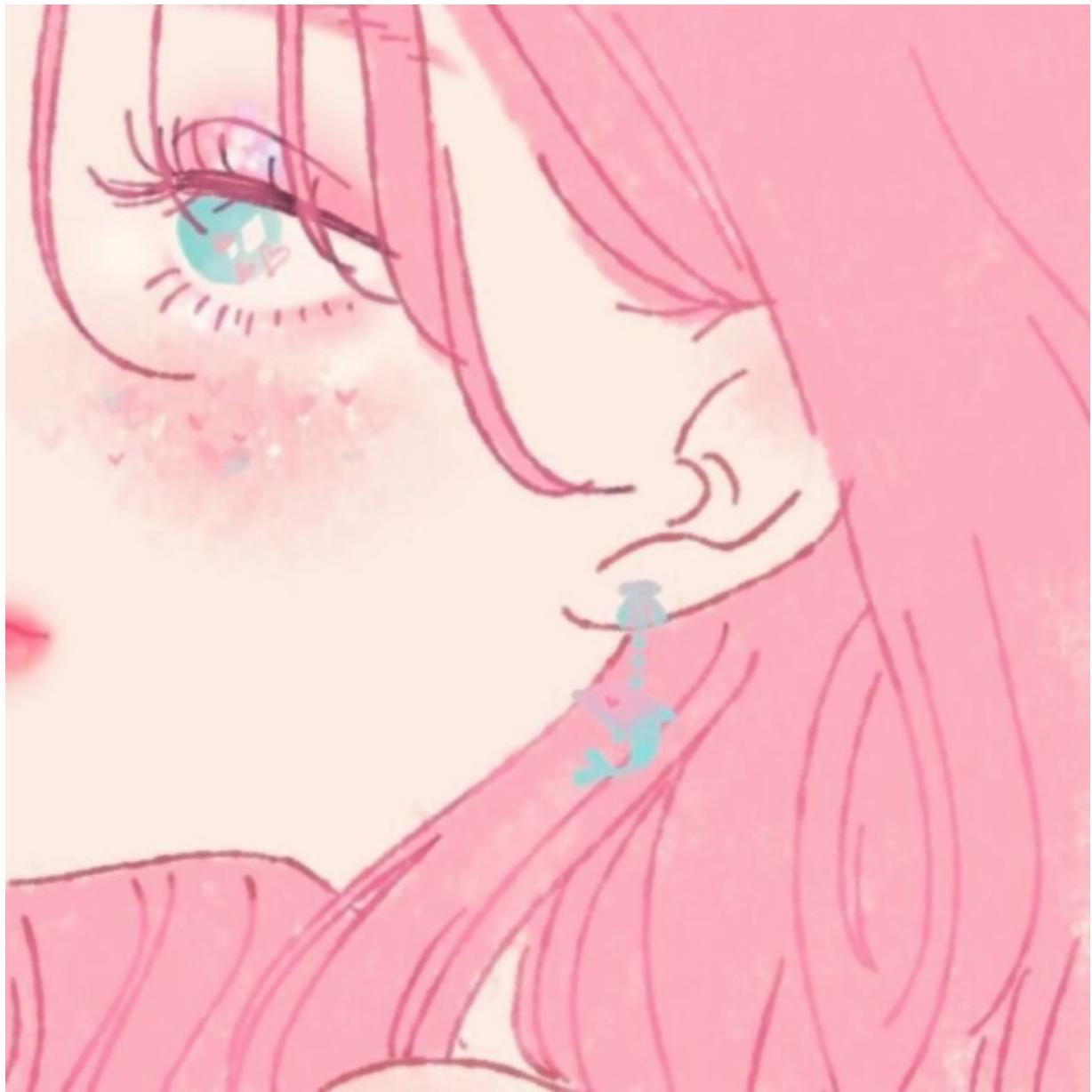
Not knowing that he won't be able to take his eyes off her for a very long time after that.

So defenseless

It was Raul's last dream and last breath.

(t/n: I'm crying so hard rn 😥)

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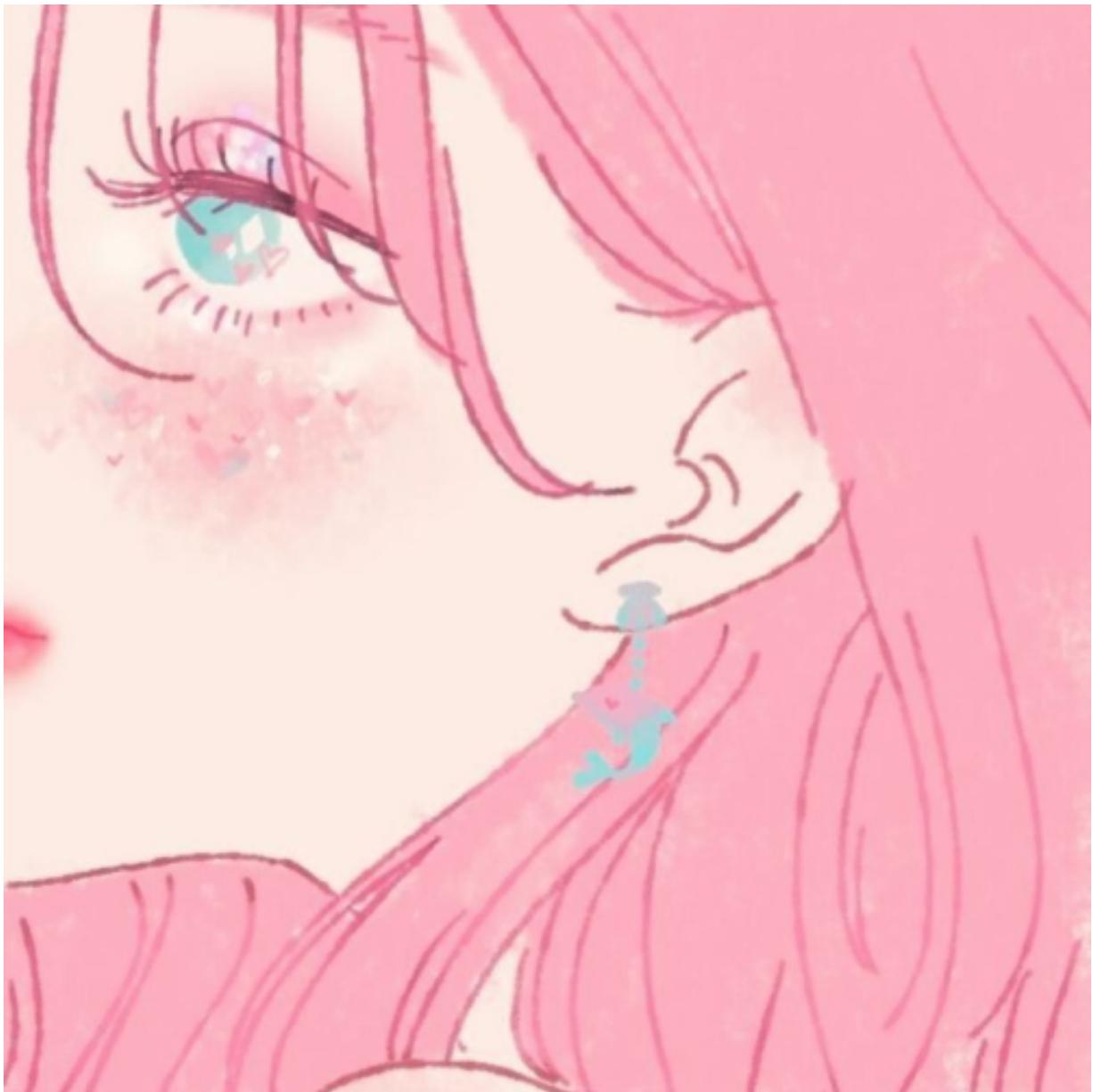


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# Chapter 6

Heuk. Huheuk.

Nicole breathed heavily as she ran out of the small forest behind the Grand Duke's mansion.

Before she knew it, it was dawn, and the grass that grazed Nicole's body rustled and made a sound.

Nicole turned a blind eye to a man's death and ran away.

'I don't understand. Why did he.....'

Soon, people will come in the morning.

Nicole stopped walking slowly.

She heard the maids chatter. Passing through the forest of the Grand Park, you will find a small lake and a ferry.

Although it's called Grand Park, the location was ambiguous, so no one dared to approach it.

She saw a small boat house. Nicole walked in there.

There was an old gas lamp in the boat house. Nicole closed the curtains and turned on the gaslight.

On the other hand, emergency food was available.

'What did he tell me to look for?'

Finally, Nicole removed the ring from her arm.

She has been messing around with the ring for a long time. Then she saw a dent in the rim.

When she touched that part, a transparent window came to mind. There was a large list of documents in it.

But the first document was opened before Nicole could touch it.

'This is...'

It was Raul's will, and it was the truth.

〈Observations on Freya de Yveschapel's Death.

Freya was considered dead, avoiding the eyes of the imperial family. There was a high risk of execution if she was taken to the Imperial family.

A caregiver was sent to treat her, but she couldn't last long and died of lung disease.〉

〈Observations on Freya de Yveschapel's husband, Matisse.

He's been suffering from severe depression

In addition, he's not feeling well due to injuries incurred on his recent trip.

A doctor was sent for medical treatment several times, but he refused. Appear to have committed suicide due to depression.〉

'Raul sent a doctor before Father died?'

In addition, he sent a nurse to Mother.

Nicole has never heard of it.

〈Observations on Jay's death, a healer of the Yveschapel family.

Due to an accident, the patient, the Grand Duke, was in a coma. The imperial Princess Celia beat Jay, the healer, using the knights when she visited the hospital.〉

Nicole's heart dropped.

'If it's Princess Celia...'

She was rumored to be engaged to Raul.

'She killed my brother?'

Raul was injured because he was caught in the explosion.

Raul, who was seriously injured, was being treated and is in coma in a small hospital in a nearby village.

At that time, Jay had succeeded in saving Raul at the risk of his life. Strangely enough, however, Raul's consciousness did not return.

'The healer didn't do his job properly! Take him and beat him up!'

It is said that Princess Celia did so with the intention of lightly punishing Jay.

However, Jay, who was already exhausted and barely breathing, was beaten by strong knights and died on the spot.

'I... I can't believe Jay died because of the princess.'

Why did he hide it all this time?

"Is he worried that I'm going to get back at Princess Celia?"

- It was treated as an accidental death to reduce the shock for people around him due to his dishonorable death.

- He will be given the privilege of an honorable death and be buried in the cemetery of the nobles.

- Since those who died after being convicted of crimes against the imperial family cannot be buried in the cemetery of nobles...

There were many other shocking facts.

'If... If we weren't taken by the Grand Duke, would we have been taken by the Imperial family to be executed or become slaves?'

And in this context, Raul seems to have prevented it

It was something Nicole learned while reading the documents.

‘But I didn’t know anything.’

And Raul is already dead.

“Ha, ha.”

Nicole cried out in despair. And she stumbled outside in tears.

Connected to the boat house was a long ferry. The lake looked very deep and dark.

‘I, I, I... It will bring me comfort. It’s nothing different from tonight’s original plan.’

Nicole walked to the end of the ferry.

A voice interrupted Nicole, who tried to close her eyes and jump in.

“Sister!”

“Isabel?”

Nicole turned her head. It was really Isabel who was standing by the lake.

“Why are you here?”

It was the moment Isabel was about to say something. Soon there was the sound of men shouting.

“There!”

“There is the wicked woman who murdered the Great Duke!”

Nicole faltered back. Then Isabel set up her nails and grabbed Nicole.

Isabel’s beautiful face sparkled in the light of the lake.

“Where are you off to, sister?”

“.....”

“It’s dangerous to fall into the water.”

Then something flew over her head. The moment she stumbled in pain, Nicole fell.

Her consolation came from the strong hands of countless men.

They were all soldiers Nicole had never seen before. And Nicole lost consciousness.



Tsak!

Water splashed on Nicole's body.

"You witch! How dare the descendants of traitors kill the Grand Duke! You won't even die easily."

Nicole was chained up.

Her body, which had been whipped dozens of times, could not move at will. Nicole's blood flowed on the wall and floor, and her skin was torn all over.

'He's really dead.....'

Nicole, who thought blankly, raised her head.

"Where is this witch looking at people?"

Tsak. The guard slapped Nicole in the face. But she didn't avert her eyes.

"Pweh. She has a visitor today, so let's stop here."

Nicole raised her head weakly. The guard let go of the chain.

"Ugh!"

Nicole knelt down on the floor.

'What happened to Isabel? Why was she there?'

She felt pain again all over her body as she fell to the floor.

Nicole shed tears. It was physiological tears. When she looked up, Nicole found someone standing in front of the

iron bars.

The first thing that caught her eye was light pink silk shoes. Nicole seemed to know who owned this pretty foot.

“Isabel?”

“Sister!”

Isabel, who clenched the iron bars tightly, looked down at Nicole with a worried look.

“Why are you here? You shouldn’t be involved in this?”

There were many questions on her mind, but Nicole checked her safety first.

Nicole’s love for her family was absolute.

“Well, I’m fine. Sister is the one—”

“.....”

“It looks great, right?”

Before she knew it, Isabel said in a calm voice. Nicole, kneeling on the floor and barely supporting herself, saw Isabel’s wrist at that moment.

Isabel was wearing a bright red dress made of silk. The design has no sleeves, so her white arms are revealed.

And Isabel’s wrist was very clean.

“When we last met, you had a bandage with blood stains on your wrist, right?”

Isabel, who looked at Nicole’s expression, caressed her wrist.

“Oh, this? You’re so naive. Do you really think I cut my wrist? You’re such a fool. I know. Why—”

“.....”

“You’ve lived so far without knowing what’s going on?”

Nicole's eyes got wider. Isabel leaned over Nicole.

"What a silly woman. I made many opportunities for you to commit suicide, but you missed all the opportunities and became an unlucky girl who couldn't even get into her coffin."

"Isabel, what are you talking about?"

Isabel, who is always sweet and friendly. Isabel who sings like an angel.

Tiny, pretty, my family's treasure. Isabel, who is full of healing talents.....

Everything is falling down.

The reality that Nicole knew was shattered in her head.

"What do you mean? Now I'm saying what I want to say. Oh, father's been easy, but you're really... You're something else."

"Father? Is Father's death related to you?"

"Father had a conscience. He thought it was a nuisance that he was alive, so he left beautifully."

Isabel leaned over. And she whispered a secret into Nicole's ear.

"I went to Father and sold him. He's incompetent, he's not protecting us, he's putting us in hell. He's a coward hiding there under the pretext of not being able to leave Mother."

"How was that possible? We were under constant surveillance. After we came to the Grand Park, we kept....."

"You're so gullible! Stupid. Grand Duke Valentine was worried about his wife's father. He tried to take Father to a safe place. So no wonder he let me go!"

Raul was really worried about my father. That's why he sent Isabel to bring Father.

As if she wanted to confide, Isabel spoke.

"But I rather persuaded my father. Since mother's lineage is already a problem, if father's status is revealed, sister will not be treated as a Grand Duchess for the rest of her life and will be insulted. Father said suicide would reduce the harassment and abuse sister receives as the Grand Duchess. Aren't you thankful? Thanks to you, our troublesome father died."

Nicole couldn't even tell what the truth was anymore. Isabel complained that Raul kept an eye on them like iron barrels and treated them like slaves.

Was it real?

"Father was suffering from depression after Mother died. To someone like that..... How can you say that? Father always did his best to protect his family."

"Who protects who? Our family?"

Isabel laughed for a long time.

"So you wanted to imitate Father? You pretended to be my guardian because you felt sorry for our parents, right? Ahaha, it's so funny. You idiot. If you really wanted to be of help to me, you should have given me the Grand Duchess position! You still don't get it?"

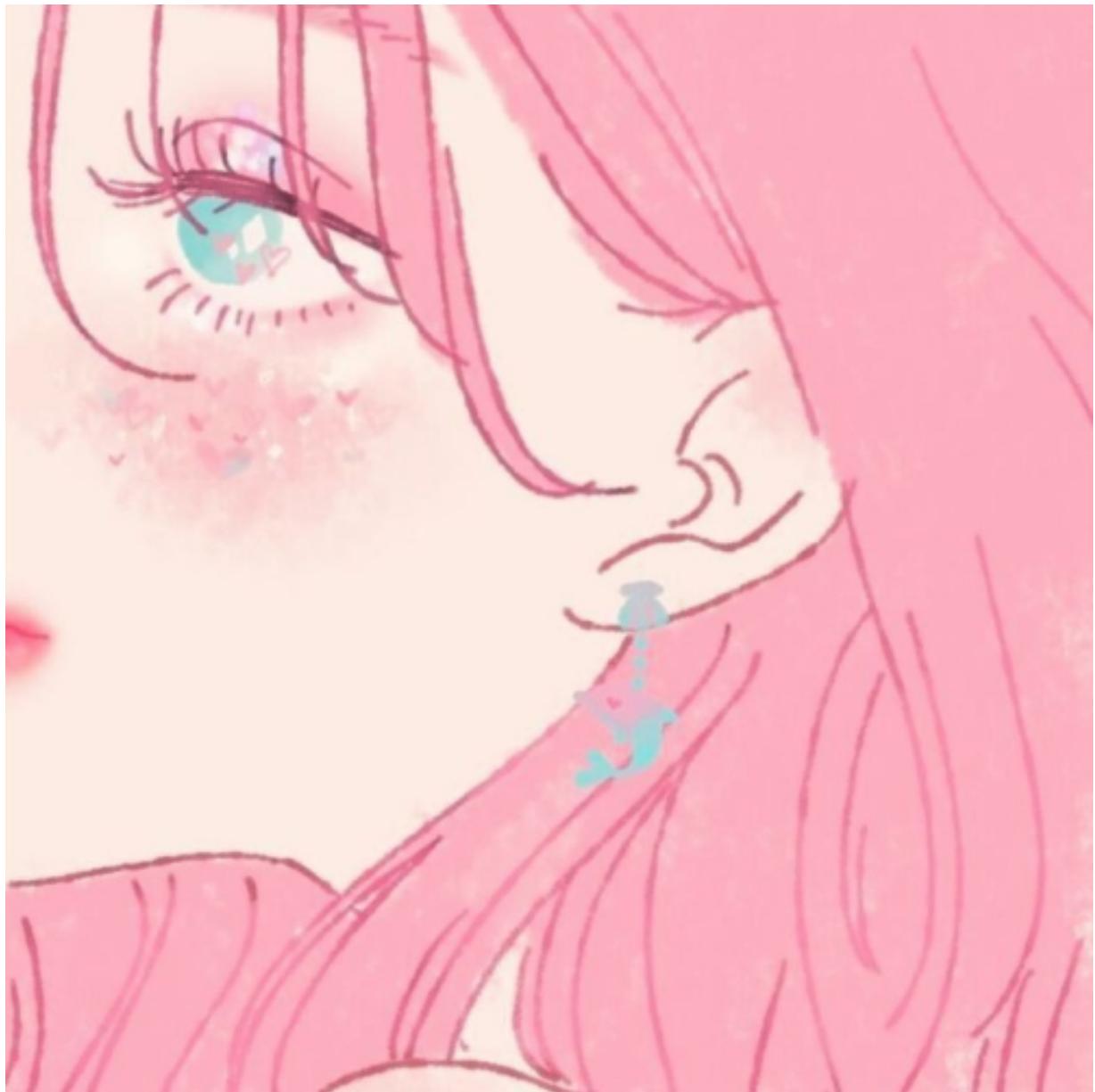
Isabel put her face close to the bars and said.

"If it weren't for you, I would have been the eldest daughter. And I would have been the Grand Duchess."

Nicole's eyes shook. Isabel's words were just as shocking.

"That's why I secretly informed the imperial family of where we're living in hiding."

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# Chapter 7

“Was it your doing? You were the one who destroyed the peace of our family?”

“You don’t know why I volunteered to take care of our sick mother, do you? I heard her. She said our family is actually a Yveschapel, a fallen noble!”

Isabel grinned.

“And that a political marriage with the Grand Duke was arranged. You don’t have healing powers and I’m much prettier. So of course I thought he’d kill you and take me. In the first place, the Imperial wanted to save the eldest daughter from the Yveschapel family and marry her to the Grand Duke because they wanted her healing powers.”

Isabel laughed low when she saw Nicole’s expression full of disgust.

“Actually, I hated the house where we lived in hiding. And I was so happy when Jay died. What if I became a real noble’s wife and Jay or you were alive?”

“For that reason, Jay.....”

“What do you know? I mean, I didn’t want to die like you. Pretending to be nice, devoted. Since two years ago, I’ve seduced Grand Duke Valentine over and over again. Seduced him to marry me instead of you. I’ll mix my healing power with the blood of Grand Duke Valentine. But he.....

Rather, he recommended me as someone else's wife. Do you know what he said to me?"

〈I want to kill you if I could, but I can't help it because my only wife is going crazy.〉

Now the last piece of the puzzle is put together.

Raul forced Isabel to marry the knight because Isabel kept seducing him.

"Everything was a lie. Even looking unhappy....."

"Pretending to be beaten by my husband? You're a fool. My husband, Ruto, is a fool. How can he touch a pretty girl like me? It's not hard to deal with a man like that."

Isabel's eyes sparkled with satisfaction and a faint madness.

"I wanted to get back at Grand Duke Valentine somehow. How can he refuse me? So I encouraged you to kill him using the poison of the night."

"You, you....."

Nicole was speechless.

"You made me do that for such a ridiculous reason? What for? You're a devil."

"Ah, the reason? Of course I do have one. You don't know after all this time?"

Isabel said sarcastically.

〈Outside of the world we live in, it turns out that there is a reason for everything that people in the capital city do. Each

had a big and small scourge.)

One day, Nicole complained to Isabel while drinking tea.  
Why do those words come to her mind?

“Gaston, I need that. Come here.”

*Thump thump.*

A man walked in. Nicole knew the man.

“The Marquis of Saratov, Gaston?”

Nicole was dizzy. Gaston was Raul’s archrival during his lifetime.

Compared to Raul, he lacked qualifications and brains, but he was a man who was long appointed to the imperial family because he belonged to the same seven prestigious families.

Exactly so in the past.

‘How could she. It hasn’t been a long time since Raul’s passing.’

Gaston was impeached by Raul after he was found to have committed numerous corruption cases and civilian killings.

However, considering that he was a noble, he was kicked out and was left to live in a local estate.

Rumor has it that Gaston was hiding a large amount of slush funds when he was kicked out.

‘And that man.....’

Gaston's family, the Saratov family, has long coveted the power and property of the Yveschapel family.

So out of spite for Raul's marriage to Nicole, he attempted to rape Nicole in a secluded garden at a party, but failed.

After that, he became an enemy of Raul.

"Did you finish your story well?"

Gaston spoke in a conceited tone.

"I was just telling her. Oh, you. I'm right. This operation will succeed. I told you, this way, you would definitely be able to return to the capital."

Isabel made a sweet face and naturally went into Gaston's arm and hugged him.

"Raul, that son of a gun, loved that poor woman, so our plan definitely worked. When I first heard it, I thought you were out of your mind"

"*Fufu*, I'm not wrong. You and I, as a descendant of the Yveschapel family, combined, we will surely enjoy power as much as Grand Duke Valentine. The Imperial family will eventually have to accept it. When Grand Duke Valentine died, there were only a few talented people from the seven major families left."

When she saw Gaston's face, Nicole could no longer deny reality.

'Then it's really... Raul, he died for me?'

She remembered him acting rather rough in bed. When she cut her body, he licked her blood and bit her.....

‘He tried to take all the poison from the beginning.’

Isabel looked at Nicole’s crazed expression and said with a proud look.

“You’re such a fool. Do you want me to tell you the truth of that day?”

At the coming of age festival for the youngest princess.

It was the peak of the ball.

The young Princess Celia, who had long had a crush on Raul, had a red face. This is because Raul disappeared even before she hinted at their engagement.

⟨Grand Duke!⟩

Then there was a man blocking Raul.

⟨How did you get here? If you bother me again, I’ll cut your throat this time.⟩

Raul’s expression was distorted when he saw Isabel standing with a shy expression.

⟨Is it true that the Imperial family said that they would exempt the Yveschapel family on condition of the marriage of Princess Celia and the Grand Duke?⟩

⟨Even so, it doesn’t matter to you. I married you off according to your sister’s wish which made you irrelevant to the Yveschapel family.⟩

Isabel blinked.

〈But..... If the Yveschapel family is no longer considered as traitors, will the world see them differently? A soft person like her may not be able to live after divorce.〉

〈Get out of the way〉

As if to be bothered, he walked in defiance of Isabel.

〈Are you going home early for your wife? But she said she didn't even want to talk to the Grand Duke. Grand Duke, Grand Duke.....〉

What Raul discovered was a letter tied to his saddle.

Raul's countenance changed when he saw the letter.

“He was informed by letter that you were going to drink poison and assassinate the Great Duke that night. He was given a detailed formula to see how the poison of the night works. I thought the Grand Duke would understand the poison quickly because he was well versed in various poisons.”

“.....”

Raul received a letter. The letter would have stated that Nicole had been poisoned and that he had to drink her blood and saliva and sleep with her to detoxify the poison.

‘I see. The poison of the night is a secret handed down only to our family. There was a reason Raul knew about the poison.’

That night the mansion was empty and Nicole remained alone waiting for him.

If he came home even a little later, Nicole would have been poisoned to death.

When Nicole realized it, tears flowed down her eyes.

“Oh, oh, oh...”

Her stupidity and hatred killed her husband. On the spur of the moment

“Don’t be so sad, sister. I’ve always appreciated your dedication. But you know, I did work for our family. If I hadn’t reported us, we would have died living as a hermit, unknown to the world. It’s weird to die there with our family for the rest of my life”

“This whole thing was your plan. Yes, it was.”

Isabel raised her eyebrows when she heard Nicole’s empty voice.

“No, how many times do I have to tell you? I wouldn’t have made such a stupid plan. I wanted to be the Grand Duchess. Anyway, I... I knew Raul was hopeless, so I had to decide. Now I’m going to make my own fortune with my own hands. We’re on the same wavelength.”

Isabel said, looking pleased at Gaston.

“Do you think Gaston will keep his promise to you? Gaston just wants a woman from the YvesChapel family. Besides, you have a husband.”

Gaston was also known for being a womanizer, as he caused several violent incidents.

“Oh, my husband. Yes, if my husband is still alive?”

Nicole was silent for a moment at Isabel's words.

"Ah, he's been addicted to hallucinogens. I've fed him for a long time. You know, I'm good at making medicine."

Medicine? At that moment, Nicole realized something.

"You, the neurotic drug you prescribed me....."

"Did you notice that now? It's a medicine that relaxes your mind if you take it for a long time."

Isabel smiled when she looked at Gaston.

"You're a fool. If I die, you'll no longer be the sister of the Grand Duchess, you're just the blood of a traitor. You can never be a lady."

Nicole snapped back.

"Who's said I'll be a Grand Duchess with my status now? I'll buy a new identity soon. I'll die with my husband. Besides, I'm a woman who can help Gaston's future. Men value such a woman."

"That's right. A useful woman like you should be treated like a treasure. I got rid of Raul like a thorn in the side."

The two giggled at each other lovingly.

"I'll tell you one more interesting fact. Do you know how Gaston survived? The Imperial family wanted to get rid of you, Nicole. They've found a way to charge you of treason several times. That's when Raul negotiated with the Imperial family. For saving you, he'll save Gaston."

The Saratov family, unlike the other seven families, was the second generation of the imperial servants. In other words,

they worked for a long time as a close aide in charge of the messy work of the Imperial family. So even in the imperial family, they couldn't throw away Gaston at all.

In addition, the Imperial family always used Gaston as a checker for Raul, so they wanted to save Gaston just in case.

"By the way, it's quite a waste. Given Raul's death, I guess you were lonely at night? As expected, I should have r@ped you that night"

Gaston looked at Nicole and said regretfully.

"What are you saying in front of me?"

Isabel pinched Gaston's arm. Gaston smirked.

Isabel last spoke to Nicole.

"Sister, remember that. Life is about getting what you want at the expense of others. Stupid father and mother gave birth to me so beautifully for a reason. So that I can stand on top of others."

Isabel laughed cheerfully.

"There is a card game saying that the only thing that can catch the king is a clown. I didn't know I'd use my stupid, insignificant sister like a clown to kill the hateful man who rejected me....."

Isabel's eyes were full of obsession and love and hatred.

"Isabel, can I do it now?"

Gaston said.

“Yes, go ahead.”

Upon hearing Isabel’s answer, Gaston took out a key from the bag in his waistband. Then he went inside the prison without hesitation.

“She’s stubborn, so you can hit her.”

“*Heup, eup!*”

Gaston crushed Nicole’s body on the floor. He covered her mouth and strangled her.

“*Keuk! keuck!*”

Nicole resisted by swinging her arms and legs. However, when she came to her senses, she already had the potion in her mouth.

“It’s a medicine that makes you dumb. You shouldn’t talk nonsense.”

Then Gaston covered Nicole’s nose with his big hand. In the end, Nicole almost suffocated and was about to die, swallowing all the medicine.

“*Ugh! Cough, cough.*”

Gaston threw Nicole down on the floor.

“I’m going now.”

Gaston looked down at Nicole with pride. Isabel waved to Nicole.

“Bye, sister.”

*Squeak.* The prison door is closed.

"How sad would Grand Duke Valentine be, who worked hard to save sister, to see this? Isn't that right?"

She heard Isabel laughing.

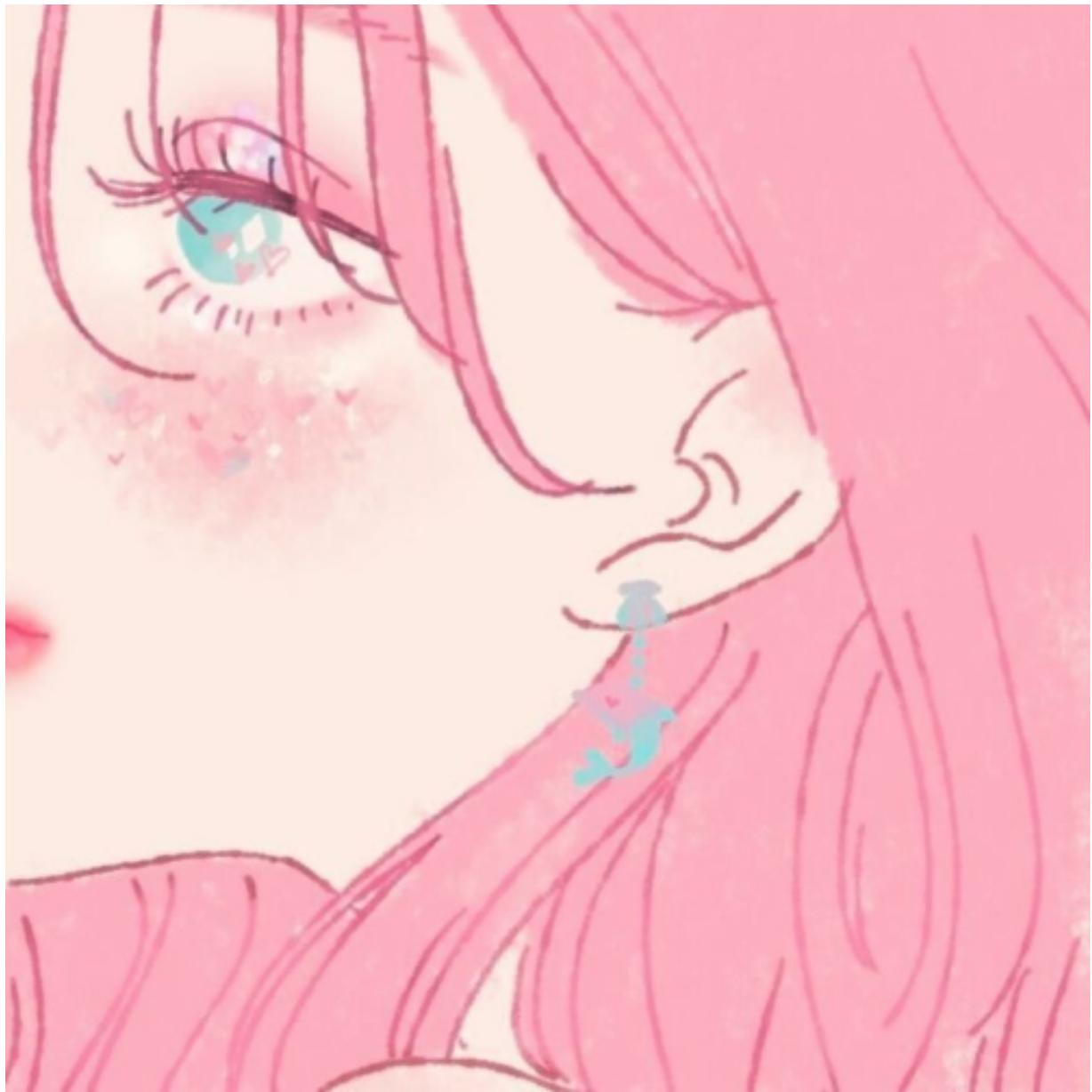
*"Uhu, eu, euhp!"*

Her throat was burning. Her head thundered.

It was probably because of the medicine's effects. But still, Nicole reached out to Isabel in tears.

But her hateful fingertips reached nothing. It was only able to reach through the iron bars.

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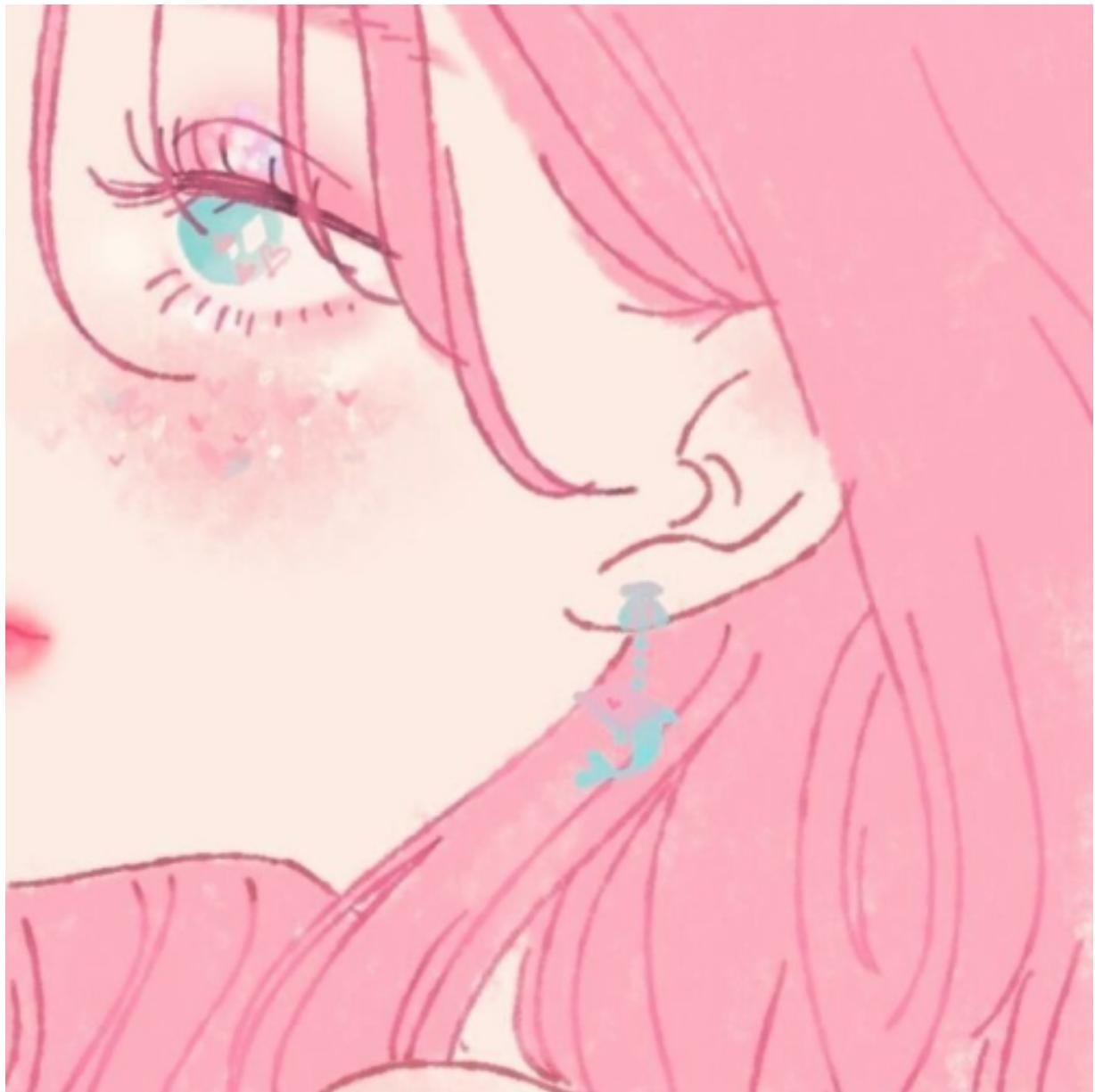


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# Chapter 8

\*\*\*

*Waaaaaaaah!*

She hears people crying.

“Kill the witch, execute her!”

“The Devil who killed the Grand Duke! The daughter of a traitor!”

The rotten food hit Nicole on the head. Nicole was walking through the crowd in a ragged form.

Today's public execution was to console the people for the death of Grand Duke Valentine, who was loved by the people.

‘It's all because of my stupidity.’

Her body swelled with wounds and her a mute tongue caused derision from the public.

But now she couldn't hear or recall anything. There was no pain or shame.

“Break her arms and legs first and then hang her!”

Someone shouted in excitement. She stood before the execution table. Then the executioner, wearing a hood, whispered.

"The Grand Duke's coffin will soon pass through here."

Nicole turned her head with a startled face. It was a familiar voice.

It was the knight close to Raul, Bastard. His black eyes, mixed with Eastern blood, were already familiar.

'Raul's coffin passes through here?'

The guard's words came to mind.

In order to show Nicole's death to Raul's body and to relieve his resentment - he said they will deliberately start the procession of the coffin in front of the execution site.

"When his coffin appears, people will pay attention to it. Throw yourself through the crowd then. Our people are waiting down there."

But the mute Nicole couldn't answer. Instead, she made a sign that she understood with a wink.

"He- he always prepared for his assassination. That he may die of such an ugly poison."

There was a faint hatred for Nicole in Bastard's voice.

"Here comes the Grand Duke!"

Nicole tilted her head long.

Over the dim view, she could see an open carriage pulled by six white horses. It was loaded with a transparent crystal

coffin.

As the coffin came through the crowd, some sobbed, and others shouted in maddened voices.

“Execution! Execute!”

“Kill the wicked woman!”

It was that moment.

*Bang!*

There was an explosion in the distance.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“What is this!”

People screamed in an instant. The look of people running around, scared.....

It was planned by Raul's aides.

Bastard quickly cut Nicole's hand off the rope.

Nicole momentarily pulled out a dagger in Bastard's waist.

Then she jumped into the crowd as Bastard told her to. The carriage came steadily towards the execution site.

*Hihihing!*

The horse jumped in fright.

Her wounded leg felt like it was broken. Nicole was lucky to settle on Raul's coffin.

'I must have broken my leg.'

There was a thud. But Nicole didn't budge.

The crystal coffin had no lid. Raul was surrounded by lilies.

'I see your face properly now only after you die.'

Raul's body was pale. He also looked calm as if he was asleep.

In a very short moment, in a few seconds. Nicole caressed Raul's face.

'Why did you die for me?'

But now she doesn't even have time to worry about it.

'As you said, if we meet in the same hell one day, I'll get an answer.'

Nicole closed her eyes.

"What are you doing?"

Then one of the knights around the carriage shouted.

Nicole was holding a small dagger from Bastard's waist as soon as she jumped.

Looking at Raul's beautiful face, Nicole cut her throat at once.

Nicole's blood was scattered over the white flowers that wrapped his body. Nicole covered herself over him. Her eyes closed slowly.

Nicole's lips, as she closed her eyes, were filled with a faint smile.

*Bung, bong!*

This time, another explosion occurred in the opposite direction.

It has been a long time since the knights who guarded Raul's coffin fled after leaving their swords.

The explosion occurred near the river near the capital.

There were no casualties because of that. The only person who died that day was Nicole, who was on death row.

When people looked into Raul's coffin again, what they found was Nicole's body, with her eyes closed, dead in Raul's coffin.

*Wiggle.*

Then Raul's fingertips moved.

Raul's eyelashes fluttered faintly.

'I left a will that you must save the Grand Duchess first.'

Even Bastard, who had a frustrated expression mixed in the crowd, did not know the minute changes in Raul's body.

⟨Nicole. Just because you don't have healing power doesn't mean you lack ability.⟩

Mother caressed the six-year-old Nicole's hair and whispered.

*(In fact, the ability given to you is the most superior ability of the Yveschapel family.)*

*(What ability do I have?)*

*(You can resurrect only one person once in your life and die instead. But it shouldn't be longer than a week after that person died. And it should not be someone who died of illness. It has to be someone who died in an accident.)*

*(I can sacrifice my life for someone and die instead?)*

*(Yes. A lot of people from different families studied that ability, but they couldn't learn anything.)*

*(How can I use that ability?)*

*(If you decide to save someone you have to cut your own neck, then a transparent bead will come out of your body. But you have to be willing to sacrifice your life for that person with all your heart. If you feed it to that person, you can give them your life instead. But it's such a great ability..... People in our family used to be used and threatened by others in the ancient times. So don't ever get caught.)*

Just before the execution ceremony, Nicole somehow recalled the memory.

And when an unexpected opportunity came, she didn't miss it and got the dagger.

'That's true. Mother was right.'

At the moment of her death, Nicole put the transparent bead from her body into Raul's mouth with all her might.

'Thank God I could save you and die.'

It was an ability she's never seen with her own eyes. A mere verbal miracle

But somehow she thinks she'll succeed. That was Nicole's gut feeling. She was so sure in the midst of a blur.

'Although it wasn't a perfect sacrifice..... But if it's you, you'll do everything well on your own as long as you survive. Because you were a hell of a thorough and capable man.'

Nicole thought unconsciously. Nicole always considered death a redemption. Indeed, she was right.

It's very peaceful right now.

'Is this what death is? I feel at ease..... It's warm....'

*Chirp chirping.*

It tickles.

Nicole tossed and turned with a strange feeling. The warm sun tickled her body.

Outside, the dry laundry made a pleasant sound of swaying in the wind.

She could also hear a boy and a girl talking.

"Is this heaven?"

Nicole opened her eyes slowly. She saw a familiar stain on the ceiling.

“Sister!”

Then someone stuck their face up to Nicole.

“.....Jay?”

Nicole managed to spit it out after a few seconds.

“Yes? Are you awake?”

“You’re really... Jay, you’re alive, right?”

“Of course. What’s wrong?”

Jay waved his hand on Nicole’s face. Nicole grabbed his hand.

She tried to move her hand. It was a little rough because she did a lot of housework, but it was definitely her hand.

‘I’m alive?’

She wasn’t just alive either.

Nicole went back to the time she lost. She came back to the past.

‘God, thank you.’

She can’t believe it’s not just her, but Jay is still alive! Nicole hugged Jay without realizing it.

“Sister, did you have a dream? Do you happen to have a headache? Do you want me to bring Isabel?”

The name Isabel made Nicole stiff as if he had poured cold water on her.

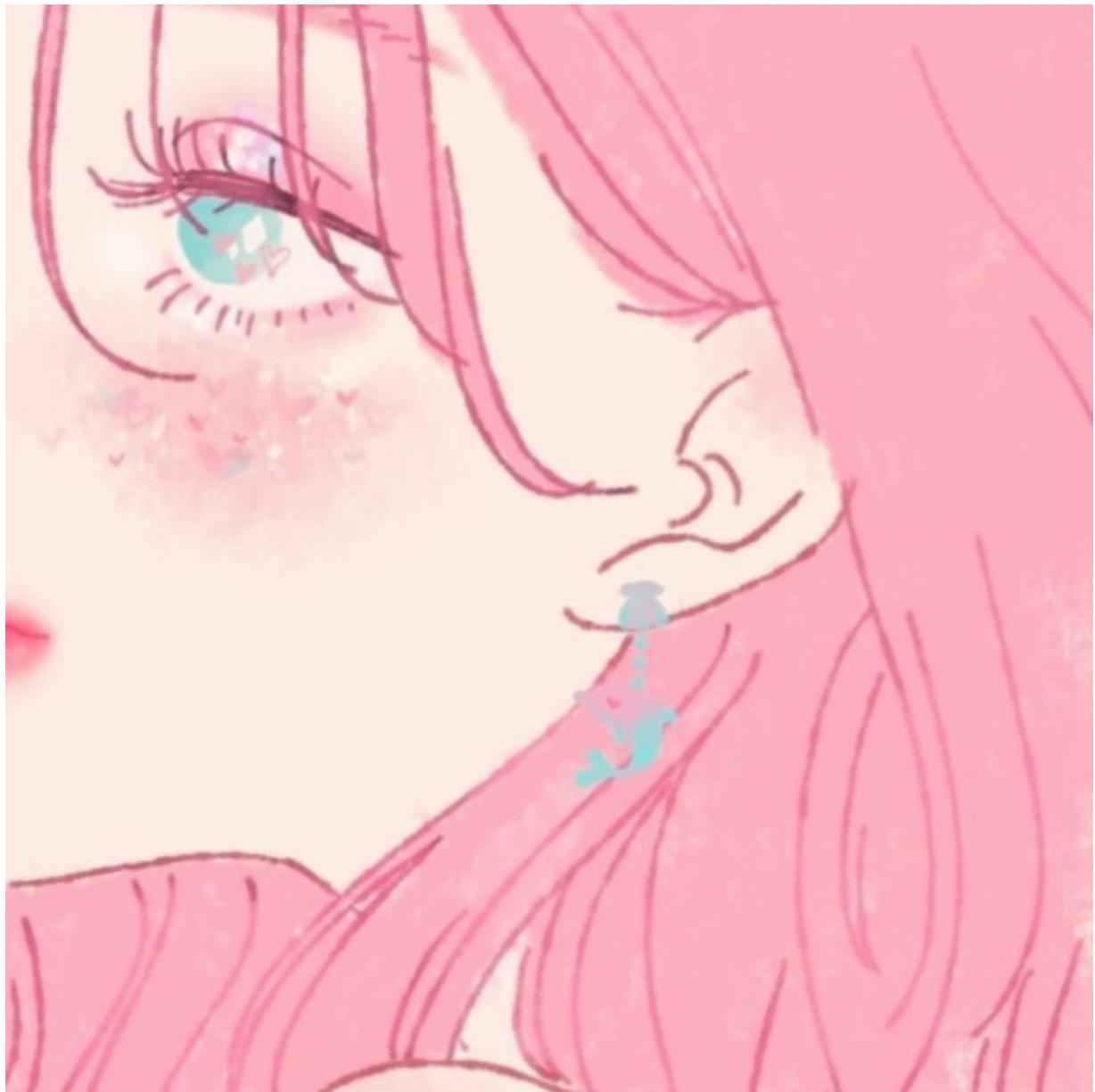
'If this is our house, and I came back to the past long before I died.....'

Then, of course, Isabel is here.

The devil lurking among this family, that Isabel

*(t/n: my mind is blown, that was a roller coaster of emotions, i wasn't expecting that!!!!)*

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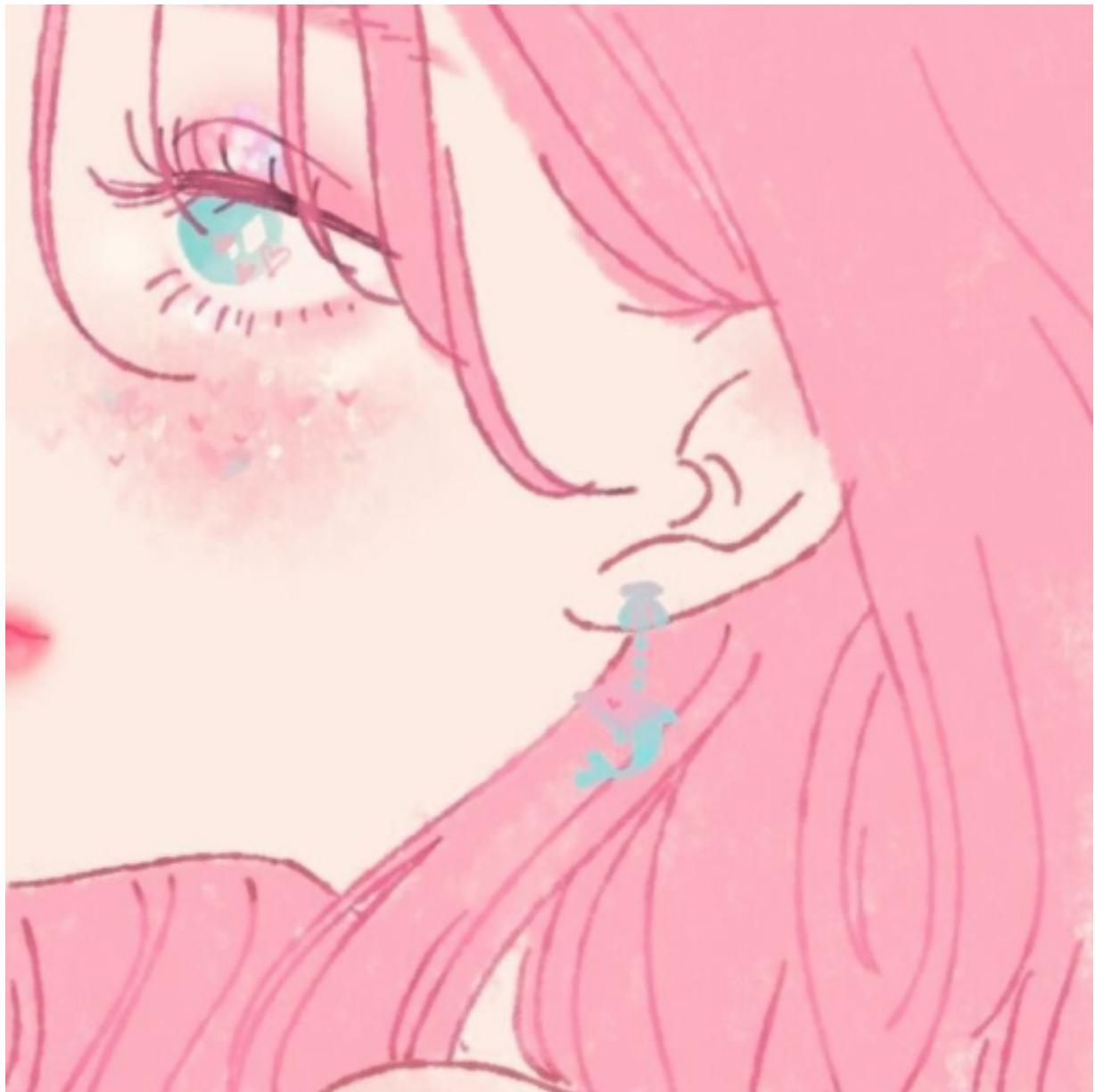


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# Chapter 9

Nicole slowly rose up, leaving Jay's suspicious gaze behind.

Then she approached the door.

She remembered. Around this time, Nicole had a habit of opening windows and doors, smoking a special scent made by Isabel and taking a nap to chase away the bugs.

Nicole was in charge of the housework because Freya was weak and always sick.

Jay also helped a lot with her work, but he was still not good at it.

'Father... went down to the city to work. Then... Raul came in and dragged us away.'

She always moved busily from dawn to night, and this short nap was her only break.

Where's Mother? What about Isabel?

Nicole hurried down the stairs. There was her parents' room on the first floor.

"Mother, I have a question."

Nicole, who was just opening the door, paused.

This is because Isabel's voice, which was acting cute to her mother Freya, was heard through the open door.

"Mother never told Isabel what our real identities were. But Isabel is curious about it. Sister isn't, but you, Isabel, and Jay are all healers. It's obvious we're from a special lineage, right? Are we really nobles?"

Nicole got goosebumps on the back of her hand holding the doorknob.

Nicole judged momentarily.

'At this point, Isabel doesn't know that we were originally nobles. The history of the YvesChapel family.'

Isabel must have started to develop ambition when she learned the secret of the family and the arranged engagement with the Grand Duke. Nicole judged momentarily.

"You keep asking me that. Are you really curious? What if you're disappointed?"

"But I'm so lonely. I can't meet anyone in this deep mountain and I always live the same way. I think I'll feel at least comforted if I know the truth. Yes? Mother, please."

*(t/n: Isabel is referring to herself by her name, as she's acting cute)*

Nicole breathed in. Freya is already ill at this point.

And yet she persistently insists on sick Freya?

Nicole opened the door without hesitation.

Freya was sitting in an armchair. Isabel clung to Freya's side and was acting cute with her cheeks on her knees.

Isabel raised her head. She looked at Nicole with her clear blue eyes, slowly

"Sister, you're here?"

She's beautiful. Like an angel.

For a moment, Nicole couldn't control her expression. She barely suppressed her heart.

'You who caused Father to commit suicide, and caused the misfortune of our family.'

'You are clinging to Mother like that?'

It's like a dream, but it certainly happened.

If Nicole hadn't experienced it, she would never have known the truth.

Nicole did not answer Isabel for now. Just quietly turned to Freya.

"Mother, are you okay?"

"Of course, Nicole."

Freya smiled with a sickly face. The sight made Nicole's heart ache even more.

"You're busy doing housework because your mom is sick, right? I'm so sorry....."

But for a moment, Freya's face was quickly filled with regret.

"It's okay. I did the laundry in the morning. I baked bread early in the morning. If Jay peels the potatoes, we can have a stew for dinner. So don't worry. But Isabel, what were you doing here?"

Nicole asked calmly. Nicole was relieved to hear a more natural voice than expected.

"Isabel was reading a book to me. I got my new meds tested. She made new cosmetics to sell to the village to raise money for the winter."

"Really?"

Freya had a great knowledge of pharmacy. All of her siblings studied medicine.

Among them, growing herbs that have been passed down only to the family was also included.

"Well, Isabel is not done talking to mother yet."

Isabel said innocently. But she gave me a hint.

"I haven't been able to spend time with Mother because I've been busy lately. You've been staying with Mother from morning till night lately. So sometimes I'll take care of Mother."

Isabel's expression changed for a moment.

'Mother almost told me the secret of the family.'

She looked as if she was thinking that.

But it was only for a moment.

"Oh, Mother, you said you were hungry earlier, right? Isabel likes bread baked by sister the most these days. You know, the one that you put acacia honey on the surface? The one that Father worked hard to get last year—"

Isabel showed her charm.

She was hoping Nicole will bring her the bread.

"Then would you like to go and put some bread in the basket? Take care of Jay, too. And I'm going to make a vegetable stew for dinner, and I'd like you to cut the prepared vegetables."

Nicole answered calmly.

"..... Huh?"

Isabel seemed perplexed when she heard her.

Isabel did not know how to do housework, so she used to break dishes or waste precious ingredients.

So Nicole eventually didn't let her do anything because her sister, who was full of mistakes, was adorable.

In the end, she volunteered to do harsh housework and took it on her own.

'Now that I see it, this is also your skill. You don't do anything and you push people around you. Your skill of manipulating the situation is great, Isabel.'

And it was Nicole who was manipulated by Isabel the most more than anyone else.

"What's wrong, Isabel?"

“But... Sister told me not to go into the kitchen. Isabel is not good at preparing ingredients..... I can’t hurt my hand when I have to make medicine while cutting.....”

The YvesChapel family is destroyed. And at this time, Nicole and Isabel didn’t even know what their origins were.

But their mother, Freya, constantly taught her children about herbs and insects used in pharmacology.

“Isabel, don’t you have to cut the herbs to make medicine? It doesn’t make sense that you, who are good at handling delicate herbs, can’t even trim vegetables or meat. That must be a matter of mindset.”

“Sister...”

Isabel tried to say something. But Nicole continued in a soft tone and interrupted Isabel.

“Until now, I left you alone because you seemed so busy and not interested in kitchen work. But... In the fall, there will be more crops to harvest in the garden. Jay takes care of the garden and does all the rough work in the house by himself. I’m also busy with kitchen work from morning to evening and cleaning. So I think it’s right to share the work now.”

“.....”

“If you do it again tomorrow and again the day after tomorrow, Isabel will be able to do light errands well someday. Isn’t that right?”

“Ah, yes.”

"You know how to put the bread in a pretty way so that it doesn't get crushed, Isabel? Let's start with that first."

*Eudeuk*

At that moment, Nicole saw Isabel's eyes flash once.

But it was fleeting. For a moment she thought if she misunderstood.

"All right, sister!"

Eventually Isabel got up from her seat.

"Isabel will do well. Right?"

".....Yes."

"By the way, what's going on, sister?"

"What?"

"You don't really talk about things like this..... So it's a little unfamiliar."

".....It was when I was young that I was educated to kill my emotions. But not anymore."

Nicole answered calmly.

Isabel nodded once and went out humming.

'Your mask may not be as thick as you think.'

Isabel's very brief nature was very impressive to Nicole.

To the point where she wants to pull down her mask of laughter and show it to her family right away.

“Nicole?”

Freya said.

“You look like a different person today. Are you alright?”

“Am I like that?”

“You always looked past Isabel’s childishness. It’s the first time I’ve seen you be tough on her.”

“I made Isabel run an errand..... Was it too much?”

“That’s not true. Isabel is such a fragile child. I’m ashamed, but so am I. I wanted to educate her so that she could experience all the rough and difficult things. But before that time came, this mother of yours got sick.”

“.....”

Nicole looked at Freya quietly.

‘My mother is smaller than I remember..... She’s so thin.’

When she lived as the Grand Duchess, I remembered this place as a paradise..... However, the truth is, Nicole was burned out during her mother’s lifetime.

It was largely due to her mother raising her as the first child, more strictly than necessary.

‘There’s a saying that for parents, their first child is a failure.’

As she later found out, Freya was pregnant with Nicole when she was on the run to escape the imperial family.

Immediately after the birth of Nicole, she wandered around and lived in hiding.

Freya was always scared then and afraid of losing her child.

In addition, Freya came from a “competent” family of great nobility.

Children in a talented family learn to kill and control emotions from an early age.

So as soon as Freya gave birth to Nicole, she educated her as she grew up.

*(Press this counter when you feel emotional, happy, or overjoyed. So that you can't think of anything.)*

*Click, click.*

*(You shouldn't cry or laugh. You shouldn't even express it. All the people who cause you to change your emotions are bad people except for your family. It's dangerous out there, Nicole. You have to hide your feelings to survive.)*

‘.....yes, I still remember it sometimes.’

Nicole thought calmly.

‘At that time, that would have been the best thing for Mother.....’

Freya feared that Nicole would grow up curious about the outside world and want to run away.

So she taught her to erase her emotions, and thoroughly control it.

Soon Isabel was born and they built a nest in this mountain.

'But Isabel's growing up..... As we settled down, everything changed.'

Isabel was the second child.

**(Mother, I love you!)**

But she's..... She was too lovely to raise strictly like Nicole. Cute, bright, always smiling. She acted strangely and prettily in everything.

By then, Freya's paranoia, which restrained and wrapped her child, had also been cured.

No matter how much training was given to her to kill emotions, Isabel acted cute or said she loved her.

'What melted this frozen home..... It's Isabel.'

They taught their children so much to never come into contact with people and not to go out of the house.

But Isabel and Jay weren't taught as hard as Nicole was taught.

Before she knew it, the family became happy, and only Nicole, who grew up under control of her emotions, was left with a gloomy side.

'So I've always blamed my mother.....'

Freya felt sorry for Nicole, but it was not easy to open up.

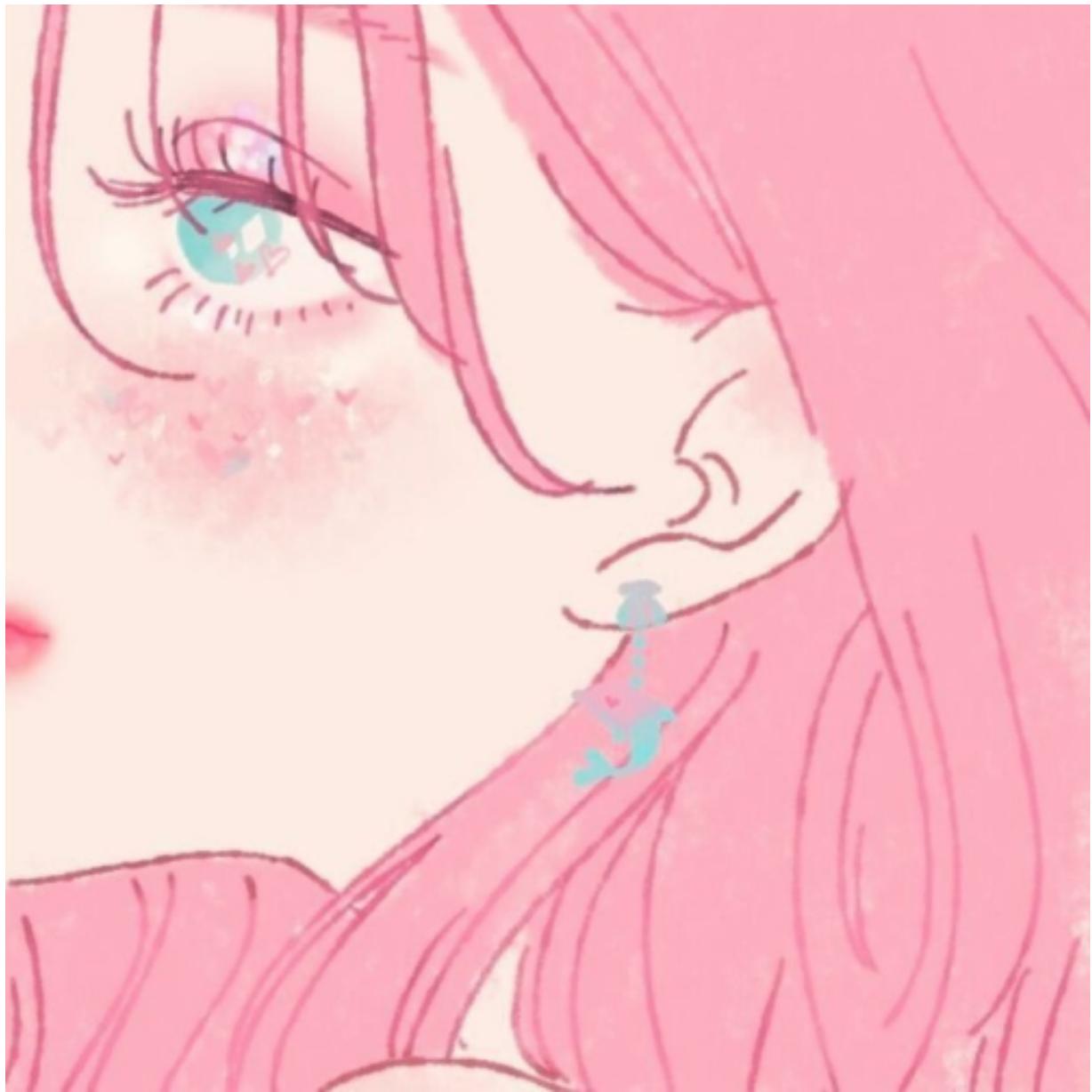
The relationship between the mother and daughter gradually grew awkward. Instead, Nicole poured all her love into Isabel who's like sunshine.

'I can understand my mother a little now.'

Mother wasn't necessarily right. However, Nicole, who had experienced the world once, could now know.

She was imperfect, but that doesn't mean she doesn't love her. Mother did her best and was just clumsy.

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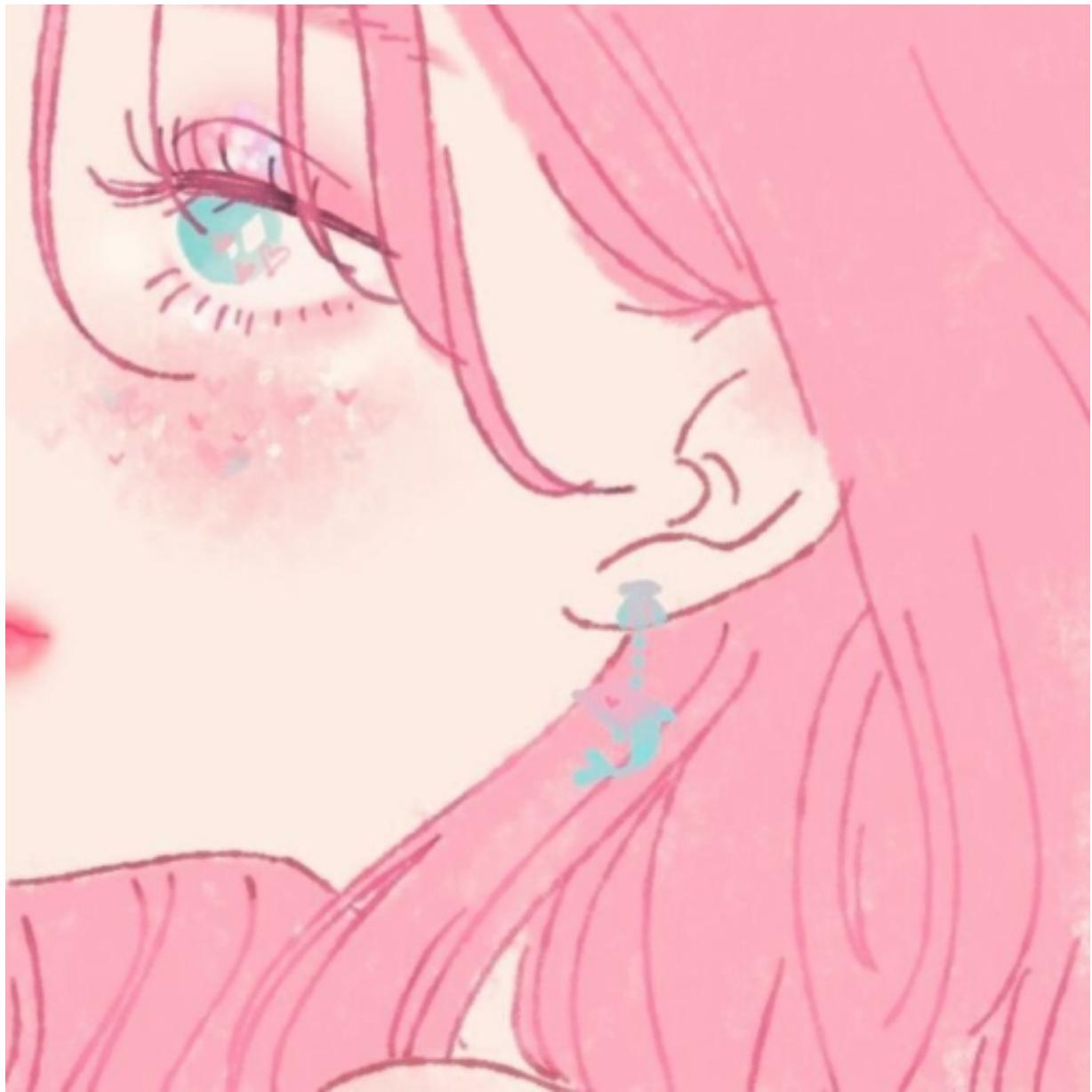


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# Chapter 10

After Freya died, Nicole missed her very much.

After a very long time, she envied even a ray of sunlight shared by Freya and Isabel.

"Don't say that. I should stay. Mother's health is not good."

Nicole sat next to Freya.

"You always worry about our family. So do I. I always rely on you because you're the eldest daughter."

".....Mother."

"Jay is young, but he is a boy, so he will get through the world well, and Isabel is immature but lucky. But you always keep your heart where your mouth is. That's why I'm always worried. It may seem brazen of me to worry about this, but....."

Nicole almost burst into tears.

'You're right, Mother's right. I can't resist my destiny. After all, even Jay, no. No one in this family can protect me. Eventually, Isabel takes my everything.'

At this time, Father had a hard time taking Freya to the doctor.

And the doctor says Freya's days were numbered.

'I guess I turned back time since I went back to the past. It's a miracle. But..... but there's nothing I can do about a sick person.'

Their family had the gift of healing.

But they could only cure an injured person.

A disease that permeated deep in the body was incurable.

'Even healers can't cure natural diseases. I... do I have to experience my mother's death twice?'

But this life will be different. We'll be together until Freya closes her eyes.

"I've never blamed Mother. Sometimes I complained that I wanted to go down to the village. But I didn't mean it. This little world we live in, what a peaceful place our home is. I know how hard it was for Mother to teach us, dress us well, and feed us while living in hiding."

"Nicole?"

Freya opened her eyes wide.

It was the first time Nicole had spoken so truthfully to Freya.

"You've never been down to town. How do you know about the world....."

"I secretly read a book that Father had hidden."

Nicole said humbly. Her parents collected quite a few books they needed despite their hard lives, but hid things that were too secular, to protect their children.

Most of them were books about learning or fairy tales.

But Nicole knew that. In fact, she was talking about what she read in her last life.

“.....I see.”

“And Father sometimes goes down to the village and buys things. He tried to take us with him once or twice. Mother was absolutely against it.”

Nicole said quietly.

“There must be a reason why you want to hide us so much. Maybe we could... Are you being chased by someone? For example, a very high-ranking person or the royal family?”

Freya breathed in. She looked at Nicole with a sad expression.

“Everyone in the family says Isabel is smart. But I know that you’re as smart as Isabel. You’ve noticed it.”

“What did you tell Isabel?”

Nicole’s voice changed.

“No, nothing yet. But now that you’ve noticed it so far, I can’t hide it from you anymore.”

Freya, in a very small, weak voice, told the truth that Nicole already knew.

Including the fact that the Yveschapel family is a rebel family, and Freya fled.

“Treason is a system of association. If you’re taken, maybe..... You’ll be killed or enslaved.”

"I read about the history of the empire in a book. There is no slave status in the empire, but traitors and their descendants are the exception."

Freya sighed softly and said to Nicole.

"Right, listen to me from now on, Nicole. The biggest reason we live in hiding like this is for you."

"Me?"

Freya opened up about the marriage treaty with the Grand Duke of Valentine.

"I don't understand, Mother. How can the eldest daughter of the Grand Duke and a traitor be married?"

"Just thinking about it makes me shudder. That's because the Valentine family and the Imperial family covet the healing power of our family."

"I mean... Are you saying that they want to breed us like livestock?"

"I'm surprised you understand that far. The Valentine family is planning to have children with the Yveschapel family to bear children with healing abilities."

Freya coughed. When Nicole leaned down to help her, she shook her head to show that she was okay.

"I want to tell you everything about my family when I'm even a little healthy. Nicole, listen."

".....Yes."

"The Yveschapel family is famous as a family of healers. They can heal an injured person and also show healing

power that has pain-relieving effects..... However, it is just a kind of ability that is manifested among the people of our family.”

Healing power was the flower of the Yveschapel family’s ability. But there were other unknown abilities.

‘I have the ability to sacrifice myself to give life to others only once in my lifetime.....’

“Raising poisonous insects and herbs for medicinal purposes is also a special ability of our family.”

“Nicole, you don’t have healing power, but you have the ability to grow herbs better than others. However, detailed abilities are unknown because the Yveschapel family has long concealed their abilities. In the end, the Imperial family.....”

“In the end, you mean that the imperial family only wants the healing power of our family.”

“Yes, so when they find our family..... They’ll ‘take’ the eldest daughter. If they kill you, Isabel, who has healing powers, becomes the eldest daughter”

“.....the moment I get caught, I’ll be killed.”

Nicole now knows what will happen in the future.

The Grand Duke of Valentine, Raul, does not kill Nicole. From his point of view, he catches Nicole, who is useless, and makes her his wife.

‘Why did he choose me instead of Isabel who showed healing abilities?’

Nicole had no idea what Raul was up to.

'I want to know you.'

Nicole suddenly bit her lip. But that's a wrong feeling.

Nicole should never be Raul's wife in this life. She couldn't repeat that kind of relationship.

"Nicole, are you okay? Were you surprised?"

"I was a little surprised because it was different from what I initially thought, but..... It's all right. Anyway..... Mother, Isabel's better off not knowing this whole thing."

"I think Isabel should know someday. It's a little early now."

Nicole bit her lips.

*(It's all because of you.)*

Isabel in her previous life has been blaming Nicole for a very long time.

'What if instead of me, Isabel had heard the family secret from Freya today?'

*(For us to survive. Most of all, we have to live in hiding to protect Nicole.)*

Freya would have said something like this, but Isabel would have twisted it.

*(Because of Nicole, we live in hiding. Nicole is the reason we can't afford to live freely.)*

'Yes, I'm sure Isabel will take it that way.'

It was not until she died in her first life that Nicole knew Isabel's true self.

Since she knows her, she could predict her way of thinking. So Nicole could see through Isabel's thoughts just by thinking calmly.

"What if Isabel gets caught up in a false dream after hearing about the marriage agreement to the Grand Duke? I'm a little older now so I understand Mother's story. If we go to the Grand Duke, we will be raised less than pigs, and it will be our grave at the same time. But she's still young and has no sense."

"No way. Isabel is such a good girl."

"The nicer a person is, the more innocent she is. I'm afraid she'll get hurt. Knowing the whole truth, she might be curious and do something crazy."

Freya was convinced by that.

"I understand. Nicole, I'll do as you say. Anyway, I feel at ease after telling you the truth. Even if I go first, you can tell the truth to your siblings. I'll leave those things up to you now."

"Just think about being healthy as soon as possible. I'll do my best to take care of Mother."

"Don't push yourself too hard. I'm fine, so take care of yourself."

"I don't overdo it. And... it's not hard at all."

Nicole spoke truthfully. Nicole was bad at everything in her last life.

‘At this time, I was so scared of Mother passing away. I couldn’t express my feelings honestly to Mother, so I had a lot of regrets.’

Nicole has always been sincere and quiet, but that’s all. She didn’t know how to express her feelings and couldn’t communicate with others skillfully. So she always caused misunderstandings.

She was completely the opposite of Isabel, who communicates well with others.

‘Maybe, someone gave me another chance.’

One more chance to say goodbye to my Mother and let her go.

“Nicole, if I die, please take care of your younger siblings. Don’t have a bad heart and just think about protecting yourself and your brothers.”

“Mother...”

Tears welled up in Nicole’s eyes.

“My daughter. Don’t cry. Since you were young, I always put pressure on you because I lacked as your mother.”

“No, you’re not.”

Nicole wiped away her tears.

“Mother, I didn’t have a chance to meet other people. My family always knew how I felt, no matter what I did. So I always wanted to settle down in this world and thought it was happiness..... But now I know it’s not.”

Nicole now knows that there is a world outside the mountains.

It was a dangerous, chaotic world outside. But now there is no turning back.

Some of Isabel's words were true.

*(Isn't it weird that we're hiding like a rat forever with our family!)*

"And... even if it's your family, sometimes you have to tell them your true feelings."

"Nicole..."

Something about Nicole has changed.

Can a person grow like this in overnight? Freya didn't know what expression to make.

"No matter what bloodline I was born in or what life we were given, I've never blamed Mother. I was really happy to be your daughter, and it's the same now. I know you did your best to care for us. Mother is a great person."

Freya's eyes also shed tears. Regardless of who said it first, the two hugged each other.

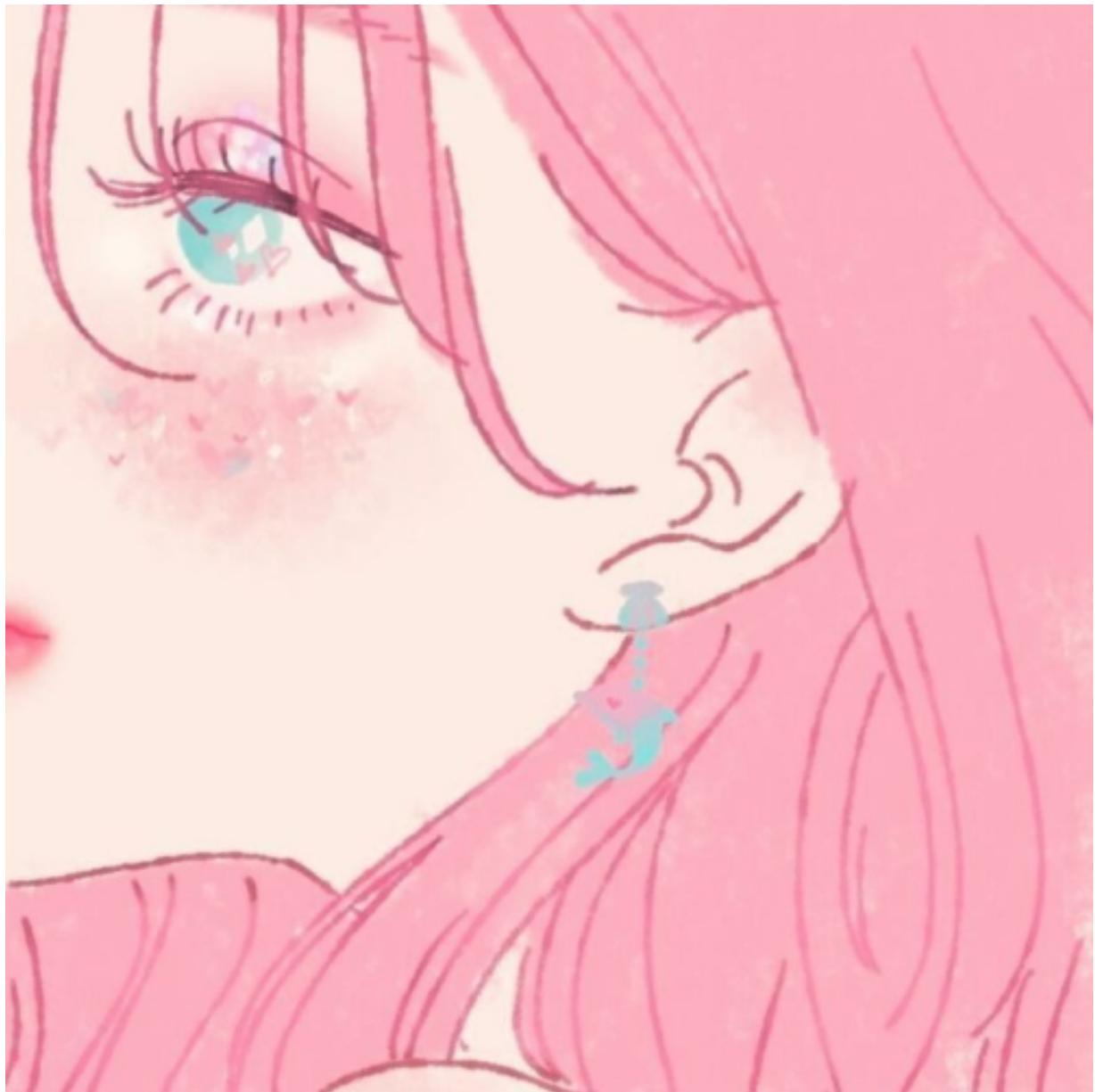
"I have no regrets in my life now. Because I knew you were such a kind and strong child."

"Don't worry.

"I'll protect my family. By all means."

Nicole said to herself as if she was vowing.

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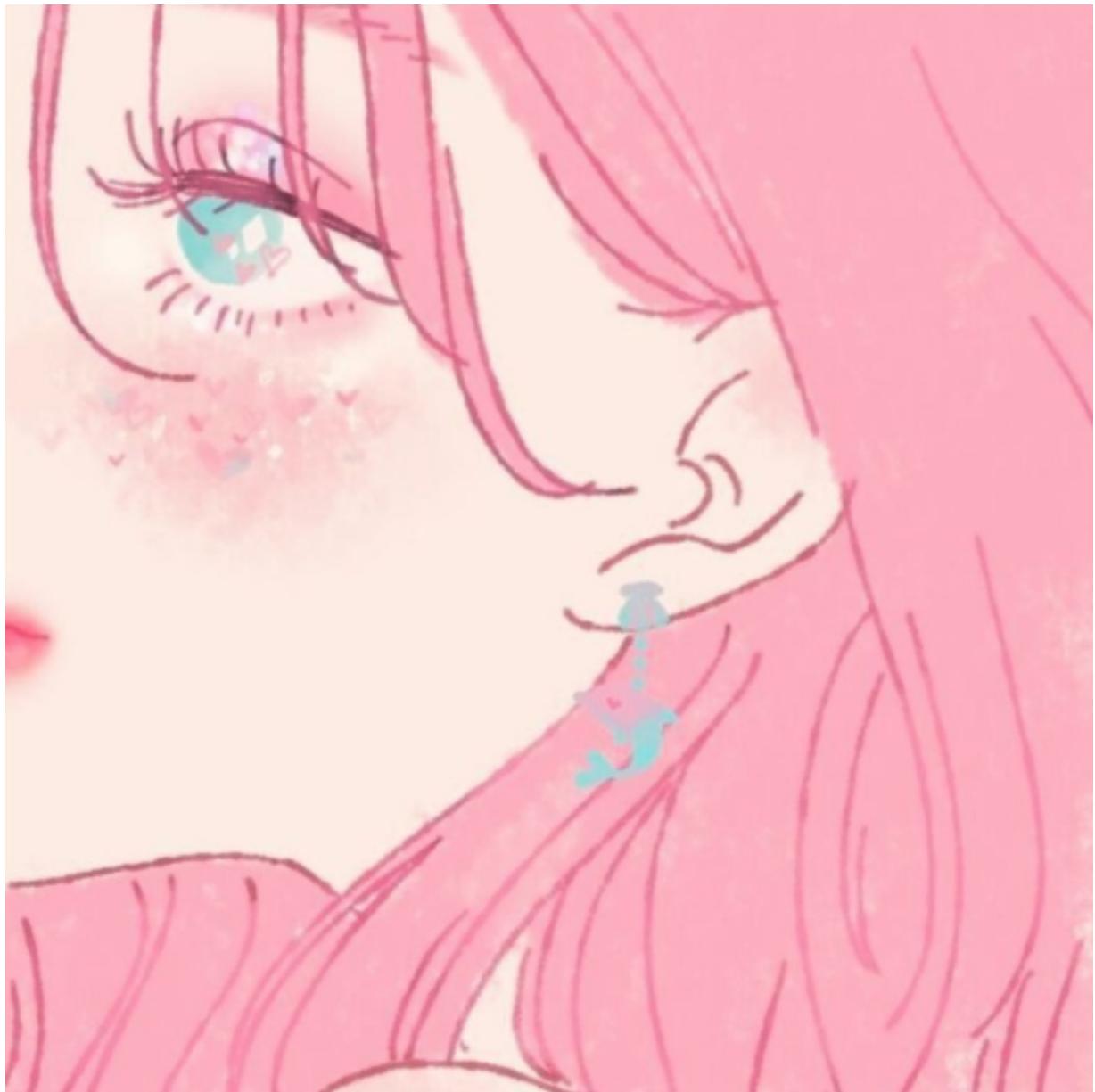


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# **Chapter 11**

Nicole wiped her tears and came out of the room, and someone was standing on one side of the hallway waiting for her.

“Isabel?”

Nicole’s expression was slightly distorted. Isabel blinked innocently.

“Did you cry?”

“.....it’s not a big deal. Why are you here?”

“It’s past Isabel’s snack time, but you’re not coming out of the room. Also, it seems like you’re talking about something, so Isabel doesn’t know what to do.....”

Isabel said sullenly.

“What about work?”

“What?”

“I told you to prepare dinner.”

"There were a lot of vegetables..... Are you really telling me to do everything?"

"If you and I don't, who will do it? Jay is also very busy because Father is far away."

"Sister, are you mad at Isabel?"

Isabel looked at her and said.

"Don't be like that to Isabel. I'm hungry because I can't even eat snacks. I want to drink the tea that Sister makes."

Nicole even hated Isabel acting cute.

'You, the devil, while you're still young and careless, should be separated from this family.'

Nicole thought.

"If you want to eat snacks, you have to work by yourself. The rest of the family are busy all day and you play except for managing a little bit of medicine and trimming herbs."

"But I'm hurt."

Isabel reached out her hand. She wore a bandage around her thumb.

"I cut my hand while cutting..... So I couldn't work."

Nicole had a clear view of Isabel's finger.

Naturally, she showed her finger to Nicole so that she would give her tea.

"That's a big deal."

Nicole then pretended to be worried.

"Come to the kitchen quickly. Let's take a closer look. Did it hurt a lot?"

When Nicole seemed weak-hearted as usual, Isabel raised the corners of her mouth and headed to the kitchen.

Nicole busily opened the cupboard and looked for something.

"Did you say you wanted tea?"

"Yeah, I think I'll feel better after a cup of hot tea."

"All right."

Nicole turned her back. Then, to Isabel's surprise, her bandaged fingers were sprinkled with white powder.

"Oh, sister! What are you doing?"

cried Isabel in surprise.

"Look at the bandage, I think you bled a lot, so I sprayed hemostatic powder. The powder Mother made last year."

"Well, that's... It's itchy

The herbal powder was an effective hemostatic agent.

The absorption is so good that even if you spray it on top of this bandage, it will reach the wound.

If there's really a wound.

The problem is, it's itchy.

If sprayed on uninjured areas, the skin would be itchy enough to make the person tremble.

"Isabel, don't move your body. You have to put up with it."

Nicole clenched Isabel's wrist, which turned white and made only a squeaky sound.

It would be frighteningly itchy if there were no wounds. But if she really didn't wound herself and made a fuss, she'll find out it's a fake wound, so Isabel won't be able to tell.

"Our kitchen knife is old and heavy, so it's easy to get hurt while using it, right?"

".....Y, yes."

Nicole looked at Isabel calmly.

'Now you pretend to have a wound on your finger, but in the future you will pretend to try to kill yourself in front of me.'

The fundamentals of a person do not change. Nicole saw the bandage without sign of blood and immediately noticed that Isabel had lied.

"Thank you, sister. Isabel is feeling much better."

Isabel barely spoke with a pale face. Nicole wanted to applaud her acting.

"I'm glad you're feeling better. Then, let's take some painkillers. If you take it, your stomach will hurt a little, but it has a very definite effect."

Isabel's complexion has grown strangely pale. Nicole felt a slight triumph.

“Then sister, my kitchen work.....”

“You can do it tomorrow. I can’t do all the housework alone. Jay, our youngest, doesn’t have enough time to sleep either.”

“Then how about taking care of the herbs?”

“I’ll help you in making medicine and preparing the herbs.”

At this time, Isabel took charge of all the herbal management, and Nicole took charge of the housework.

In the long run, it was much more useful to learn more medicine.

A year later when she became the Grand Duchess, Nicole, who was so bored, so she studied medicine again at the insincere recommendation of her psychiatrist to look for a pastime.

When Nicole was brought to the Grand Duke’s mansion, the property of the Yveschapel family was also confiscated. As a result, books from the Yveschapel family were kept in the Grand Duke’s mansion.

Nicole resumed her studies with the help of those books.

Fortunately, Nicole has a good memory and vividly remembered what she had studied then.

“Isabel... kitchen work is a little.....”

In the end, Isabel hesitated and spoke as if she was troubled.

“Mother is very sick. Maybe she doesn’t have much time left. So now you have to be able to do anything for yourself.

It's for you, so don't be too upset, okay?"

Isabel had nothing to say, so she just shut her mouth.

Nicole felt more at peace when she saw Isabel's uncomfortable face.

The house was quiet throughout the dinner.

Isabel glanced at Nicole who was eating and thought.

"What's wrong with Nicole?"

*Tilt.* Isabel tilted her head slowly.

'She's not supposed to be like that. What's wrong with this easy-to-use mammoth?

Something has changed. Isabel rolled her eyes.

'I have a bad feeling about this. I need to put my plan into action quickly.'

The night came. The night in the forest was very quiet, and there was not even a sound of birds.

That night, Nicole sat in her bed, awake.

'Today... What date is it?'

But it wasn't a dream. Her experience of becoming sick and slowly going mad due to the torment of being the Grand Duchess, being tortured and her standing at the execution ground.....

'It's all so vivid..... It's as if it just happened yesterday.'

Nicole was sure. She must have come back in time.

She doesn't know exactly what happened. But that's what her gut told her.

'Then if that's really the case..... I don't have time. Today is July 2nd. Soon Raul will find this house and take us.'

It was only two weeks before Raul arrived at this house.

'At least Isabel doesn't know yet who our family is, so she won't report our existence to the imperial family.'

There was a report in the ring that Nicole took from Raul before she died in her last life.

'The Imperial family decided to exterminate the Yveschapel survivors. However, the Grand Duke first found them and captured them to secure them.'

That was the content of the report.

'Then at this point, the royal family wanted to kill all the people in our family and make the marriage invalid. But, how the hell did Raul know about coming here?'

Large cities in each province were lined with knights from the imperial family.

They can surround the cabin in a day or two.

'That Raul came in person faster than they did..... It's it because he was around here?'

So where is he now?

In addition, Isabel's problem had to be dealt with quickly.

'I'll be treated like a madman if I tell my family to kick Isabel out right now.'

So Nicole had to move cleverly.

She had to figure out what Isabel was like and think about how to expose her and separate her from her family.

'What would Raul have done?'

For Nicole, Raul was always a distant person, but he was the only one whom she poured out her emotions to aside from her family.

He taught her hatred, conspiracy, and more than that. And he was also a man of great ability.

(It's better to keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Enough to be indistinguishable from love)

She overheard Raul talking once. Nicole decided to keep an eye on Isabel for now.

"Isabel, are you sleeping?"

Nicole prepared a quick cup of tea. And knocked on Isabel's door.

It has been a long time since she visited her sister's room at this time.

This is because she worked until late at night and fell asleep right away.

'Is there no one in the room?'

Nicole carefully turned the doorknob.

*Click*

The door was locked. But Nicole knew how to open the door.

This house was almost deserted when they first arrived. So they were the ones who repaired it.

Father made a universal key that could open the lock for each room.

It was a spare key that looked like an iron skewer. And Father gave Nicole the key just in case before he left the house.

Nicole used the key to open the door. While she was at it, she hurriedly brought a lamp to the room.

The lamp was a very precious object in the house and there were only three of it there.

*Squeak*

Isabel was using the biggest and best room out of all her siblings.

'This is a deep forest. It takes more than an hour to walk to the village and there is no light around. But she left at this hour?'

Nicole shuddered.

The former Nicole would have worried about Isabel.

But now she was more afraid. What the hell is she up to? Since when did she start to sneak away at night?

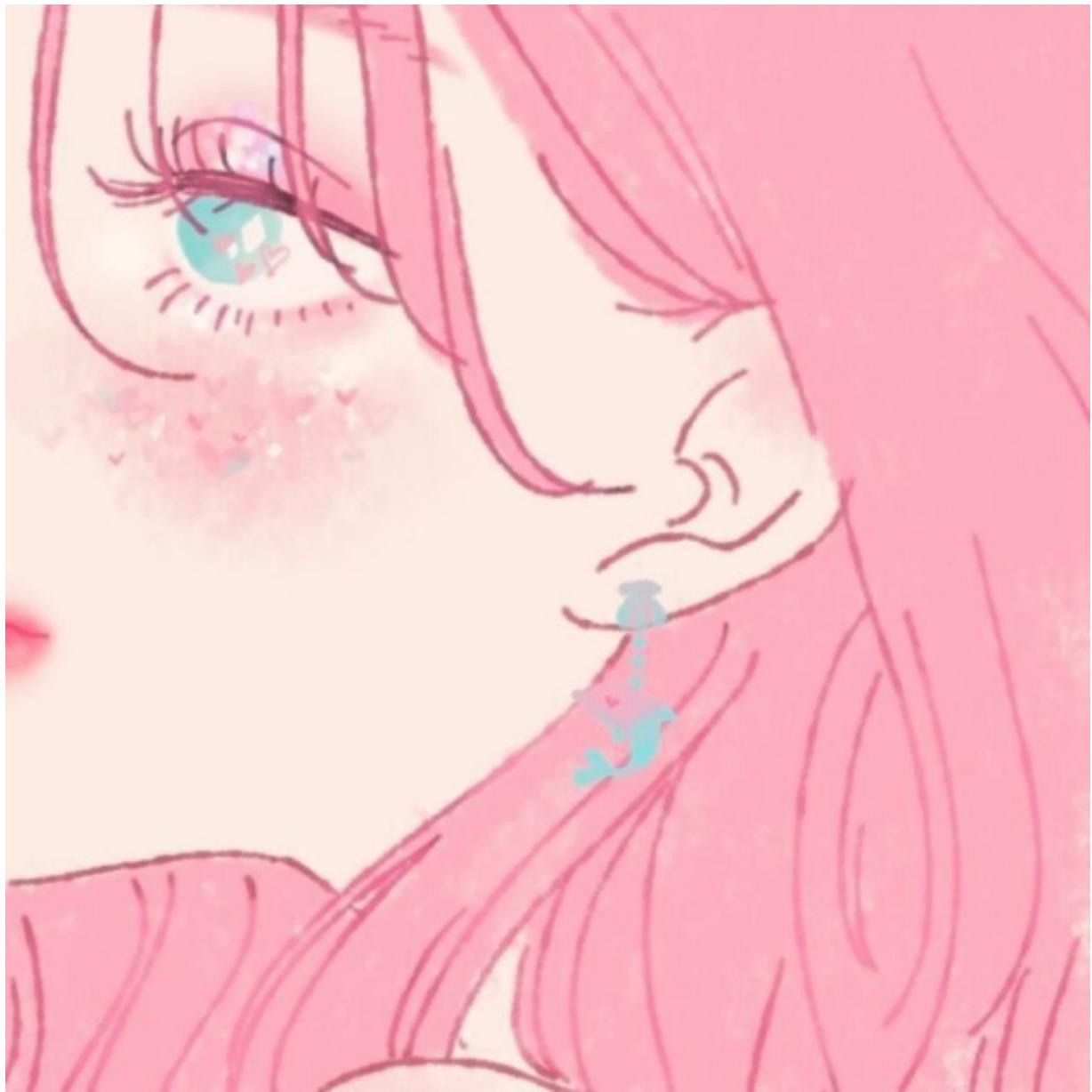
Her parents spent a long time educating her siblings not to go out without permission. For Nicole, sneaking out of the house at night was unimaginable.

“Isabel?”

Nicole whispered into the room. The old floor squeaked and pressed.

At that moment, Nicole recalled what Isabel said a long time ago.

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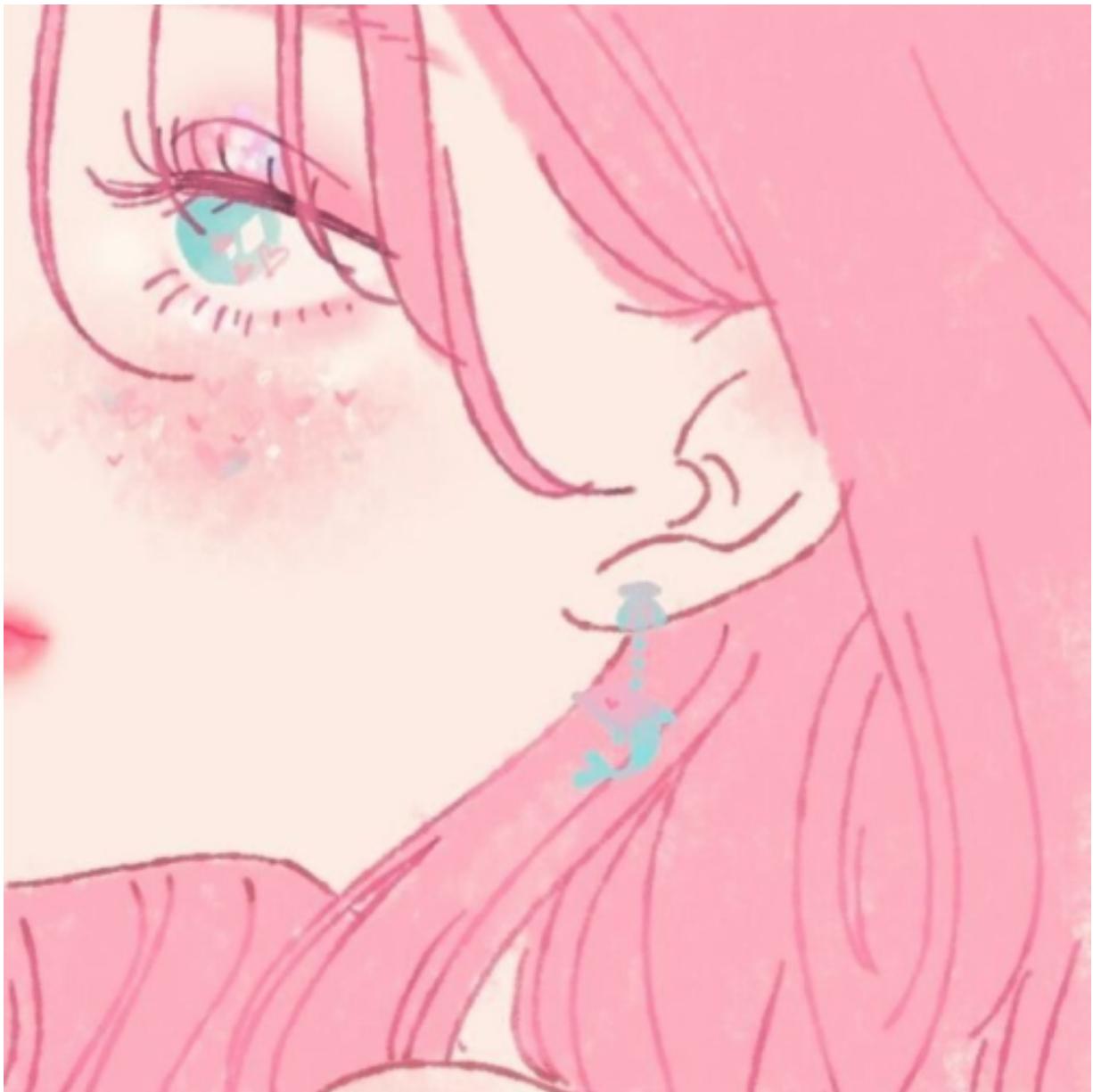


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# Chapter 12

*(Isabel, it's true that Mother was a great pharmacist. But she didn't teach us how to make an ancient poison or anything like that. How on earth did you learn to make the poison of the night?)*

*(Sister... Actually, I found a place where Mother hid secret books. I studied the books secretly and studied them under my room, underground. You know, when we lived in an abandoned house. There were secret spaces all over the house. There was such a space in the basement of my room..... You didn't know, did you?)*

Why did Isabel say it so easily?

'It's best to mix truth and lies properly to deceive others. She was trying to trick me into using the poison of the night.'

Nicole now seemed to be able to understand some of Isabel's ways of thinking.

Nicole felt her hand over the carpet under the bed. Last year, Father managed to buy it by selling herbs at the village market.

When she lifted the carpet, she saw a small handle on the floor.

‘So there’s really a secret space?’

Nicole climbed down the ladder. She could see the inside when she lit the light. The space was larger than she thought and it was organized comfortably.

‘Forbidden books, and lots of herbs.....’

The most surprising thing was not that.

‘Perfectly organized interior. Isabel cleaned this space herself?’

Isabel was the one who always fell or got hurt just by doing small chores. Nicole was dumbfounded.

“What is this silver brooch?”

By this time they were really poor. They are unable to afford such a thing.

There were new laces, brooches and shiny opal rings. They were ostentatiously placed in a small cabinet.

In addition, the type of herb hanging there was shocking.

‘These are all poisonous plants, right? I don’t think it’s been long since this dried.’

Nicole smelled it. Even with her eyes closed, she knew how to distinguish herbs and grasses growing in this mountain.

‘It’s a white snake grass. Why did she pick so many dangerous herbs?’

Nicole thought as she looked at the herbs hanging in several bundles.

It was then. Very quietly, the door was opening.

Nicole raised her head. Is Isabel back?

'It's a relief that I put the carpet back in place and closed the door when I came in.'

Nicole reflexively hid herself under the desk. And she turned off the lamp that she brought.

*Squeak, squeak.*

Someone was stepping on the floor and coming into the room.

Soon Isabel's cheerful voice rang overhead.

"Oh, today is an important day, so I can't skip this. I have to take it."

Nicole stopped breathing.

"But it's weird, huh?"

Isabel murmured loudly.

"Did I leave the door open to the basement? The carpet—"

"....."

"It's a bit crooked"

*Bulk. Slap. Slap.*

The urgent sound of footsteps came overhead.

*Dururek, bureuk.*

The basement door opened. Isabel turned her head upside down, smiled, and pushed her head into the secret door.

Bright light poured in. Isabel's eyes glistened through the open basement door.

"Who is it? Who entered pretty Isabel's studio like a rat—?"

Isabel slowly hung the light down.

"I have to catch and kill the rat. Isabel is fragile and pretty, but she has a lot of poison."

Nicole didn't budge. Soon Isabel looked up.

"*Fufu*, Isabel is also a joker. Who's going to come in here? All my family must be sleeping."

Isabel then added quietly.

"What do those idiots know?"

Her tone gave Nicole goosebumps on the back of her hand.

'That tone is the same as Isabel's tone that mocked me in prison before I died in my previous life.'

A clear voice with a creepy look that is devoid of innocence.

Isabel leaned over the ladder.

She grabbed one of the ropes hanging from the ceiling and pulled up a bunch of closely dried white snake grass like a trick.

So she held the grass in her arms and took care of it.

"Then, I'll be back."

Isabel said to herself. And there was a sound of closing the door.

'I need to know what Isabel is up to. Where is she going now?'

Nicole took a moment to go outside.

"Footprints."

Nicole leaned over. There was a trail of dirt near the doorway.

If she goes to the right with her back to the low yard door, there is a deeper forest, and if you go to the left, there is the entrance to the village.

Their parents never let them near this road.

Needless to say, Isabel would have gone left.

'If she didn't, it can't be helped. First of all... I should go.'

Nicole began to tiptoe.

While walking along the street, Nicole noticed a shaking light in the distance. It was a mana-powered lamp.

Isabel, she was walking far away.

Fortunately, Nicole moved very quietly. Her lamp was not even on. Thanks to this, she was able to keep Isabel from seeing her.

It was not easy to walk stealthily in the dark forest depending only on the light in the distance.

It was an experience that she didn't know if she was following a person or was possessed.

'It's really Isabel, isn't it?'

Fortunately, there was a dirt road built long ago here, so there was no sound of her footsteps.

The light stopped somewhere. Then the clouds cleared and the moon was revealed.

She saw Isabel holding a light through the tall trees.

'That's not the way to town, where are we going? It's a deep forest there. It would be really dangerous.'

Nicole left a moment later and went through tall trees with Isabel.

And Nicole was shocked at the sight.

"Mansion? In a place like this?"

It was a two-story farmhouse mansion that appeared as they walked a little after passing through the dense trees.

Isabel bent down and felt somewhere in the fence with her hand.

Nicole peeped at the process, hiding behind a tree.

Isabel grinned and opened the door with the key she found in the gap in the fence and went inside.

The door didn't even open. When Nicole saw Isabel go inside, she carefully followed her in.

'Where did she go?'

Then there was a rustling sound. It was at the back of the mansion. Nicole stopped her footsteps and headed there.

It wasn't a person who made the rustling sound. It was the livestock in the barn.

Nicole hid behind the barn and looked forward.

"*Fufu, enjoy your meal. There you go. You eat well. You have to eat well for me to achieve my goal.*"

She whispered

It was a very small voice that seemed to be hallucinating. Isabel was throwing something at the cows' culls as she was grinning.

Nicole almost screamed.

Looking at it carefully, it was the white snake grass that Isabel packed a bunch of.

'Are you feeding the cows at someone else's house with white snake grass?'

White snake grass was no big deal when people ate it directly.

But the problem was the cow that ate the white snake grass. Cows produce milk that is drunk by imperial people the most everyday.

However, milk squeezed from cows that ate white snake grass is poisonous.

The person who drinks the milk experiences severe stomach aches and headaches. Such constant consumption of

contaminated milk can lead to death. It was called the milk of death.

'I don't know who lives in this mansion, but is Isabel trying to kill the people in this mansion?'

Or maybe.....

Nicole bit her lip.

"*Hehe, hehe.* There's not much time left."

Isabel smiled quietly and left the place excitedly.

Nicole came out of her hiding place a long time later. She looked around the mansion.

It's a place that takes about 20 minutes to walk from home. A mansion hidden in the forest at the entrance of the village that takes an hour.....

"Like a fortress, a secret place hidden among trees. I didn't know there was a place like this here."

Nicole was like in a dream.

'I really didn't know anything.'

Suddenly, thinking about her past life made Nicole feel weird.

'Isabel, what the hell are you.....'

It was then. Nicole suddenly felt a splitting headache hit her head.

"Ugh..."

*(Come on, good sister? Look at this, you idiot. Remember what I say from now on.)*

A laughing voice

*(Hey, what if you really die this time?)*

*(It's okay. I want to do it every day if I can. But it's only possible when the Grand Duke of Valentines is far out. Now, you know who made you like this? Your only brother died. It's all because of your husband that this pretty Isabel is suffering.....)*

“What? That memory?”

The leaves of the dark garden rustled.

Nicole didn't even realize that she was walking until a moment later. The wind was blowing.

‘Where am I?’

And when she came to her senses, Nicole realized she was standing in a dark path.

“Ah...”

A light came on from her back.

“Was I in a panic just now?”

It was a very small altar that caught Nicole's eyes in confusion.

Purple flowers were in full bloom around the altar.

‘Is this... a memorial altar?’

A memorial altar on a white platform

The altar was filled with white flowers. Next to it, items such as a small music box, small dolls, and books were placed.

‘It’s a memorial altar made for a young person who died.’

During the Great Depression, Nicole had seen similar altars. Sometimes she was allowed to go out, so she went to the temple instead, and there was an altar like this set up for a young priest.

‘Is there anyone in this house who died young?’

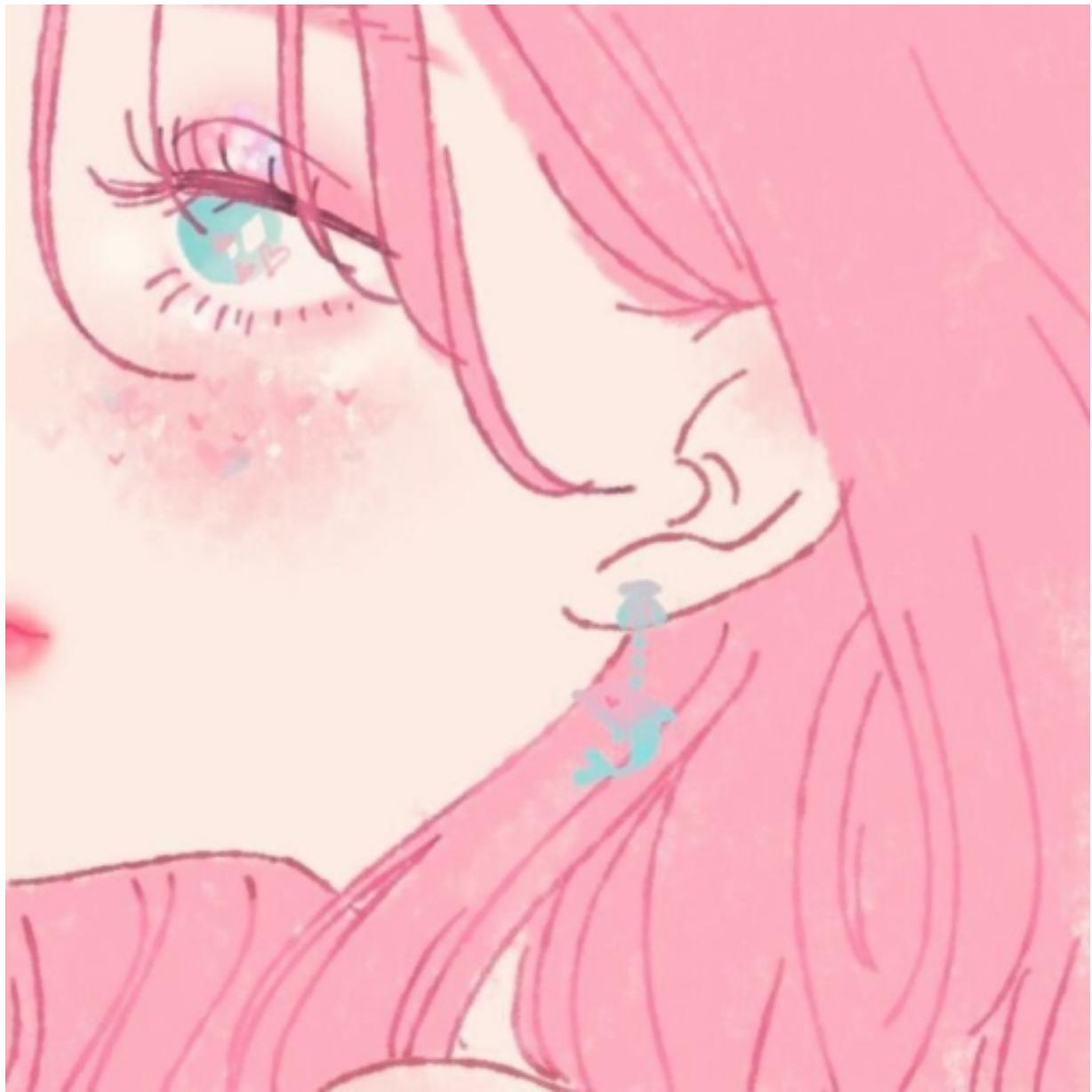
Nicole leaned over.

“Who’s there?”

Nicole rose from her seat in surprise. It was a strange voice.

Someone was walking in from behind the mansion.

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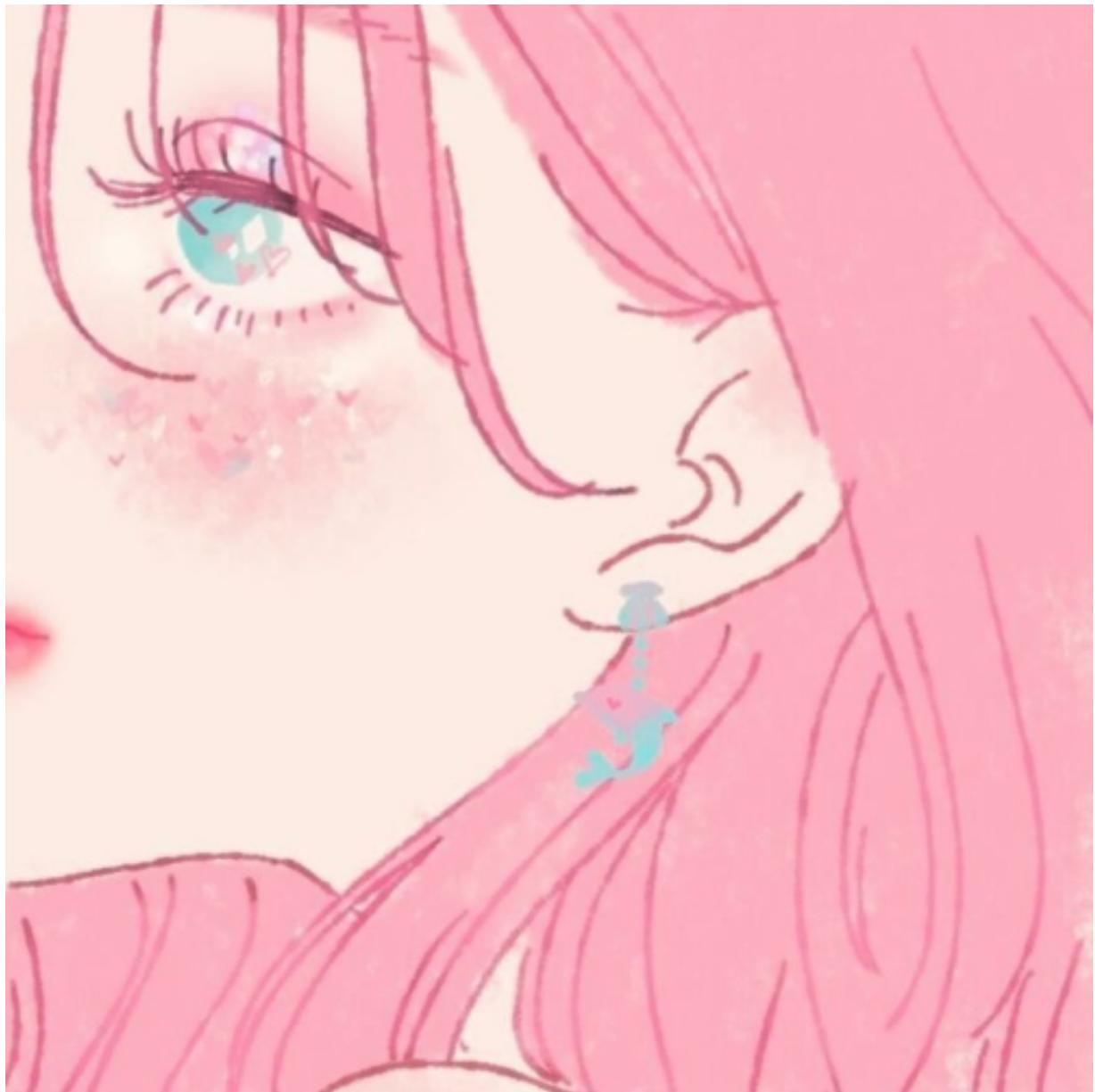


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# Chapter 13

The place where Nicole stood was bright, and the place where the other person stood was dark.

So the other person's face was not visible from her perspective. After a long time, she said while she was standing far away.

"Siena, is it you my daughter?"

Nicole blushed suddenly. At the same time, her body trembled.

'Is she the landlord? What should I say?'

She hurried over to see Nicole, who didn't say anything.

'This lady... Who is she?

Nicole has never seen her before. She was wearing boots, trousers, and an elegantly cut lady's jacket.

It was as if a noblewoman and a soldier were combined in one, but it was not an awkward look and matched her very well.

And in one hand, she had a long rifle.

Her stylish and unconventional hair was cut into a short bob.

She couldn't guess her age, and she was more beautiful and elegant than pretty.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude....."

"No."

She looked at Nicole vaguely. A faint disappointment came to her face when she mistook Nicole for someone else.

"Just in case. Who are you? Why are you here?"

"I wandered around the night road and somehow came into this house. I live in a nearby farmhouse."

Since childhood, her parents have taught her to pretend to be an ordinary person in a nearby village when she meets people.

"Hmm..."

She frowned.

"Come in for now. Whether you're a living person or a ghost. Since you came on such a meaningful day, I should treat you to a cup of tea."

A woman living alone in the mountains serves tea to an intruder?

Nicole has never seen anyone with this guts. And soon she found out the identity of the woman with nerves of steel.

'Stuffed...?'

That was the first sight Nicole had ever seen inside the house.

Unlike the shabby exterior, the house was very well decorated. The wallpaper was turquoise with golden decorations. And the tableware on the fireplace decorated with gold frames were all used by the capital nobles.

But the most impressive thing was the stuffed animal filling the living room.

The most vivid thing that looked like a bird that seemed to have just been caught. It was a male bird that burned incense so that the insect wouldn't get tangled.

"Hunting must be your hobby."

"Ah, yes. I enjoy hunting at night. Precious birds are easy to catch at night."

Nicole was horrified at the thought that if she had done something wrong, she would have been the victim of the rifle she was carrying.

"Usually, people don't think I caught them."

"The gun you're holding seems to be a precious object."

Nicole knew about the gun when she looked at it.

It was said that it could only be used by chosen people throughout the entire empire.

'My husband from my past life..... Raul had two of them.'

What Raul had was similar in shape to that.

It is said that the shotgun is not very lethal, but it is silent and can cause injury superficially.

The stuffed animal was flawless so it might have been caught with a shotgun. The same was true of birds.

“You’re a quick-witted kid.”

She offered a seat before Nicole said anything. And poured warm tea.

“How did you get into this house?”

“The entrance... ...was open.”

The smell of warm bergamot heated the room. Nicole stared at the teacup.

It was an obvious lie. Nicole took a look in her eyes.

“Well, yes. Sometimes I forget to lock the door. Because there are no people living in a place like this.”

Fortunately, she seemed to move on without much thought.

“My name is Grace.”

“Nice to meet you. Madam.”

Nicole spoke cautiously.

“I didn’t touch anything in the house. I just looked here because I thought it was a house where people live. There’s a house in a place I’ve never imagined.....”

“That’s possible. If you go around at night at this time, you are likely to be misunderstood, so don’t do that next time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nicole replied obediently.

“But... I guess you weren’t surprised to see me. Do young female guests other than me often visit this house?”

“Sometimes, a girl who lives nearby comes to play. She’s a cute kid.”

Grace nodded.

“What’s her name?”

“She’s called Isabel. She says she lives hiding in the mountains because she has a situation at home, but she sometimes comes to see me because she has no friends other than me

“Does she come at night, too?”

“Yeah. At first, I was surprised to see a girl walking around this remote place alone. She said she had to sneak out late at night because she was hiding. I used to do something special that I had to stay awake at night. Thanks to this, I don’t sleep at night, so when she comes, I call her over and give her tea.”

Nicole grabbed the cup she was drinking. Her face turned pale.

‘Isabel, are you out of your mind?

The family was obviously living in hiding around this time. Their parents controlled their children to never talk to outsiders.

But she even told her about our situation. Maybe she even said the location of their house.

“Do you happen to know Isabel?”

Nicole realized why she was so gentle with her.

She suspected that Nicole was a family member of Isabel. Isabel and Nicole were not alike at all, but they were similar in feeling and outfit.

“Yes, I’m actually Isabel’s older sister. The introduction was late. My name is Nicole.”

Nicole frankly said her real name. As long as she knew Isabel’s existence anyway, she had no choice but to stop deceiving her.

“I thought it was like that. It just feels like that.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you honestly from the beginning. Isabel’s been acting suspiciously at night these days..... I was chasing after her just in case.....”

“I admit that this is a situation that would make you worry about your younger sister. Because I know I look strange to you. How can a person who lives in a place like this look normal? But I can tell you one thing for sure. I’m not a suspicious person. There’s evidence of that.”

“Evidence...”

“Do you know that there is an owner on this mountain?”

“.....Are you?”

Nicole’s eyes got bigger.

It is said that this place used to be a place where mana stones were excavated. The mana stones were of the highest quality, so people lived near here.

The source of the mana stones dried up faster than people expected. Since then, it has become an abandoned mining town that is not worth staying in.

In addition, there were false rumors. It is said that bad energy that makes people sick comes out of the abandoned mine where mana stones were mined.

Thanks to that, the villagers would not even come close to this area.

‘If this place was a mine, there would be a mine owner.’

Don’t tell me, she’s.....

“From this mansion to the abandoned mine village, which is a long walk away. Part of this mountain is mine. It’s my family’s land that I inherited, to be exact.”

She added briefly about herself.

She was originally from the capital. Then, she must have come here to heal.

“My ancestors who built this house seem to have been quite eccentric. It was built in a dense forest where no one could notice the entrance. Actually, I heard that at that time, they created a secret exchange to embezzle mana stones. Mana stones have a lot of taxes, so they tried to smuggle some of it here. But even I’m not sure. I can’t even confirm the authenticity of the deceased directly.”

After listening to Grace, Nicole got up from her seat.

The land between here and the abandoned mine village was where Nicole's family lived. In the first place, the abandoned cabin was also repaired by them.

"If so..... Isabel has already told you everything, so you know. It's a big disrespect because my family lives without permission on the land owned by the landlord. Until now, we didn't know there was an owner, so it wasn't intentional."

At this time, she thought their family was living in perfect hiding. In a controlled world, under the protection of their parents.

No one touched them, but the truth is, there was someone who looked at them as if they were looking into the palm of their hand.

She didn't think they would be the remnants of the Yveschappel family, so she just didn't touch them. Nicole really lived in a palm-sized world. She was a sinner, if ignorance is a sin.

"Sit down. It's true that the owner abandoned that house, so it's a good thing if people live there. How polite of you."

Grace looked surprised. She looked at Nicole carefully.

"Who the hell taught you?"

"Nobody taught me. I'm just trying to be as polite as possible."

".....what a strange child. I can't believe there's such an elegant child in this mountain....."

Grace, who had paused for a moment, continued.

"It's a very strange night. I felt like my daughter was going to come back, but you're here instead."

"Did you have a daughter?"

Nicole asked cautiously.

In her last life, she was so poor at expressing her emotions at this time that she always spoke unevenly. But she already outgrew that.

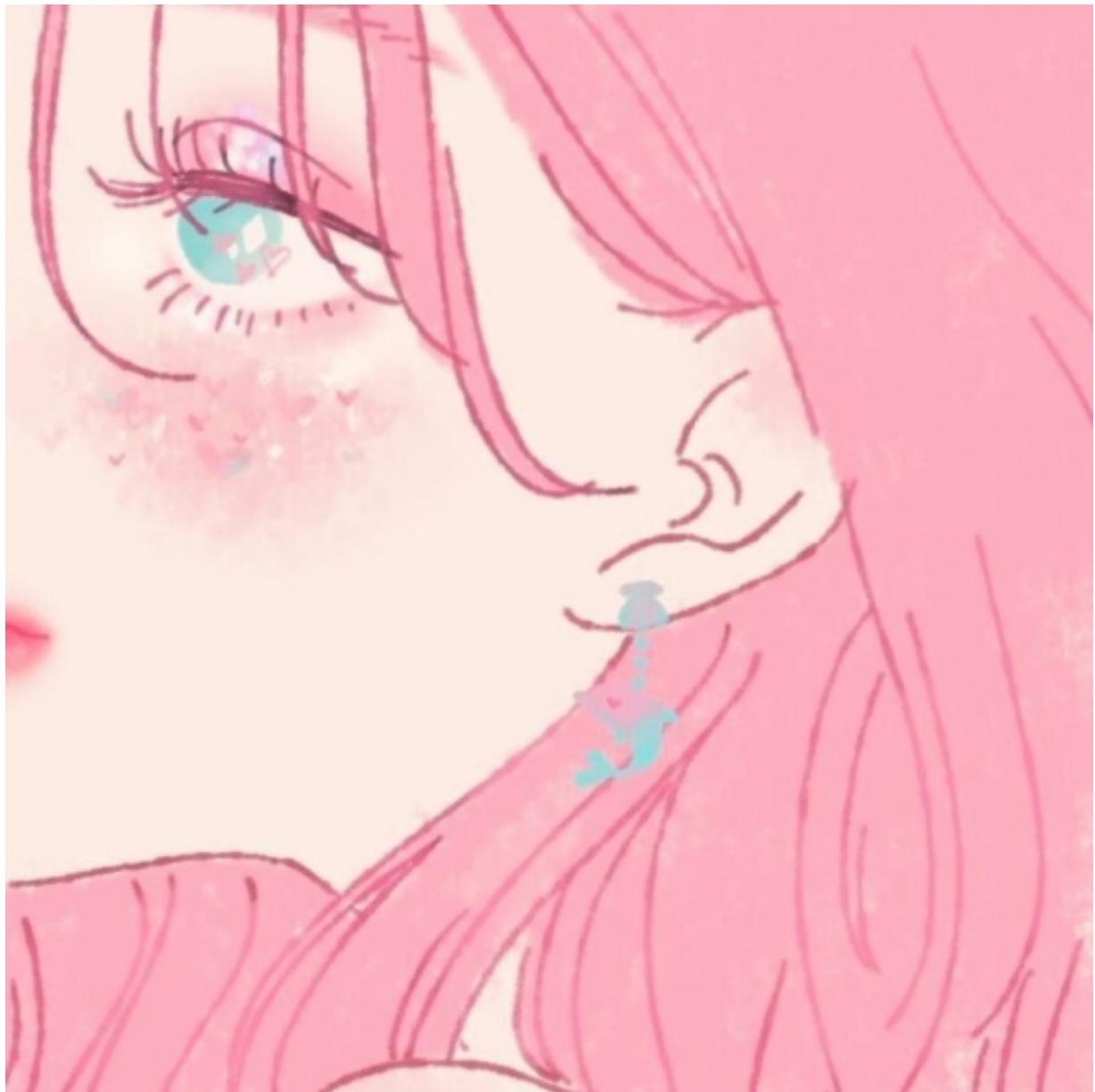
She was taken to the Grand Duke's mansion and learned manners by half-force and exploded twisted emotions.

Now Nicole was no longer her past self.

She also knew how to express her emotions skillfully while being quiet. It was different from her past life when she was misunderstood by others for nothing.

This attitude of Nicole pleased Grace.

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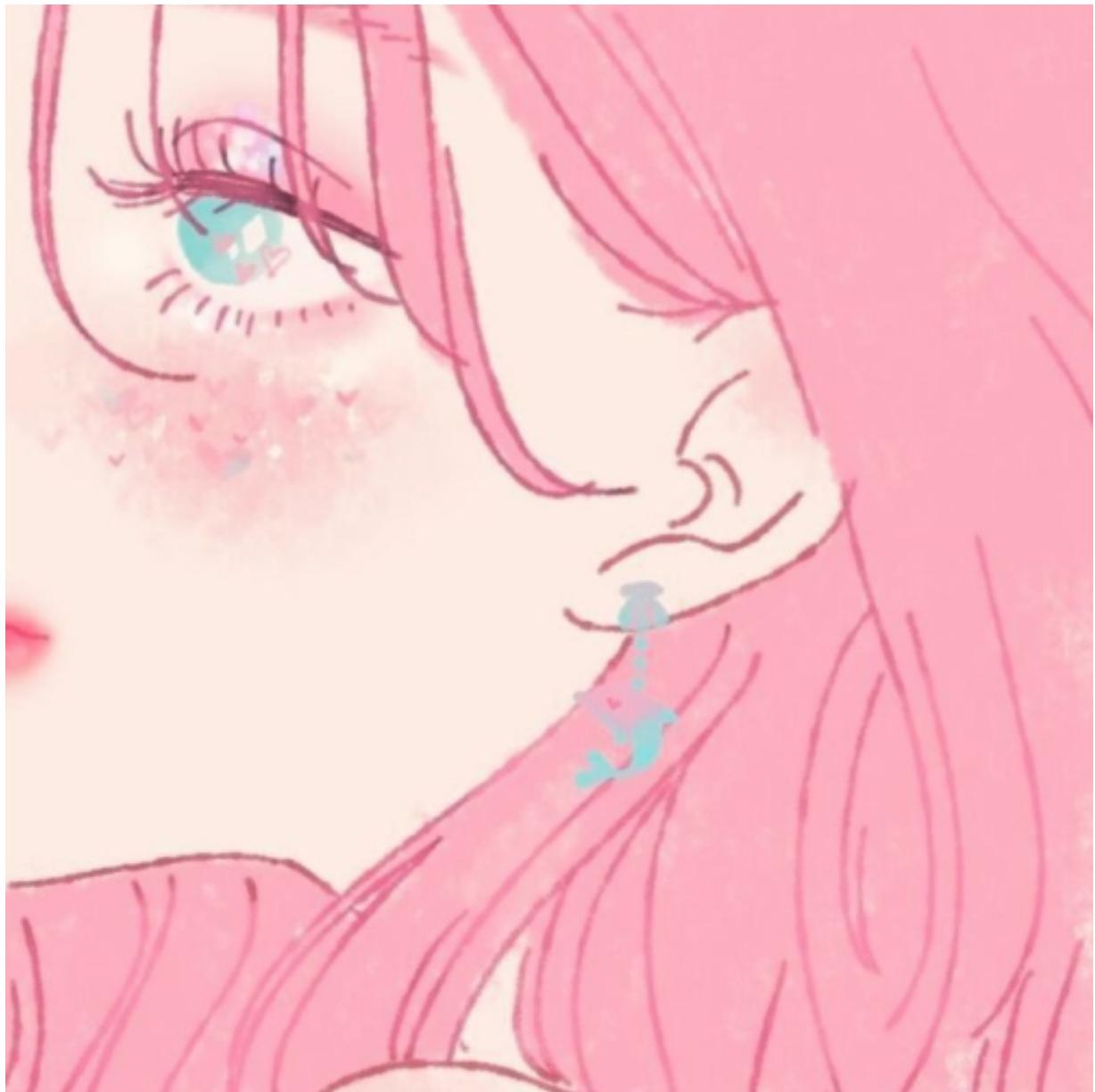


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# Chapter 14

“How old are you?”

“I’m 21 years old now.”

“My daughter died at the age of 20. So I feel weak when I see a child of your age or Isabel’s. My daughter was very pretty, too.”

“.....”

“This year is the fourth year since my daughter died. So maybe that’s why we met today. For me to tell you a story about my daughter.”

Nicole understood. The imperial people believe that the spirit of the dead stays in this world for more than four years then completely leaves the earth.

So on the fourth death anniversary, there was usually a small memorial service. Unless the person didn’t pass away early, an altar is no longer necessary and going to the Temple is only needed.

Fourth anniversary. For 10 days, the deceased is said to be visiting their family for the last time.

‘Is that why she mistook me as her daughter in front of the memorial altar earlier? Because today is within that ten

days?"

Nicole spoke quietly.

"Why, is it strange that I went bird hunting when it's time to commemorate my daughter?"

Grace said quietly.

"No, not really."

"My daughter loved new cuisine. Tomorrow is the 10th day, so I was going to make her favorite dish. I planned to hunt for a few days, but it was a waste."

".....I don't know how to comfort you. I hope your daughter is at peace."

Nicole was a little moved. Parents seemed to be only worried about feeding their children to both the living and the dead.

"I'm glad you said so. And don't worry about living in this land. If there was anyone dangerous around here in the first place, I would have gotten rid of it in advance."

"....."

Nicole was genuinely curious about her identity.

If she really finds a bad person, will she really shoot them? Somehow she felt like she would.

"Do you really live alone?"

"Of course, there are people here who work for me. They commute from town. I enjoy being alone at night."

“.....I see. But this is quite a big house for someone who’s living alone.”

“The young man who takes care of the garden also takes care of the house. He milks the cows and feeds them.”

“Excuse me, you don’t seem to be in financial need, but why do you even raise livestock?”

Grace said with eyes asking why all of a sudden.

“I like to drink freshly squeezed milk. And I always wanted to live in a small garden and raise livestock after returning to farming. I recklessly built a garden and bought livestock, but all the goats ran away.”

Nicole’s heart began to beat hard.

‘I think I know why Isabel did such a suspicious thing.’

Nicole said calmly.

“What do you do with the leftover milk?

“I’m letting the working young man take it. He seems to make money by selling it to a nearby store. I’m just letting him have some pocket money.”

Milk... Milk of death..... And someone who lives alone.

A hidden mansion

‘It’s weird, I feel like there’s something I’m missing.’

At that moment, Nicole’s body stiffened. Obviously, Nicole has read a story about a woman named Grace.

The ring that Raul gave her. In the document contained there.

'I read it in passing, but it's clear. That's right!'

<Record of the witch hunt in the village of Ranford.

The incident occurred on July 12, 232 of the Imperial calendar.

The village of Ranford was underdeveloped due to the long exploitation of a government official.

The lady, who built a mansion alone at the entrance of the village, was falsely accused of "cursing the children's milk" and was witch-hunted.

The lady was taken to the village and burned at the stake. After that, the villagers flocked to the lady's mansion and tried to steal things.

But the house was completely empty. A robber has already broken in.

Later, a man named Jen from Belzera was arrested as a suspect. It was stated that he robbed the mansion during the disturbance due to the witch hunt.

This is a wake-up call for the reality of some areas of low education even in the empire.....>

The ring was filled with records of Nicole's family. However, that report was suddenly included in there.

Nicole was out of her mind at the time and didn't think it was important.

'I wondered why it was there. There were so many truths that I learned at that time that I didn't remember them for a long time.....'

But the document in the ring Raul gave her. There was a meaning in all of it.

The milk that was released into the village. The people who drank the milk must have started to get very sick.

'This lady is the one who was witch hunted.'

But the thing is, there were other people who robbed the mansion.

'What if someone made this up and robbed the mansion while the owner was taken away?'

Or maybe the causal relationship is the opposite. The culprit may have set up the owner as a witch for the mansion.

'What's clear is that Isabel was involved in this.'

The arrested robber, a man named Jen. Is he related to Isabel?

'Who the hell are you, Isabel?'

The child was born a devil. Why was such a child born to their parents?

"Are you all right? You don't look well."

"No, you said it was okay, but..... I was thinking about how I could repay you for allowing my family to live nearby. Well, how about I make some medicine for you?"

"You?"

“.....Yes, you seem to be suffering from insomnia, so I can make you tea and medicine that is good for a good night’s sleep. My family harvests herbs and eats them. I learned from herbalists that some herbs are good for sleep.”

“Are you saying you’ll come back tomorrow?”

Nicole was surprised inside, but answered yes.

“I had a dream about my daughter last night. It was a dream that Siena would come to see me. She kept looking at me anxiously and was shouting something to me.”

Nicole felt sorry for her and felt a little restless.

One, she didn’t seem like a weird person.

“Madam, can I say something presumptuous?”

“.....tell me.”

“Well, in fact, I saw the cows in the cattle shed a little on the way here. Cows often get sick during this period, too. Drinking the milk of a sick cow can make people sick. You’d better milk the cows for a few days and throw them away. Don’t let your employee take the milk.”

Grace thought for a moment. Giving milk to her employee was always Grace’s favor. She could give it or not.

She was ignorant of rural affairs, and Nicole’s words sounded plausible.

“I see. I will.”

“If you wait, I’ll bring some medicine to treat cows.”

Grace happily said yes.

Nicole thanked her dead daughter for appearing in her dream last night.

That's because Grace took Nicole's word for it.

'Please rest in peace.'

Nicole prayed quietly in her heart for Grace's deceased daughter.

'Isabel is after Grace's property.'

'To accuse Grace as a witch, she was feeding the cows at Grace's house a poisonous weed.....'

Nicole organized her thoughts on her way home.

It's still speculation, but she's sure she's almost right.

'I'm sure there's an accomplice. I need to find out who they are.'

Family can be heaven, but they can also be another hell.

This is because, unlike ordinary enemies, you have to cut them off to remove them.

'What if Mother knew what Isabel was doing?'

After a moment's thought, Nicole came to a conclusion. Everyone should know about this.

That's the way Nicole wants it.

Nicole woke up early after a few hours of sleep. Then she changed her clothes lightly and went into the kitchen.

“Are you awake?”

Isabel came in rubbing her eyes. Nicole slowly turned her back.

“You woke up early, Isabel.”

“You told me to help you with the kitchen work.....”

Isabel yawned and clung to Nicole.

“What will you ask me to do for you today?”

Nicole turned her head slowly. Her face hardened before she knew it.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you? You’ve been weird since yesterday.”

Nicole barely smiled. She had to appease Isabel well to achieve what she wanted.

“It’s not like that. I’m proud of you. You woke up early to help your sister.”

“Then, whose sister is Isabel?”

Isabel giggled.

Isabel’s face shining in the morning sun was shockingly beautiful. Even Nicole, who knows her true nature, is confused for a moment.

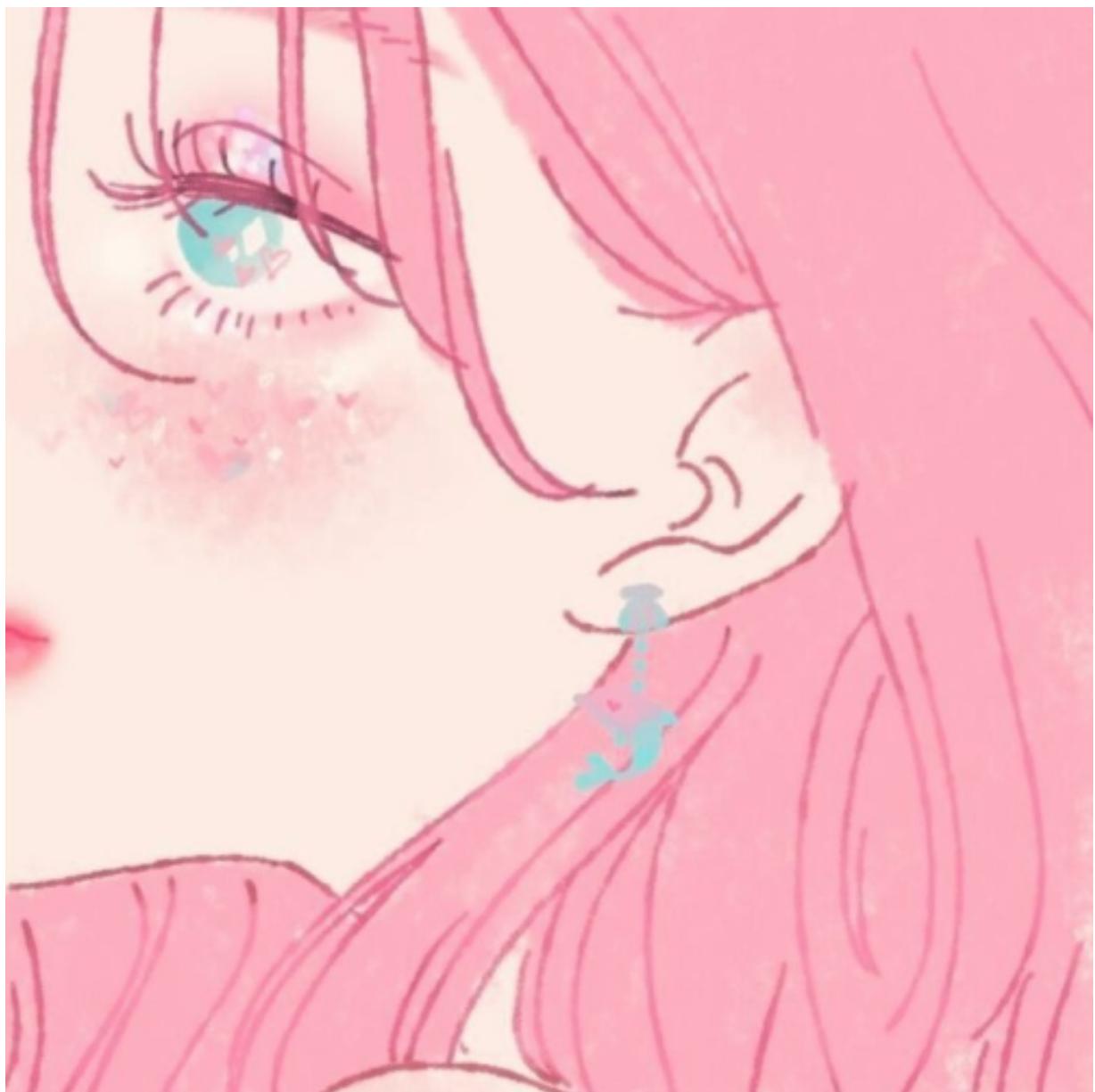
“By the way, sister—”

Isabel stopped in front of a row of kitchen knives.

“Did something happen last night?”

*(t/n: Isabel is seriously giving me the creeps)*

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# Chapter 15

“.....what do you mean?”

Isabel, she was laughing.

“I think I heard ‘something’ last night.”

‘Did she know I went after her? Or that I went into her room?’

Nicole chose. Isabel took the knife in her hand and looked at the blade gently. Nicole was nervous for a moment.

“What’s wrong, Isabel?”

“I’m going to cut some bread. This blade is sharp enough, right?

Isabel hummed and said, as if she’s about to cut bread. Nicole smiled inwardly and replied calmly.

“Actually, I have something to tell you, I went near your room and came back.”

“What do you want to say to Isabel?”

“Yeah.....actually, I wanted to apologize to you.”

Isabel’s eyes got bigger.

“What apology?”

“I’m sorry I asked you to help me with the kitchen work. I must have been exhausted for a while because the housework was so hard. You’re still young..... Of course, as your older sister who is a year older than you, I should try harder.”

Isabel blinked at Nicole, who became as simple as before.

“You don’t have to help me with the kitchen. I’ll do a lot of herbal trimming, too. Don’t worry, go and get some more rest.”

“As expected, you’re the best! Isabel can’t live without Sister.”

“Don’t mention it. By the way, I prepared a present for you after breakfast. You’ve been wearing those clothes since last year..... You don’t have to go out, but I want you to try on pretty clothes. It’s made of muslin cloth that Father got me.”

“Where is it? I can’t wait to see it. My clothes!”

“I’ll give it to you after we eat. And you can go to the flower garden this afternoon to play. I’ll give an excuse to Mother that you and I are going to harvest some herbs.”

Isabel’s lips twitched. The grin gave Nicole goose bumps on the back of her hand.

“Ah- As expected. You’re the best. Thank you so much. You know, Isabel will pick a pretty flower for you. Something very shiny.”

Isabel hugged Nicole tightly like a child.

"But you have to go secretly. If you get caught by Mother, you'll be locked up in the warehouse again."

Isabel's face stiffened at the word warehouse.

Their parents loved their children infinitely.

But they were also people who could do anything to protect their children.

It is not easy to lock up and raise children at their prime at home.

Their mother and father immediately locked their children in the warehouse if they went out without permission or did not listen.

The warehouse was a very dark and terribly humid place. The mere thought of going there gave her goosebumps.

"But she's sick."

"Mother may not be able to punish us but once Father comes back, he will. So, be careful."

Today, Nicole intentionally gave Isabel a break.

Free time to go anywhere. Nicole will use that gap to follow Isabel.

Breakfast is over. Nicole removed the herbs from the room with an expressionless face.

At this time, Nicole's pharmacological skills were far lower than Isabel's.

She lacked the strength to study because she did a lot of housework, and she was not sure if pharmacology would be useful because she was not a healer. So she neglected her lessons.

But Nicole was smart. She quickly learned the books she read when she started studying again after getting married.

‘Why didn’t I know the value of these drugs at this point in my previous life?’

Now she knew how to make a lot of extinct drugs. One of them was a mysterious power.

“Well, I’m wearing new clothes. I feel good. The weather is nice.”

Isabel, dressed in her new clothes, stamped her feet pleasantly. Moreover, the clothes smelled as good as they could be.

‘She put a lot of thought into it. Stupid fool does something pretty cute today. We’re going to go our separate ways anyway, but I will miss that fool sometimes.’

That’s a common phrase.

Isabel thought. Then she started heading somewhere with a basket of herbs.

In about 20 minutes.

Glittering powders began to shine on the floor along the path Isabel took.

Nicole walked along where Isabel did with some time difference.

'It's been a while since I made it myself, but I was able to make it perfectly.'

What Nicole made was an object called the tracking incense.

About 20 minutes after the person who was sprayed with this scent walked away, the powder that fell from that person would glisten.

After a certain period of time, Isabel would not know that her path was traced.

However, the effect was only 5-6 minutes, so she had to be fast.

It was true that she had been making new clothes for Isabel since last year.

She didn't know the clothes she made for her younger sister would be used like this.

It was the last thing she did this morning, putting the tracking incense in her new clothes.

If the scent disappears, the effect of this tracking scent will also disappear.

'But this road Isabel took..... She's on her way to the abandoned mine, isn't she?'

There were abandoned huts around the only abandoned mine in the area.

Where the mana stones were located, precious herbs grew there as well.

However, since it is in the middle of the road over the mountain, vagrants sometimes sit in the cabins, so they did not come here carelessly.

“The tracking incense has been cut off here, but it’s clear from the direction.”

In time, Nicole arrived at a hut at the entrance to the abandoned mine.

The window of the hut was wide open.

*Kyaaahahaha.*

A familiar sound was coming through the window of the cabin. It was Isabel’s laughter.

Nicole lowered herself and approached the window of the cabin.

Isabel and a woman with faded blonde hair were talking, with big eyes and small build. In addition, she looked very messy.

“How can Isabel come at such a time?”

“Ah, can I meet you only at night? I came because I missed you. Karen.”

Isabel said sweetly. A woman named Karen laughed loudly.

“Anyway, our plan is almost successful now. How about you? Are you cleaning up your pathetic family?”

"Karen, if you say that, Isabel will be scared..... Can I really leave my family?"

"You're still so naive!"

Nicole realized.

'I've seen that Karen woman in my last life.

'When I was the Grand Duchess in my last life. The only places I am allowed to go to were Isabel's house and the temple.'

Even so, if my seizures were too severe, Raul reluctantly let me go.

(Please do exactly what I said last time. .....Don't get caught. And your medicine..... take it.)

One day Nicole was lucky.

This is because Raul has an urgent appointment and he will not be able to return home for a month.

She didn't even care what happened.

The butler said she could go to Isabel's house as if he was being generous. Nicole visited Isabel with rare delight.

But there, she has another guest. Isabel lowered her voice and was whispering and talking to the woman in the room.

It was a woman with short hair and a revealing dress. Nicole has never seen such a woman in such a racy outfit before.

(Isabel? You have a guest?)

Isabel's eyes widened when she saw Nicole.

Soon after, she smiled an innocent smile and introduced her as an employee of a store she often called to buy things.

At that time, Nicole let it go without thinking much. Now that she thinks about it.....

'Karen will work as a close aide to Isabel a few years from now.'

In addition, in her last life, Isabel boasted that she was rich to Nicole, who was in prison.

She may have done a lot of things, starting with stealing Grace's property. Then it's not a lie she was rich.

'How long has she known Isabel since? I don't think they've been together for a long time.'

Nicole kept eavesdropping on their conversation.

The woman named Karen kept drinking cheap wine.

By putting the gibberish together, Nicole could see the situation.

Karen wandered here and there with her own brother and sister and got into this place. Then she happened to meet Isabel, who was harvesting herbs.

Just as good people easily recognize each other, evil people often recognize each other at a glance. They hit it off right away.

The mountains during summer was a good place to live for homeless people. Because it was colder here than down the mountain and there was no danger of being killed by wild animals.

Isabel made them hallucinogens to win their favor, and told her about Grace.

Soon the three put their heads together and set up a plan to rob Grace.

'What I expected is right. They're going to accuse Grace of being a witch and rob the mansion.....'

But why didn't Isabel run away with them in her last life, when it's obvious it was her plan?

Nicole could easily guess why.

'After hearing the secret of the Yveschapel family, she thought about it for a few days and changed her mind. She reported our existence to the Imperial family, planned to kill me, and somehow she tried to become the Grand Duchess.'

Nicole laughed bitterly. However, the words that followed made her mouth cold.

"I heard you're being held and bullied. That kind of mother should disappear. You worked on that medicine as I advised, didn't you?

"Yes, Karen's advice is very helpful to Isabel. Isabel is so happy. I'd be sad if my mother died, but..... But there's nothing we can do. How do I change my destiny?

Medicine?

Around this time, Isabel was playing an important role in making Mother's medicine.

'Why didn't I think of that?'

Mother was giving Isabel the recipe to make her medicine.

'Did Isabel, who already made this evil plan without difficulty, do something at Mother's medicine?

'It's true that Mother's disease is a lung disease. But...'

All kinds of secrets were handed down to the Yveschapel family.

It was mainly medicine with special effects, painkillers, and medicine to treat injuries. There were even many recipes for poison.

But there were no drugs to cure a disease.

'We had to buy lung disease medicine from afar. Father searched everywhere for good medicines for lung disease.'

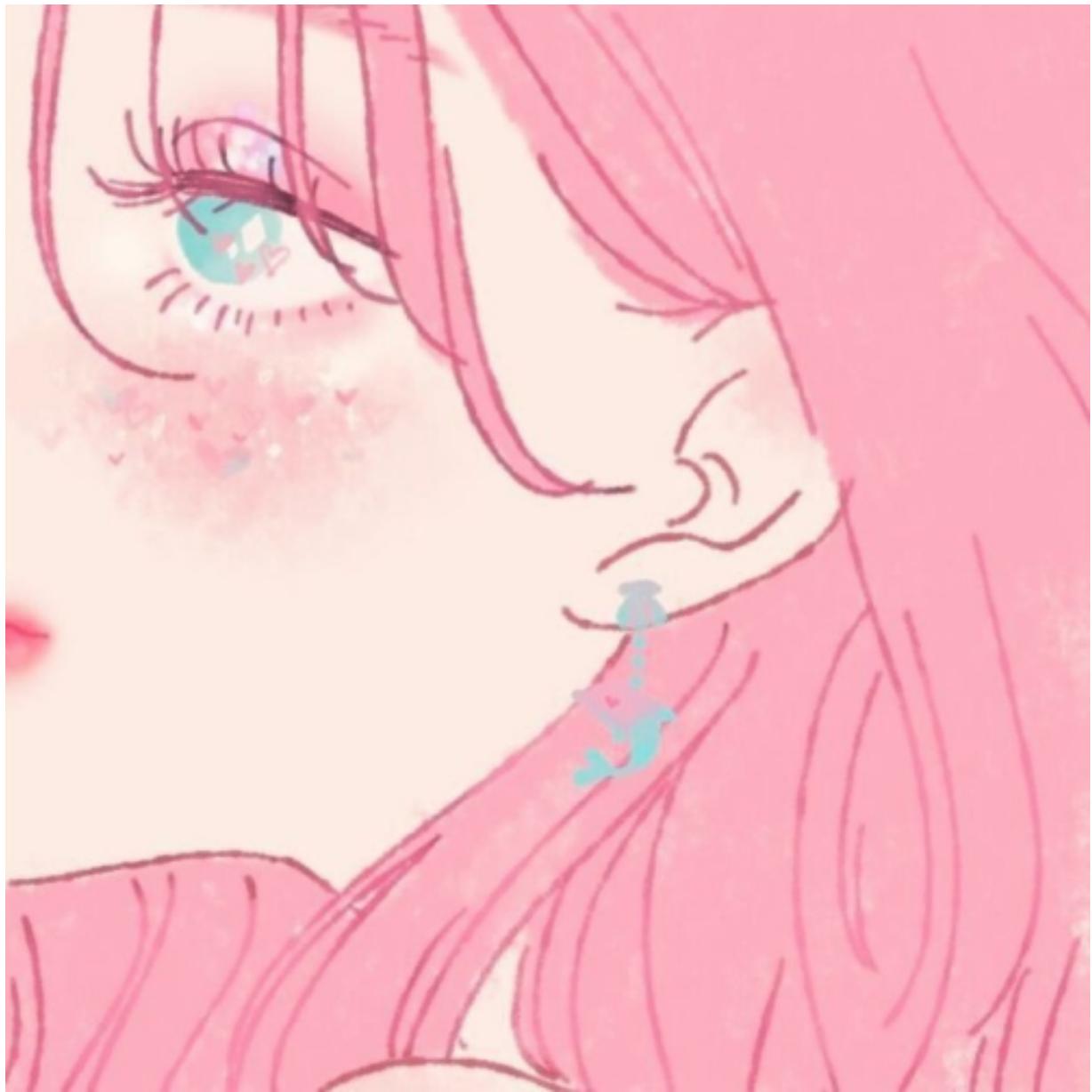
Father's outings became more and more frequent.

He needed money to buy medicine from afar. Naturally, they had to sell herbs more often.

'Mother's been losing more and more strength.....'

By that, who gained freedom?

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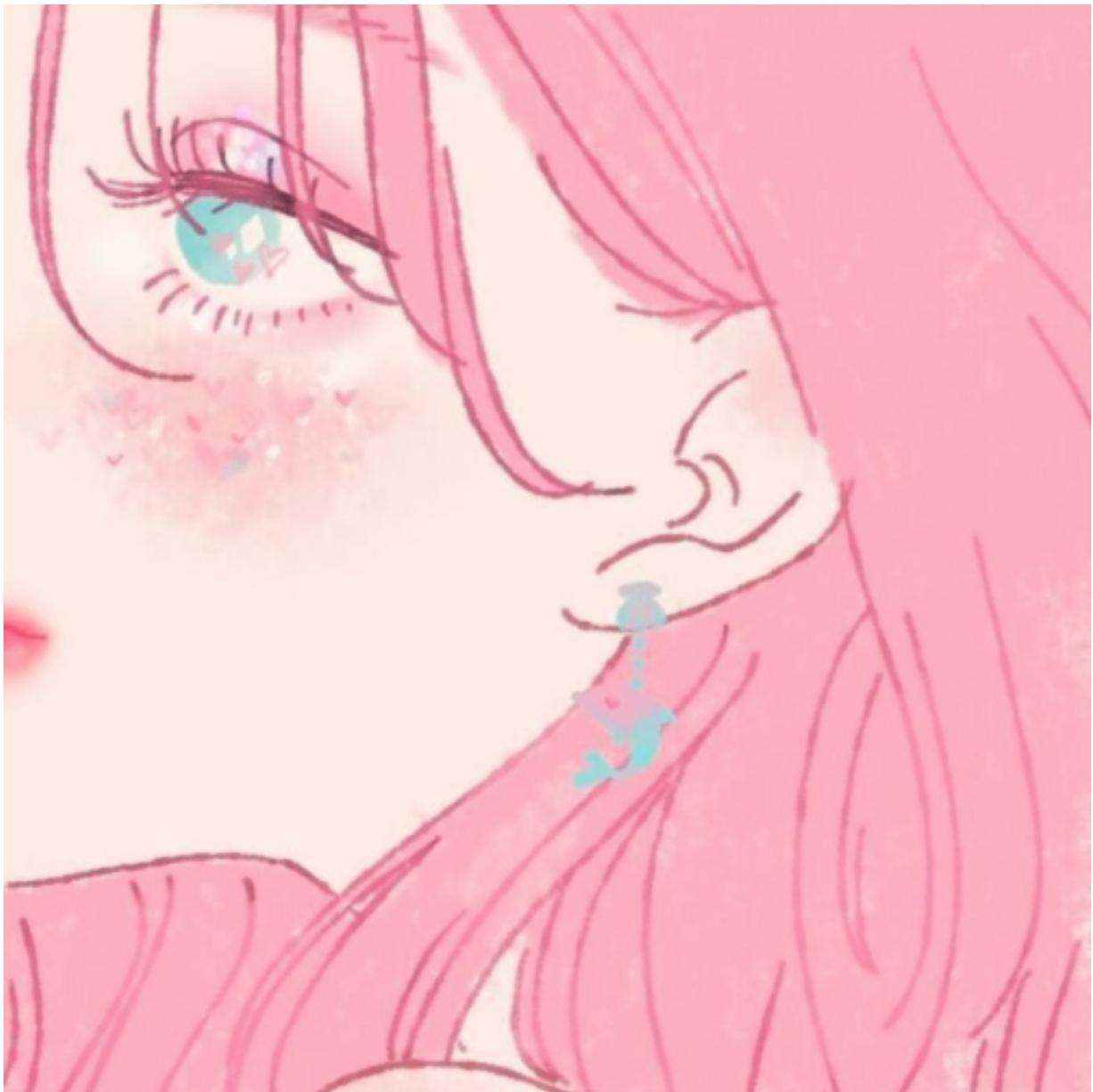


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# Chapter 16

“That woman named Grace. She’s dead to you, isn’t she?”

“She’s a little weird. I think she’s good with the sword, and she hunts by herself. But she has a weakness. She’s weak with women my age. I think her daughter died? So I’m dying while I listen to her story and act like her dead daughter. I can imagine what kind of girl she is, and she seems like someone I know.”

“Kyahahahah! You’re doing great. Isabel, you have a gift”

“Don’t say that. I’m embarrassed..... By the way, she’s a little..... I think she has mood swings. I don’t think we should mess with her.”

Isabel said after a while.

“So on the day when we incite the villagers, you must give her sleeping pills. Sometimes there’s life in her eyes.....”

It was then. She heard the door open. Nicole freaked out, but it was the back door, not the front door which was near the window where Nicole was hiding.

There was a heavy sound of footsteps as a man walked in.

“Jen!”

Isabel approached him with a bright smile.

“Are you feeding the bugs well?”

“Oh, that weird bug? It’s growing at an incredible rate. It’ll have babies soon. How on earth do you raise such a thing? I’m already feeding them.”

“Anyone who simply feeds it can do it. But I’m the only one who can handle such a bug. Be careful. You can get poisoned if you get bitten incorrectly.”

Nicole couldn’t listen to the conversation anymore because she felt disgusted.

Nicole staggered and rushed into Isabel’s room.

Then she headed to Isabel’s secret lab, which she found yesterday.

‘No way, please.....’

The door of the secret laboratory opened.

‘I hope it’s not there. I knew you were a devil, but that’s too much. Mother had a lung disease.’

Nicole opened the cupboard slowly, praying eagerly. It was a space that she couldn’t open until yesterday.

The house was so predictable. They had nothing, so they lived with a fondness for tools related to pharmacology.

Among them, she knew what her mother’s medicine was.

It's an old crystal bottle with a pointed lid. Written there was the date and name of the medicine on the bottle.

"Ha, ha, ha...."

Inside the cupboard, crystal vials were lined up in order of date. It was all drugs full of poisonous insects.

There are also kinds of drugs that should never be made or touched. It was the kind of medicine that used poisonous insects.

It was only raised for medicinal purposes, but it was not made into medicine.

Poisonous insects are not difficult to keep. However, it was only difficult to use it at the right time to show an appropriate effect.

"The Windbug."

Isabel called it with such an alias.

When it is larvae, it is also caught alive and put in a combined reagent according to the recipe, and the reagent turns into a poison.

'If you eat the poison secreted by this worm, it will have a great painkiller effect and it would seem to have a healing effect at first. But it permeates to the body and makes the patient more sick in the long run. It is especially the worst medicine for the lungs.'

She probably kept the bug-soaked medicine well. At the end, she would have removed the bug and fed it to Freya.

'That's why my mother's illness got worse.'

Nicole wiped away her tears. She tried to be cool.

'Should I reveal this to my family right away?'

The answer was no. Even if she exposes this lab right now, there are many ways Isabel can avoid it.

There are poisonous weeds that cause milk disease, and poisonous insects that go into my mother's medicine.

She can just say, "It was made for an experiment."

Nicole wanted all Isabel's sins to be revealed at once.

So that Mother and the whole family can gather together and kick Isabel out at once.

The door of the secret laboratory closed again.

Isabel was in a very good mood. She hummed home.

"All good things belong to Isabel. Everything pretty is Isabel's. Everything maggot or ugly is my ugly sister's."

Isabel's goal was simple and lucid.

Splendid and wonderful. It's to be a high-class noble who lives a beautiful life.

There are many reasons why Isabel, who lives hidden in the mountains, came to think of such an idea.

First, Isabel secretly read the books her mother had collected.

There were also numerous magazines in it. Beautiful women in colorful clothes and hats full of flowers and feathers. They were like angels.

'Ah, this is who I really am. I have to live in clothes like this.'

Isabel swore to herself after that day.

There is no basis, but she must be a valuable person by birth.

Now this crappy environment surrounding her and her family were all fake.

Nicole and Jay, her own siblings, are so stupid. They obeyed their parents without complaints.

'The only joy in my life right now is making fun of my stupid sister.'

The reason why she likes to bully Nicole was simple. Nicole was similar to herself. She's smart and sensitive.

In fact, being sensitive means changing whenever she pokes her.

But for some reason, Nicole didn't know herself very well.

Isabel spent countless hours making her sister secretly upset with her parents.

*(By the way, Mother doesn't like sister laughing. Why is she like that?)*

At the same time, building a wall between family members and manipulating them. It was Isabel's favorite hobby.

"Jay can't do whatever he wants because it's boring, but—"

Actually, she didn't care much about Jay. He was younger than Isabel and nice, so she could use him as much as she wanted.

She knew Nicole had become strangely depressed in the past two days. So she was upset with her.

But in the end, she apologized.

That was the evidence that everything was normal and things are working as they should.

"It's all Isabel's. That stupid grandmother's property, my future happiness. The loyalty of that stupid siblings, Karen and Jen."

Isabel had a firm plan for her future.

'It's obvious that we're hiding like this because Father owes someone a lot of money. Or he's a sinner. So my family will only hold my ankle from now on. The whole family has to die. There will be no evidence if I change my identity.'

Isabel wanted a new identity. It should be a very great and perfect status.

Isabel, who has never been out of the world, knew how important it was to have a last name.

Karen and Jen are from the conflict zone. She's already heard how much they suffer from having an ambiguous status there.

'I'm gonna kill someone and take their identity.'

She can have everything in the world if she wants it. She was born this pretty and smart after all.

Isabel was happy. Because freedom was approaching.

Contrary to Isabel's happiness, Nicole became calmer day by day.

Nicole, sitting in her room, tied her hair slowly. The night came again.

'Isabel, there's not much time left for you to reveal your true self. I have to say thank you. I can't believe you've already planned this. Thanks to you, I don't have to convince our family what you are.'

Nicole's days have been very desperate and chilling since she turned back time.

In fact, she has never been at peace.

She was just running away from her true self. Now she was about to end everything this time.

Nicole made a new medicine that evening.

And on that day, she gave medicine to Mother who was not feeling well. Mother fell into a deep sleep.

"That's strange, Nicole. I'm not feeling well today. I think the medicine tastes a bit weird. Did Isabel make the medicine right?"

"You couldn't sleep because you coughed too much yesterday. So today, I added some sleeping pills to the recipe that Mother prescribed and made it again. Have a good night's sleep."

Originally, she should be addicted to an anesthetic toxic drug. Because Isabel's has drugged her for a long time.

'Since the anesthetic ingredient is gone, it's natural that she's in pain.'

Nicole gritted her teeth. That's why she prescribed sleeping pills to Mother, who will suffer from withdrawal symptoms tonight.

Hearing that, Mother slowly fell asleep. Nicole went out into the hallway.

'First of all, let's work out Grace's problem'

She can't let Grace die. She had such a hunch.

The number of victims of Isabel should not be increased.

"I mixed medicine into the cows' food. They'll be all right now. But they're in a recovery period for a while, so you'd better be careful."

Nicole went to Grace as promised.

She turned on the lamp of the dark barn and whispered to Grace.

Grace gently advised Nicole to have a cup of tea.

Nicole entered Grace's house on the second floor for the first time. It was a small tea room that she had never entered before.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No. I just thought that you really came. It's fascinating."

"What?"

At Grace's words, Nicole opened her eyes wide.

"I take medicine for a nervous breakdown. Isabel, come and go so often, but I met you on the last days my daughter's soul is about to pass. I wondered if you were a person or a ghost."

"You shouldn't take the medicine that a ghost gave you. Here, I'm not a ghost, it's a medicine I made."

Nicole also gave Grace a scent for a good night's sleep. It was all hastily made.

Grace said thank you and tried to give her silver. Nicole politely declined.

"It's really okay. I didn't give it to you for a price, ma'am."

"Call me Grace. If I don't give you anything, I feel uncomfortable."

Nicole refused desperately and ended up receiving only one silver coin.

Today Nicole was going to tell Grace all about Isabel's plot.

But I thought, what if Grace didn't get angry or believe it?

So Nicole first decided to pray for Siena in honor of Grace.

There aren't many people who can be rude to someone who remembers someone who is precious to them.

“Yes, Grace..... Well... is your daughter’s memorial altar still there?”

Nicole said quietly.

“Of course, I always set it up.”

“Then can I pray for your daughter?”

Grace looked surprised and said yes.

“As expected...”

Nicole headed to the memorial altar.

Usually, young people’s memorial altars are placed with objects that they liked and flowers in full bloom.

‘It wasn’t a mistake.’

‘It bothered me the last time I saw the memorial altar.’

Pens and small stamps that can be used on letters.... .

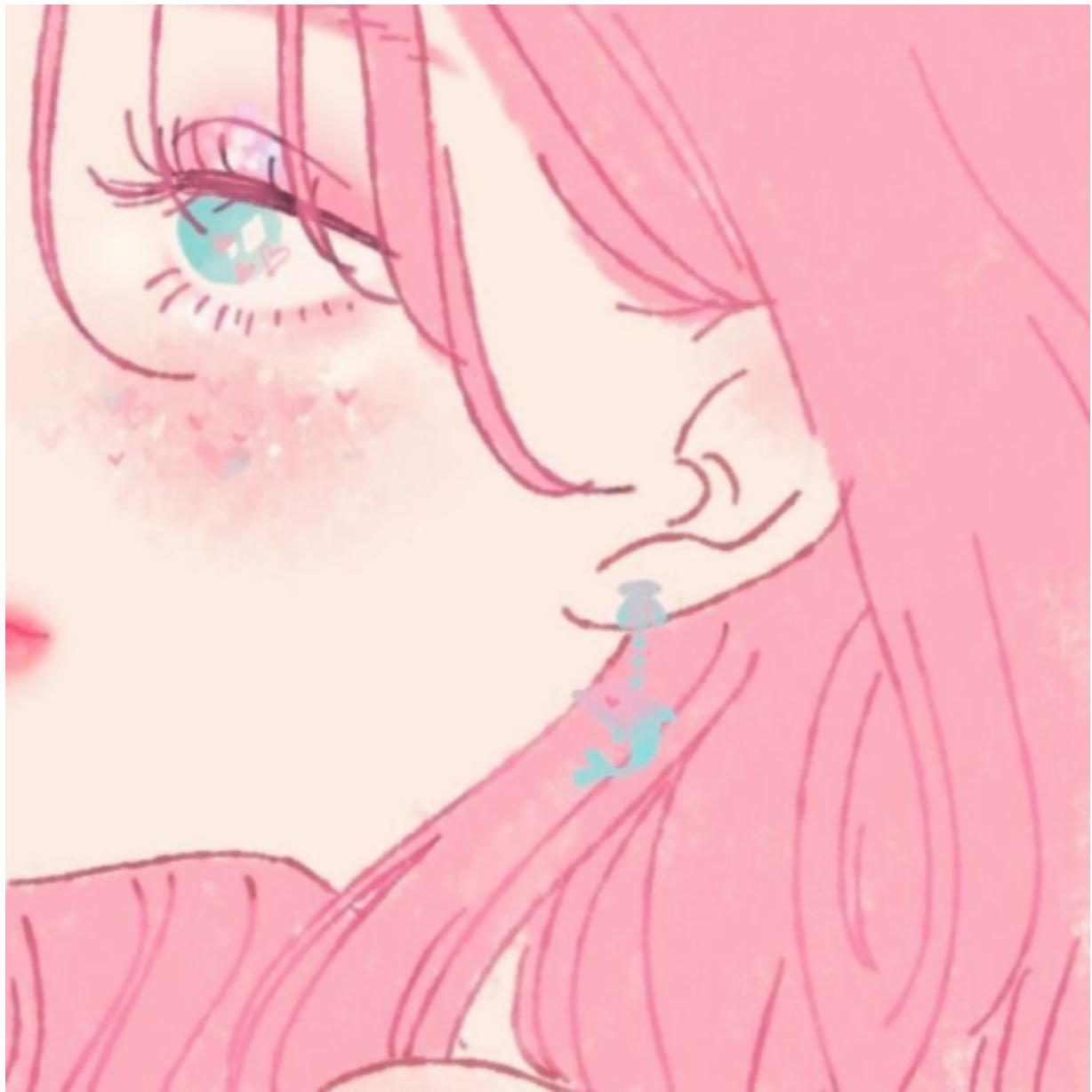
Among them was a white music box made of porcelain placed between flowers.

A music box with a spirelike decoration, Nicole lifted it up.

In her last life, she has seen an orgel similar to this one.

It was in Raul’s drawing room.

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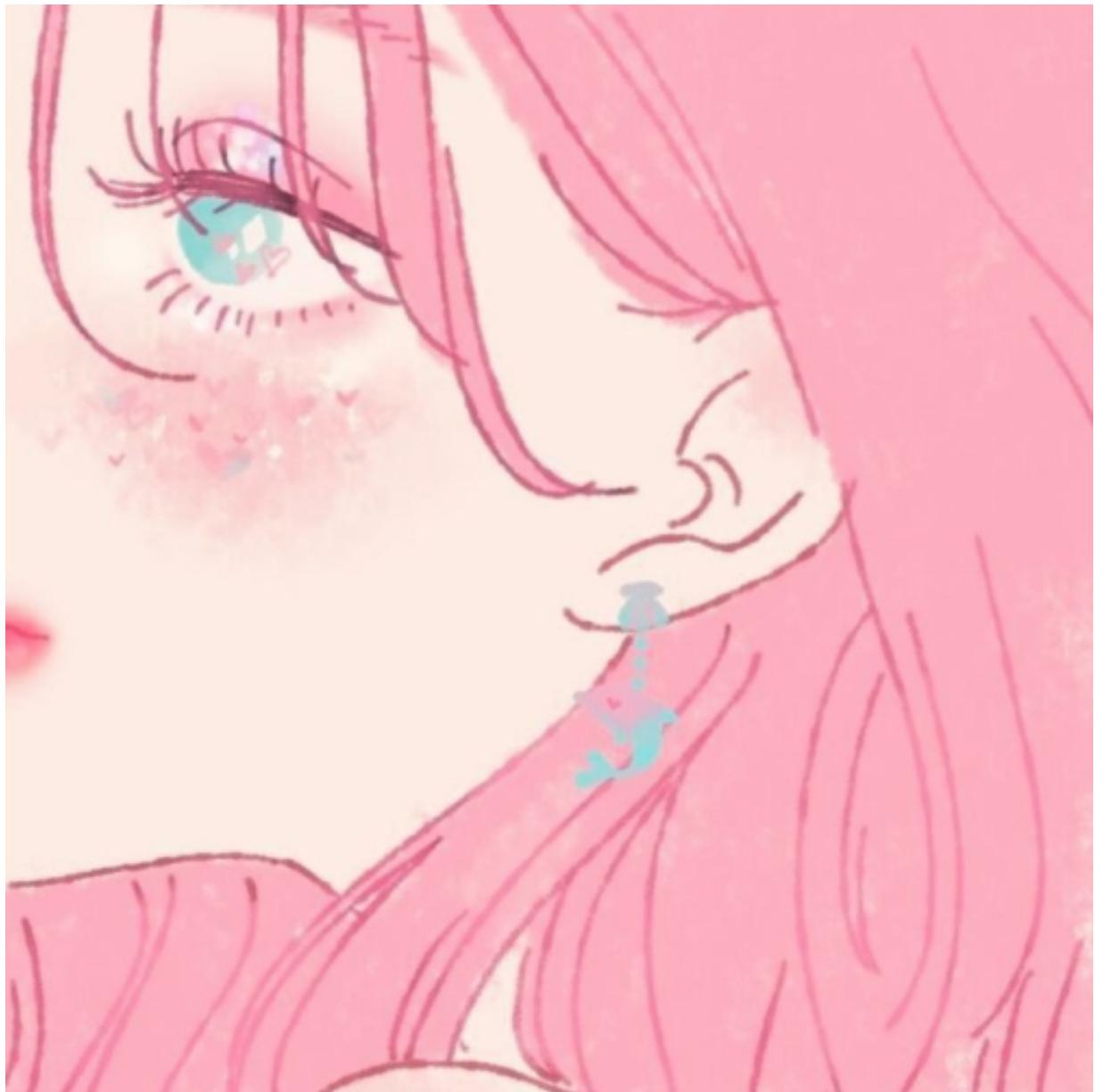


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# **Chapter 17**

*(I don't want to go. I think he's..... I'm scared. Do I have to go?)*

Nicole once again recalled memories from a long time ago.

Her husband in her previous life, Raul, was always busy.

He had to manage numerous properties of the family and was also serving in the Knights Templar. It also said he operates a secret organization.

At the time, Nicole didn't even know exactly what her husband was doing.

Taking care of Nicole, the Grand Duchess, was one of many tasks for such a busy Raul.

He called Nicole out on the second and fourth Friday of every month.

Nicole had to be dressed up by the maids and felt like dying each time.

*(Don't say silly things. Do you know how many people envy you to have half an hour to have a cup of tea with him? If you can't do your job as a Grand Duchess, at least obey.)*

Nicole complained every time, but the lady, who was Nicole's chaperone at the time, spoke coldly.

Nicole went to the drawing room as ordered.

'At that time, I didn't talk back to him. Because at least my brother, Jay, was still alive at that time.....'

At the time..... Far from being a good couple, they were close to each other yet ignoring each other.

Still, it wasn't the worst relationship.

Once every two weeks. Exactly an hour long.

Even then, Raul didn't say much to Nicole.

He just put Nicole in the drawing room for formality and proceeded to read his documents or did his work.

Even so, he was so busy that he couldn't fill an hour.

*(Y, You're busy.)*

Nicole finally plucked up the courage and spoke one day.

*(I know I don't have time to waste on me. And I..... I, it's uncomfortable. So in two weeks, we don't need to have a meeting like this. I'm good as it is.... The conversation.....)*

She had barely plucked up her courage thinking that she might be beaten. Then Raul stared at Nicole properly.

He had sharp eyes. Nicole was frozen stiff.

*(It's uncomfortable)*

*(.....)*

*(I do this to show others that we get along well, yet it seems like whenever I meet my wife, I become insignificant. Who told you to say that?)*

He rose slowly from his seat. Nicole looked away.

In fact, she still hated him then. Of course, how can she love a man who may have been the cause of her father's suicide?

*(No one asked me to say it.)*

Raul was silent. An uncomfortable silence hung between the two. Nicole rose from her seat restlessly.

Turning her back, she tried to calm her chest.

Raul followed and got up. As it happens, Nicole was standing in front of the fireplace. Raul's eyes stared at something on the fireplace.

Nicole followed his gaze.

*(Is this a music box?)*

Nicole suddenly asked a question.

After becoming the Grand Duchess, she received new dresses, jewelry, and cosmetics. She was given the things she wanted since she was young.

However, if a grown-up Grand Duchess wants to have curtain decorations with silk dolls, music box, or small doll decorations, she will be treated as a psychopath.

'When I was young, my dream was to have a doll or a music box.'

She was a little curious about the music box that she only saw in a book.

It may be because there is nothing else to do except die of exhaustion in this situation.

⟨Take it.⟩

He beckoned his gloved hand. Nicole reluctantly did as she was told.

He leaned down. He was so tall that his shadow fell over Nicole's eyelashes.

⟨Open it.⟩

Nicole did as she was told. There were only a few small ceramic switches in the music box.

Do you want to hear the sound?⟩

⟨.....Yes.⟩

Nicole spoke quietly.

He leaned down. Slowly moved the switch in some order.

The switch looked like a flower. It was the order of red, blue, and purple flowers.

There was a slow click, and a small ceramic doll rose from the music box.

Soon, the doll slowly spun and danced. A sound came from the music box.

It sounded as clear and pretty as she read in the book. Nicole closed her eyes for a moment and savored the sound.

*(It smells like jasmine.)*

Nicole said.

*(No, is it a sandalwood?)*

Nicole smelled it. And she was surprised. Before she knew it, he was close.

*(Both are wrong. There's no scent.)*

At that moment, Nicole felt ashamed. The smell she smelled was from his body.

Embarrassed, she got goosebumps.

Nicole turned her back and ran away. It wasn't until later that she realized that the music box was someone's relic.

'Is it Raul's precious belongings? There's someone like that with that cold-blooded person? Is it his dead mother's?'

When was that day? Yes, it was around this time.

Perhaps, it was around July. It was a particularly cool summer.

Nicole hated Raul throughout their marriage. But sometimes there was a scene that came to mind like a cool summer.

His sculptural profile focused on the music box.

It was a flash of memory. It was close to an accident. Nicole almost dropped the music box.

'Is this the same thing?'

She opened the music box. Obviously, as she saw in her last life, there were switches of red, blue, and purple flowers.

‘Was it in this order?’

Nicole pressed the switch in order.

The music box snapped open. And a clear tone came out. It was definitely the same melody as then.

“How do you know that?”

Nicole wanted to ask. What Grace has to do with Raul.

‘The fact that this music box is in Grace’s hands right now.....’

Obviously, this music box was a relic to Raul. If so...

It was then. *Cringg criiing.*

From a distance, she could hear the sound of carriages and people’s footsteps.

“Oh, my God. I’m in trouble. It’s not even an inspection day.”

“What?”

But Grace quickly walked into the house, clutching Nicole’s wrist. Nicole was almost taken away by accident.

“Who are those people?”

But Grace began to walk faster instead of answering.

*Bang bang.*

There was a knock on the door. The sound sounded ominous to Nicole.

"Isabel says you run away in debt and live in hiding, right?"

Nicole nodded quickly. That was also what their parents taught them.

In case of an emergency, they told her to say that they went bankrupt due to debt and lived in the mountains.

"I had a high position in the capital. I know a lot of secrets from the royal family and the state, so I am regularly monitored wherever I go. So the people out there....."

It is highly likely that they are members of the Imperial family. Nicole's back hair stood up.

"Don't worry, they'll leave in no time. If something goes wrong....."

Grace looked back at the stuffed animal in the living room. And then she opened the warehouse space under the stairs.

"There are hidden stairs inside this warehouse. So hide yourself here and run away through the back door through the stairs when I signal you."

Grace's gray eyes looked cold, as if she had been through all the hardships of life.

The door closed before Nicole's eyes.

Soon a group of people came into the house.

Nicole hurried into the warehouse under the stairs.

*Bang*, Grace closed the door.

'It's dark...'

Fortunately, there was a gap in the door. A faint light came in beyond.

Grace seemed to have piled up a lot of tea in the space under the stairs. Nicole's head went numb with various scents.

'There's a staircase inside?'

Houses that made hidden secret stairs were common because nobles hated to see employees go up and down.

It was just a style of architecture that was popular a long time ago.

When she lived in the Grand Duke's mansion in her last life, she found out about it because she saw something like it close to the corridor for employees for security.

'There's a lot of stuff piled up, so if I move it wrong, it'll make a sound.'

Nicole held her breath.

Soon there was a loud sound of footsteps. It was all the sound of the knights' boots.

The stairs were attached to the wall at the end of the living room, so the side of the stairs faced the porch.

The space under the old wooden stairs was punctuated in the middle.

Nicole put her face there and peeped slowly at the situation.

The first thing that caught her eye was the men in black. All were dressed in uniforms with a high collar and gold collar decoration.

'That clothing, it's familiar to me.'

Nicole's eyes got bigger. Soon, through the open front door, there was a knock.

Someone walked in slowly. There was a medal on his chest. Some of them were familiar to Nicole.

'No way.....'

Nicole's heart began to beat wildly.

The tip of her nose was exposed as if she was jumping through a crack in the door.

The atmosphere seemed to change for a moment when he entered the room. The tense atmosphere even chilled Nicole, who was watching.

'That can't be—'

It was a person whom she thought of several times after going back on time.

"Long time no see, Grace. No, shall I call you Master, as before?"

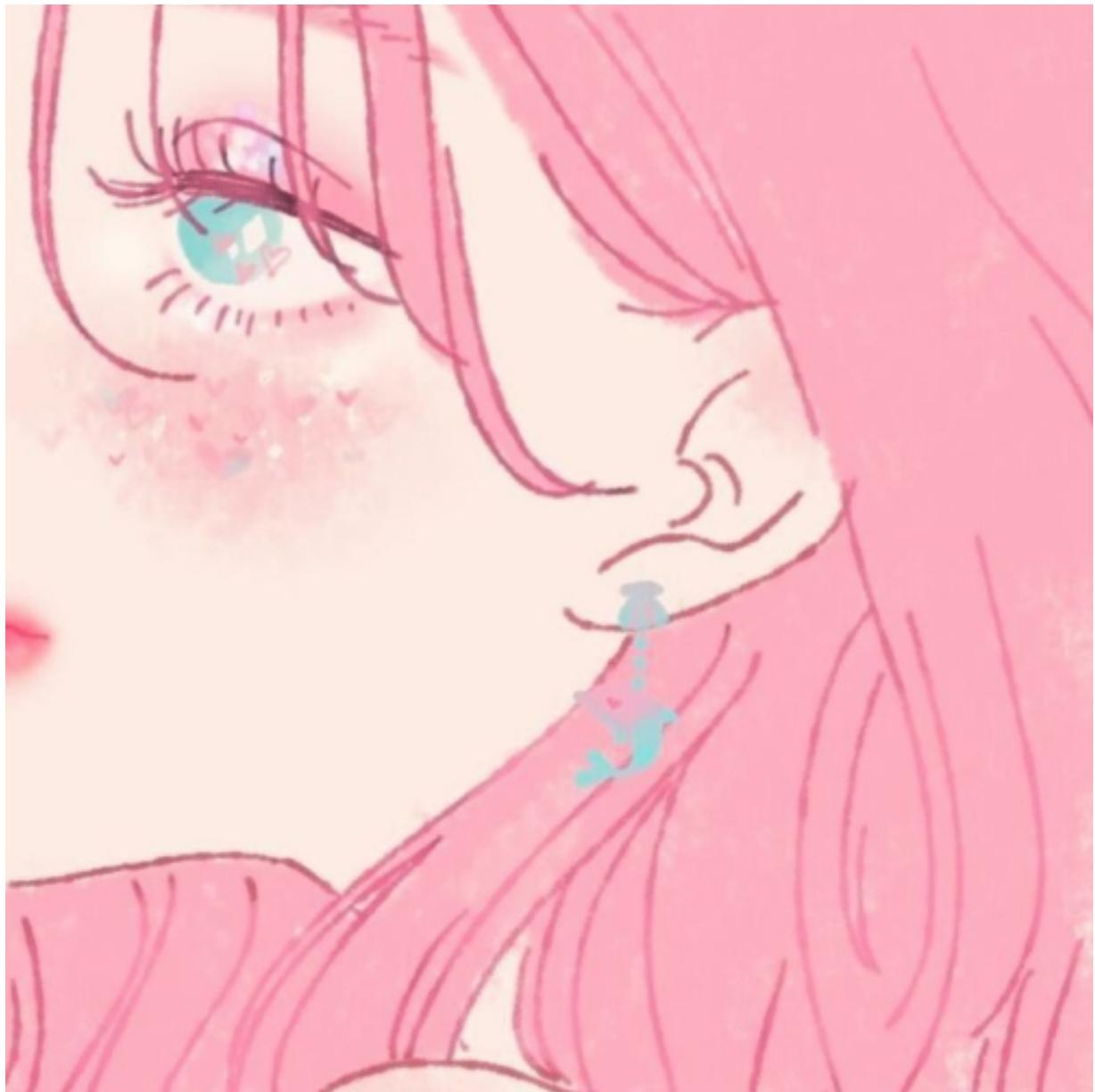
He spoke in a low voice. It was a familiar voice.

"Raul."

Nicole closed her eyes. Her hands were trembling.

'Why is he here?'

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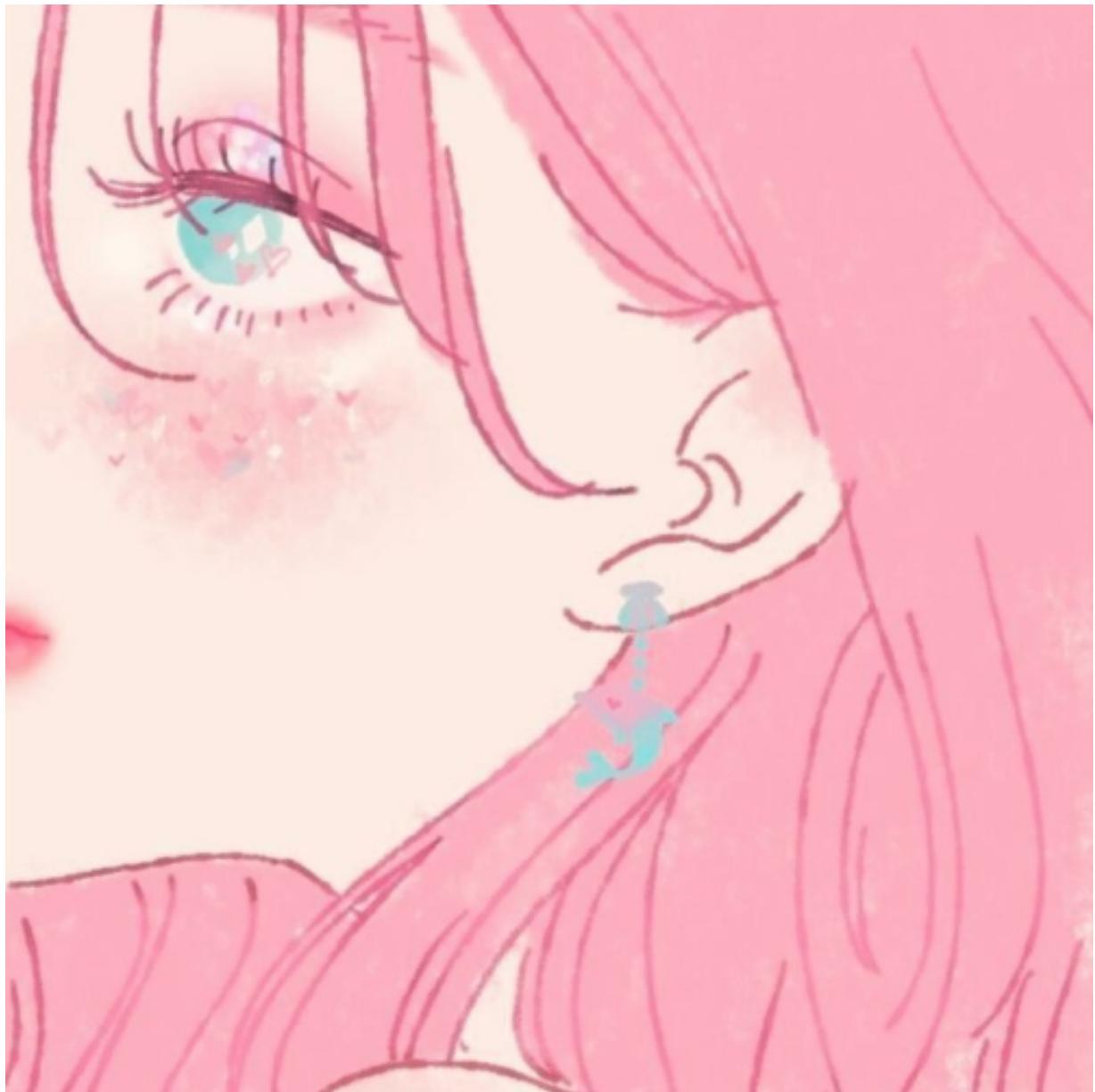


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# Chapter 18

“Why are you here?”

Grace asked quietly.

Although her voice was low, Nicole could feel the sadness and hatred engraved under it.

“I came here to see how you’re doing, but apparently you’re doing well.”

“Yes, now that you’ve checked, then all is good. I don’t think Grand Duke Valentine should be in a position to directly monitor retirees. What’s going on in this area?”

“There have been some incidents around here.”

Raul replied briefly.

Soon, Raul’s confidant, Bastard, answered instead.

“It seems like one of the officers who pocketed the money from the emperor did the money laundering in a city around here. We’re going to stay in a nearby city for a while to investigate it.”

Grace seemed convinced.

“I understand. There’s no way he’ll remember my daughter’s death anniversary. She must have been just one of his pawns he’s thrown away.”

“Isn’t it her fourth death anniversary? It’s too late for condolences”

“Grand Duke, the fourth anniversary is special. It’s said that this is the year they go to heaven.”

Bastard said with some embarrassment. He seemed to be considerate of Grace’s feelings.

“You’d better move on.”

Raul said peacefully.

Grace’s countenance changed. If Nicole was among the people upstairs, even she would have noticed.

Raul’s confidant knights also showed a bewildered look.

‘What are those scary people looking at?’

Nicole realized that Grace was a greater person than she thought.

Only a relatively young knight among them was pretending to whistle nonchalantly. Nicole knew him. Was he called Estok?

“Move on from what?”

Grace spoke softly after a while.

“Siena died on duty, so it’s an honor. That’s why.”

“There is nothing strange or regrettable about my daughter’s death. Isn’t that right?”

“I’m glad you know.”

Grace laughed briefly. Then she paced around the table, picked up a bottle of water, and threw it at Raul.

*Clink!*

Raul didn’t budge and turned his head to avoid it.

The water bottle fell on the wall with a loud noise and the floor was wet.

“Madam Grace, no matter who you are, he is still the Grand Duke.”

“What should I do? Do you want me to stop her?”

Estok stepped forward and said, pulling out his sword. Raul beckoned impatiently.

“Seeing that you’re angry, your blood pressure seems normal. You’re also maintaining your muscle strength.”

*Clang clang. Clang!*

“You say that? You?”

Grace threw out a teacup and kettle this time. The knights groaned.

But Raul was calm.

And Nicole realized this was Grace’s ‘signal’. It meant to run away.

Nicole took off her shoes and ran barefoot toward the end of the warehouse. Inside, there was a small space with a door that could barely fit a single person.

The space was dusty enough to make her frown at the mere sight. Nicole stopped breathing and went up the staff stairs.

Now she was on the second floor.

Nicole also knew there was an outdoor staircase leading to the backyard.

*"Heuk, Heuk..."*

Nicole walked barefoot down the iron stairs.

Then she came out of the backyard. It was the site of Siena's memorial altar.

Then Nicole felt a sign of activity. For a moment, Nicole hid herself behind the altar.

"Is this the memorial altar? It's decorated very beautifully."

"It's a pity. I can't believe that such a high-ranking person lives in such a remote place. I'm glad her mental illness doesn't get worse. Madam Grace also showed violent tendencies that's why she retired....."

Raul usually brought several knights. A couple of knights seemed to be waiting outside the house and patrolling.

'I'm going to get caught at this rate, what do I do?'

Then there was a sound from the barn.

"There was a sound over there."

They headed towards it. Meanwhile, Nicole stepped on the altar and got up.

'I'm so sorry, Siena. I'll definitely pay you and your mother back.....'

She didn't forget to apologize to Siena.

Growing up in the forest, it was natural to know how to climb trees. Nicole climbed on a big, sturdy branch and curled up.

'Please, may the lights go out quickly.'

Grace, who loved her daughter very much, installed lights everywhere that responded when people came.

This kind of lamp was more expensive than normal lamps. And if there was no movement, the lights would go out.

Soon the darkness colored the surroundings again. Nicole closed her eyes and prayed that this time would end quickly.

She didn't want to be caught by Raul.

But..... It was fortunate that he was alive. It's only natural that he's alive in this timeline.

'This is not the time to think so carefreely.'

Nicole, who thought so without realizing it, quickly came to her senses.

In the past, Raul found the hiding place of the Yveschapel family, or my family, earlier than the imperial family because he was staying in a nearby city.

This time Isabel doesn't know the secrets of the YvesChapel family yet, so she won't tell the Imperial family like she did then.

It was dangerous just to be near him.

Nicole felt her heart tighten.

"Calm down, Madam Grace."

Bastard earnestly said to Grace.

Grace's seizures do not last for just a day or two.

Grace refused to escort them and shut herself up in the countryside, as if she had received them on the day of her death.

Rumors were rampant that she was out of her mind, and there was nothing they could do about it.

"What should we do? Should we fight?"

And even Estok was staring at Raul. Bastard had a headache.

"Quiet."

Then Raul said.

"There's someone in there."

Stairs are usually attached at right angles to the innermost wall of the hall of these kinds of houses.

Usually, a warehouse is built in such a space.

Raul was staring exactly at the warehouse under the stairs.

“Are you even going to search my house now?”

Grace’s eyebrows trembled slightly, but she spoke calmly.

“Do as you please. I’ve already regretted dozens of times that I shouldn’t have picked up a guy like you, but what’s the difference?

Grace’s words wrinkled Raul’s brow.

He beckoned quietly to Estok.

Before he knew it, Grace was blocking the warehouse.

“I didn’t think much of it at first, but I’m curious now because of your actions. Who the hell did you hide in there?”

“What kind of ridiculous imagination are you having? You think I’m going to get in trouble at this age.”

“If you have a young man in there, I will bless you. In the case of Master however, young women are much more dangerous.”

Raul plodded down the stairs.

Grace had no more justification to stop him.

“If it’s a rat, I’ll hunt it down!”

In addition, Estok was approaching with his eyes sparkling.

*Bump.* Raul opened the warehouse.

There was a pair of old, small shoes neatly placed in it.

When Raul beckoned, Bastard lit the inside of the warehouse with an electric light.

A hidden door inside a warehouse The wind was coming in as a small door opened that seemed to barely pass by a child or a woman.

“Poor thing. It seems that a poor, light-footed guest stayed.”

The shoes were clean, but it was almost sunset.

“She is a child from the farmhouse who comes to play sometimes. I just ordered her to leave quietly through the back door because I was afraid something would happen.”

“Grace, a former senior official in the Imperial Intelligence Service, should regularly report on the relationships around her. So I need to know who this is.”

“.....”

“Usually, hidden employment leads to sponsorship. Fortunately, I ordered the back door to be locked. I have to help my Master because she shouldn’t have to care about such trivial things.”

Grace said as if she was dumbfounded.

“Do you have to treat a child from a poor farm as if she was being hunted like that?”

“I decide how to handle it. We’ll interrogate her if necessary.”

Grace knew that taking sides too much could provoke Raul. So she had no choice but to shut up.

Even on summer nights, the wind began to blow little by little.

The temperature in the mountains was fickle.

'It's cold...'

Nicole closed her eyes and was on the tree.

She couldn't breathe much because the light would react and turn on again if she moved too much.

'Shall I go out the back door now?'

No matter how much she waited, it was quiet everywhere.

Nicole took her breath away and climbed down the tree.

It was then.

Just like that.

Something was thrown to the altar. Nicole looked at it reflexively. It was a little pine cone.

'Oh, what?'

Nicole came down the tree and fell to the floor with a snap. She didn't want to make a sound.....

The altar lights turn up brightly. Nicole fell into a pile of flower beds surrounding the altar.

"Are you here now?"

A man was looking down at Nicole in the light that decorated the altar.

Nicole scrambled to her feet.

Then something cold touched Nicole's chin. It was a sword.

Nicole looked up at the black and shiny boots and looked up.

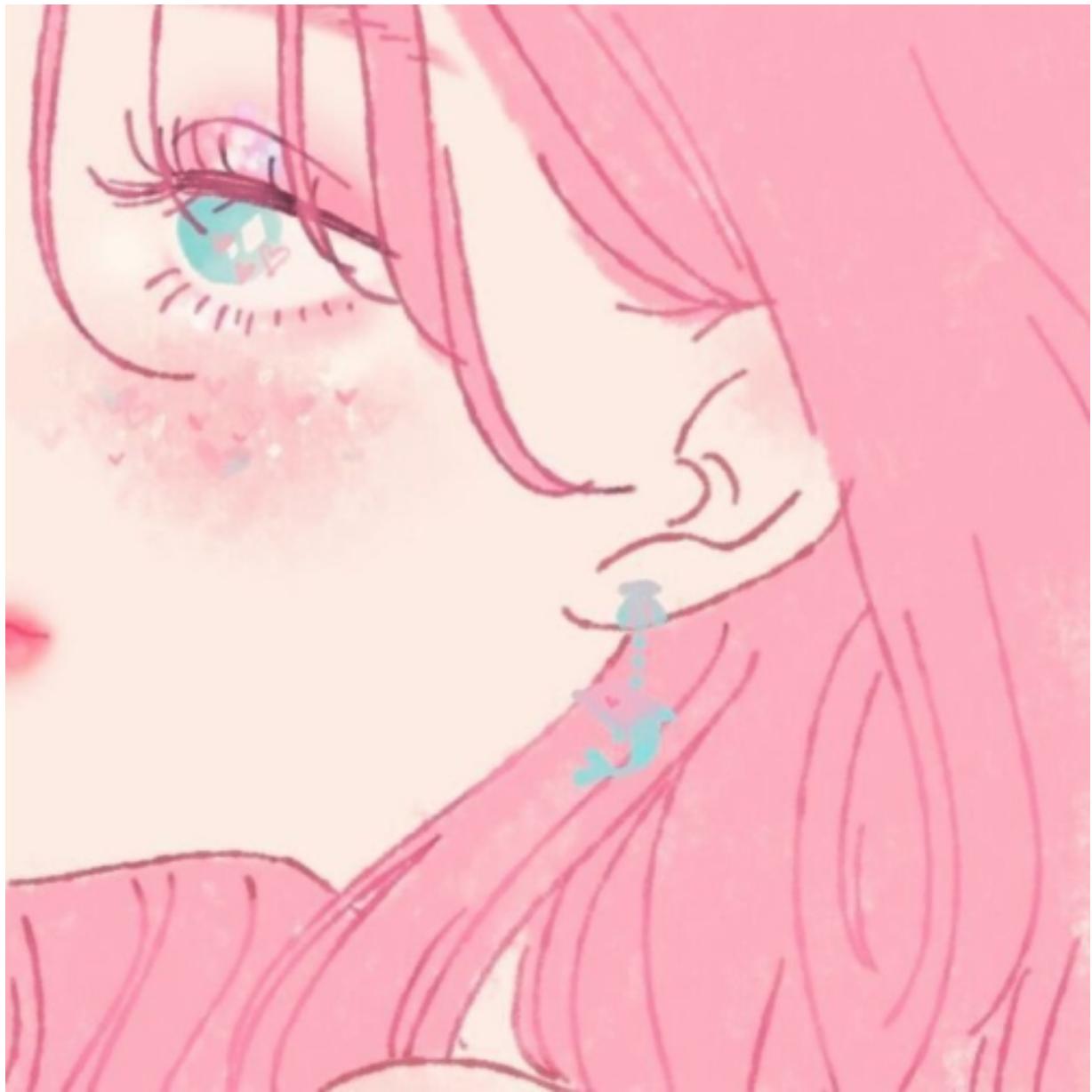
Raul was looking down at her.

Unlike his indifferent eyes, there was a faint interest around his mouth.

"Well, I...."

"I was waiting for you to come down. If you were a little late, I'd have shot you with a shotgun. That's the perfect way to wake up the sleeping animals in a night hunt."

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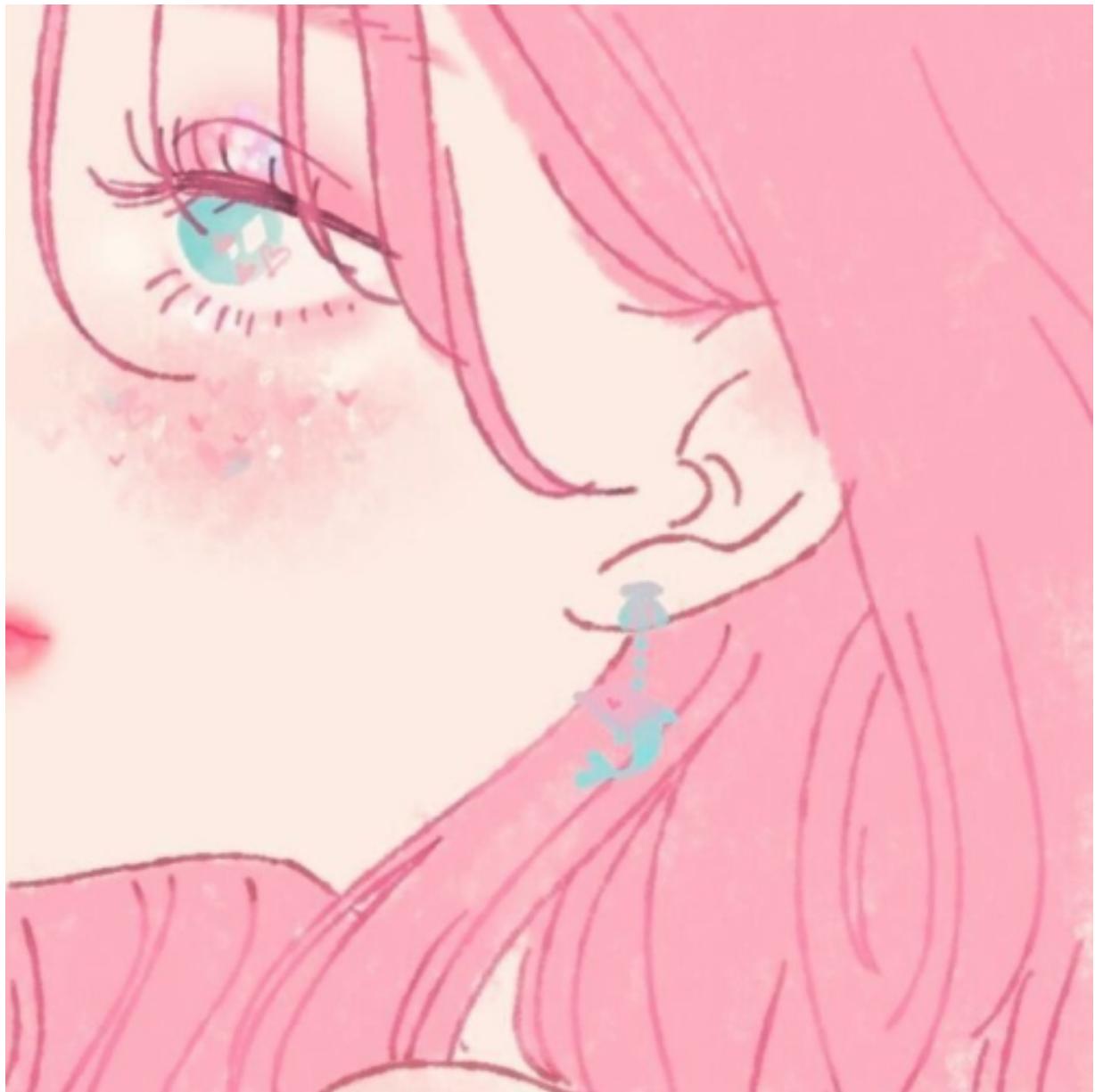


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# Chapter 19

Raul quieted down his steps, went out to the main gate, and headed for the backyard.

What he saw then was the sight of a woman climbing silently up a tree, with her white legs exposed.

Her pale feet clung to the tree and moved up and down.

Her face was already hidden between the branches.

'It's fun.'

There were few people in Raul's life who had personal significance.

Grace was a rare exception to his life category.

A long time ago, when he lost his parents and became an orphan, Grace became his supporter as his teacher.

And she was devoted to teaching him in a situation of no gain.

Such a connection was not easily cut off. Raul was deeply indebted to Grace.

The problem was that Grace became a little strange after her daughter Siena died.

Grace was then easily taken in by young women reminiscent of Siena.

She would show generosity for nothing and sometimes give money. And she didn't ask for anything.

In addition, Grace had a high status, and Grace was from two intelligence agencies, so she knew too much.

Grace was a woman Raul should take care of politically and privately.

So Raul was most wary of young women by Grace's side.

For example, this woman who's kneeling in front of him.

A woman who looks innocent and mysterious.

She looked at Raul with trembling green eyes, with her delicate golden brown hair hanging down to her waist.

Raul was confused at the moment how many emotions crossed in her eyes.

Do I know this woman?

"Who are you?"

"....."

"If you're not a fool, you have to answer. And look into people's eyes."

He lifted the tip of his sword and gently touched Nicole's cheek.

Nicole's body got goosebumps as if she was caressed by a snake.

At the same time, she remembered his touch from her past life.

Nicole's face began to turn red. Her hands trembled faintly.

It was both familiar and unfamiliar that Raul was in front of her.

She was scared and glad..... Just a lot of emotions mixed inside her.

"You shouldn't do that in a situation where you're suspected of being a spy. It's even more suspicious if you act so pitifully. It's even worse when you eavesdrop on others."

Nicole only answered calmly.

"I'm just..... I just came to give some herbs. And I got pocket money. A piece of silver. That's all."

"Did you?"

He spoke kindly.

"That's a lot of money."

Nicole was so nervous that she didn't even notice Raul was teasing.

"Yes, to me, it's like my entire fortune..... It's not that....."

Nicole thought. How did she talk to Raul before?

Actually, she doesn't remember them having a conversation. Because she used to get angry or have seizures all the time.

"I swear I don't intend to harm Madam Grace. I don't want to use her. Well, if someone like me comes in and out of this house and bothers her, I won't go anywhere near her again."

A tear fell from Nicole's eyes after she finished talking.

Raul took a step back. Nicole barely got up.

Raul looked over at her. If this was acting, she should receive a standing ovation after that performance.

Nicole really looked like a simple, pitiful young woman from a farmhouse. She was just a rare beauty.

"Did Grace tell you to hide in the warehouse?"

"Yes. She said... the annoying people were coming, so she told me to just go through the back door. I didn't know this would be such a big deal..... Since I was young, my parents told me to hide whenever I saw nobles."

Nicole, who confessed everything to Raul, didn't seem very clever.

In addition, if there was such a beautiful daughter in a poor farmhouse, it was common to hide her because it would be a source of trouble for high-ranking people.

At that moment, Raul saw a dot under Nicole's eyes in the light.

The faint dots on her right cheek were drawing a triangle.

"Since when did you have these?"

"It's just freckles, sir."

Nicole said quietly.

“It’s almost gone now.”

“That’s too bad. If there were any left, it would have been worth counting.”

Nicole was so surprised that her heart almost popped out.

“Uh, I... It’s...”

“Relax, I’m kidding.”

Raul said.

“You’ve got to go.”

Raul said.

“Seeing you climb a tree, you’re not a lady so I don’t need to see you off.”

Nicole started running barefoot.

She doesn’t care if she hurt her feet. Raul looked after her back for a long time.

“Did you kill her?”

As Raul returned to the house, Grace looked at him with an expression of ridiculousness.

Seeing that there was no scream from outside, she thought nothing was wrong, so she was just waiting for the tea.

“I thought it was a rare bird that could only be caught at night, but it was just a small rabbit. I’m not interested in hunting like that.”

“I told you it wasn’t a big deal.”

“It’s a little strange that people live in a place like this.”

“People can nest anywhere if they’re poor. Anyway, as you say, to enjoy retirement, you need to know how to show mercy to those poor children. Am I suddenly upgraded to a dangerous person by giving them some small money?”

“It’s just that I don’t have a good feeling.”

But Grace didn’t pretend to hear. Raul felt a slight fatigue.

“See you in a few days when I finish my work.”

Raul said in a non-sweet tone.

Grace only snorted and didn’t see Raul off either.

“*Heuk, heuk...*”

Nicole ran through the woods.

‘My feet... hurt.’

When Nicole arrived home, she took a deep breath. Then she hurried into her room.

‘Raul... you were there.’

However, there is one difference from the past life.

It was that Raul didn't know who I was yet.

An indescribable emotion swept through her mind.

'How stupid I must have looked. But...'

We're not meant to meet again in this life.

'But...'

Is it because she's afraid or because she misses him? Her heart beat loudly.

At the same time, Nicole felt one more misunderstanding about Raul being resolved.

It happened in her last life.

The day Nicole listened to the music box while having tea with Raul in the drawing room.

Since then, Nicole has secretly gone to his drawing room once.

The relationship between the two wasn't the worst at the time. Nicole fiddled down the music box a few times.

And a few days later, the butler visited and said.

⟨All the items placed on the fireplace in the drawing room are relics of Grand Duke Valentine's old colleagues. It's been there for a while and he's decided to dispose of them all. He's going to throw away this music box, but he told me you may keep it if you want.⟩

⟨Whose item is this?⟩

⟨It's his teacher's belongings. Do you remember the previous training? Never mention his late teacher or parents. So, thanking him for the music box is prohibited.⟩

She didn't know then, but now she understands.

"By that time, Grace must have already died in the witch hunt of the villagers."

A person of such high status, Nicole recalled the conversation between Raul and Grace.

At first glance, they seemed to have a bad relationship, but that would not be the case at all.

'Raul wouldn't have spent ten minutes with Grace if they really didn't get along. Because he hates wasting time the most.'

And after much time, Siena's belongings were turned into Grace's belongings and kept in Raoul's drawing room.

'Another question has been answered.'

The first day they met in their last life. The reason why Raul killed the villagers.

'Maybe it was Raul's venting, or revenge. Revenge for those who witch-hunted his mentor, Grace.....'

Either way, for Rau, Grace is his teacher whether he likes it or not. But somehow it didn't seem like Raoul hated Grace.

Rather, she felt like he had some deep respect. It was just a hunch.

'I really didn't know anything about you. I've always wanted to demonize you.'

But now there was no time. Now that Raul came here, Nicole had to leave.

'Let's get ready to leave right away. I wish I could afford to wait for Father, but I can't. It's really dangerous if Raul is nearby.'

The forest of summer was filled with green grass and tree fruits.

Nicole checked that her mother had taken a nap and went out with a basket on her arm.

She picked herbs and mushrooms for dinner.

Then she turned around and headed for Grace's mansion with a quick step.

'I hope Grace understands what I mean by this letter. I wish I had time to meet her in person, but.....'

Nicole wrote a letter and threw it under the garden of Grace's house.

Then she waved the bell in front of the house as hard as she could.

Breaking the silence of the day, birds flew out of the forest.

The front door opened. After confirming that Grace was coming out, Nicole stopped her footsteps and ran toward the house.

'Since you know Raul, I can't meet you again. Even that's dangerous.....'

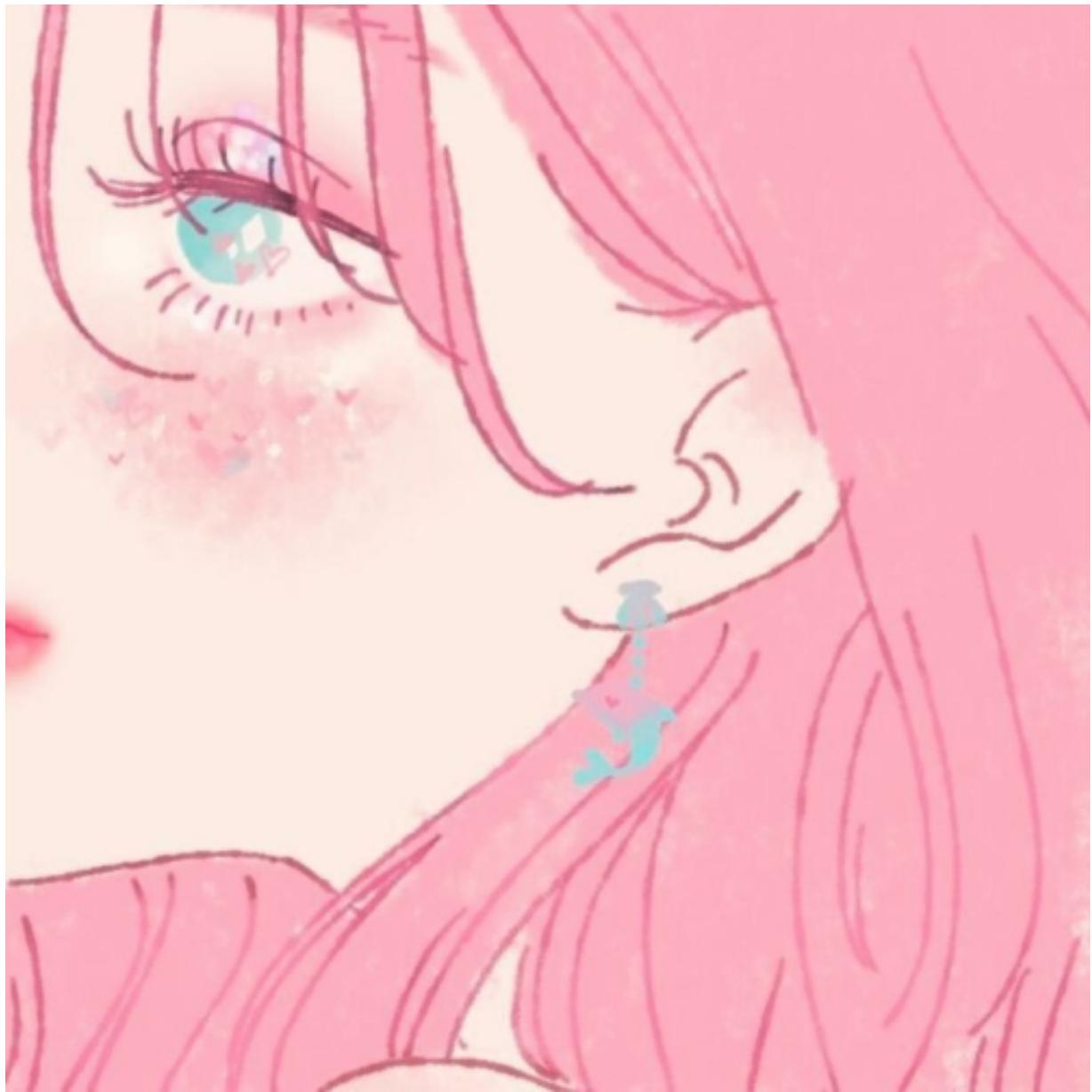
Isabel's plan for Grace's property.

Nicole wrote down the details in the letter.

She also advised her to deal with Jen and Karen as soon as possible.

It's time to go back home. Today, she has to spend special time with her family.

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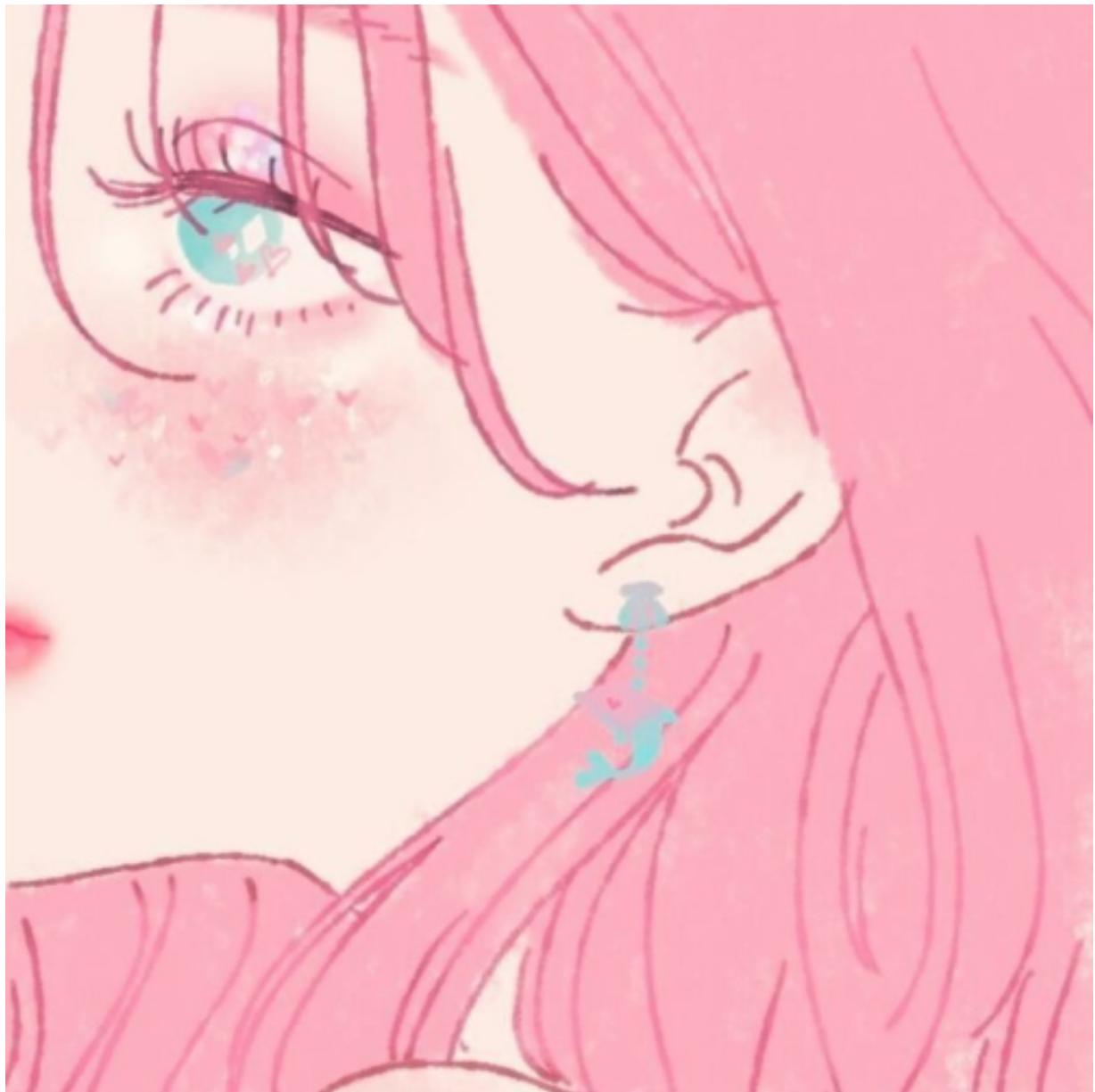


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# Chapter 20

‘Ah, I feel refreshed. I’m so happy that a lot of money is coming to my hands soon.’

Isabel was in a good mood today. Isabel went out to her heart’s content and was lazy because Mother kept sleeping like a sick chicken.

In addition, Nicole was kinder and more attentive than usual, rather than controlling Isabel.

“Nicole, that idiot must have felt sorry that she dared to rebel against me.”

Didn’t Nicole say she would give Isabel a chance to go out with an excuse for gathering herbs today?

‘I heard there were people who had stomachache because of the milk that came from Grace’s house last week’

Ignorant rural people fed milk porridge to their children and became sick.

There’s gonna be dead children coming out soon enough.....

‘Jen will do something to make the strange woman who lives in that house a witch.’

By the way, Nicole was a little weird.

'Does that idiot go out every night? It seemed like she was walking around in the early morning yesterday. I thought it was because she was preparing for breakfast.'

But when she arrived at Grace's house, Isabel's expression changed innocently.

First, Isabel headed to the cattle shed and fed the cows with poisonous weeds.

Then she went into the house and acted cute to Grace, pretending not to know anything.

"*Ta-da!* Isabel made a surprise appearance. *Hehe*, you didn't expect me to come at this time, did you? My mother allowed me to go out secretly."

"Here you are, Isabel."

But Grace looked strange.

She seemed tired, as she would normally shower Isabel with affection and serve her a lot of delicious snacks.

"What's wrong with you? I'm afraid you're sick."

Isabel said calmly and examined Grace's face closely.

Sometimes Isabel felt a strange cold terror from Grace. Just like now.

Sometimes there was a moment when she felt like a country bumpkin in front of a person of high status whom she couldn't even make eye contact with.

"Isabel, would you like to sit down?"

Grace said, tapping slowly on the table. Isabel sat down quietly.

Grace took a sip of tea and asked quietly.

“Do you have an older sister, Isabel?”

Isabel’s smiling mouth hardened slightly.

She blinked exaggeratedly to hide her trembling eyes.

‘Oh, really. My bad hunch is always true.’

What did her damn sister do?

But unlike her busy head, Isabel immediately nodded.

“Yes! Have you met my sister by any chance?”

“Yeah. I happened to know her. Your sister is a calm and nice child. By the way, your sister was talking about my barn. She looked at the cows and she said they seemed sick.”

“Oh, did she?”

“When I heard that, she said they looked as if they had eaten something wrong. Do you remember the servants who come and go into my house? Do you think any of them are suspicious?”

Grace said affectionately. Isabel rolled her eyes.

‘This woman... Is she testing me?’

Isabel has to frame someone else.

‘Because Isabel seems to be a pure and kind person to people’s eyes.’

The answer in this case was simple.

"Well, maybe..... Did my sister give Grace a present or did she do you a favor when you talked to her?"

Turning her attention to gossip about others altogether. Isabel instinctively knew how to get rid of people's suspicions.

Grace paused. Isabel's lips went up as if she could see it.

'What did she give her? She probably didn't know how to get close to people, so she tried to do them a favor. I'm sure she gave her herbs or fruit chips. It's obvious what she did.'

"Why do you ask that?"

"What she gave you wasn't food, was it?" It's a big problem if you take it yourself. Please tell me right away. Then it could be dangerous."

Isabel hasn't taken off her girlish mask yet, and she wasn't just a beauty.

Her audience sees a transparent and girlish charm enough to melt their heart.

"She did give me medicine."

Isabel said.

"Is this the medicine?"

It's obvious that it's from their home. They always classified medicine bottles in the same way. Isabel found the bottle on the fireplace without difficulty.

As expected, this pill was made by her sister.

“She said it’s a cure for insomnia.”

“Did you take it?”

“I haven’t taken it yet. There was an eventful incident yesterday.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“What do you want to say?”

Isabel is turning toward the fireplace. She turned her head slowly.

Isabel looked frightened before she knew it.

“I have a favor to ask of you. The cat in the backyard..... I’ll get the cat.”

Isabel hurried out holding the bottle of medicine before she heard the answer.

Grace got up in a hurry and followed her.

‘I’m glad I stopped by Karen and Jen’s cabin before I came here.’

Isabel grew poisonous weeds and poisonous insects in their cabin.

Some of them were made to grind ripe poisonous weeds.

So she had some of those medicinal ingredients in her arms.

Isabel’s actions were swift.

She took Grace out and naturally sprayed poison beetle powder into Nicole’s medicine.

"I'll give this cat the medicine."

".....why did you do that....."

But Grace didn't stop her.

The cat in the backyard came out languidly, thinking she was feeding him as usual.

Isabel took out a beef jerky, crushed a pill in between, and handed it over.

*Meooowww—*

After a while, the cat that ate beef jerky fell sideways while scratching.

"Now..... what happened?"

"I don't think he's dead. *Ha-ha-* I'm glad you didn't drink that. I think he's just paralyzed."

Isabel wiped the area around her eyes. She seemed very relieved.

"Tell me the details. What on earth did your sister give me?"

"Actually, she has a mental illness. When she meets a stranger, she bewitches them with her good looks and feeds them with poisonous weeds, and she plays such mischievous pranks. Apparently, the medicine she gave Grace was mixed with a large amount of paralyzing drug."

Isabel sniffed.

"Really, I think of Grace..... like my real mother.... You're very precious. I wish you didn't know about her. Isabel is so ashamed of her sister."

"That's interesting. Tell me more about your sister."

Grace said, with no regard for Isabel, who was trembling and crying.

"My sister has an inferiority complex to Isabel. She's trying to hurt Isabel using the people who's precious to her. That's why I kept Grace's presence secret from the family.....  
Actually, the reason my family lives in hiding is because my sister keeps causing problems. I don't know how many times it's already been."

"Didn't you say you lived in hiding because of your parents' debts?"

"That's true, too! But it's also because of her mental illness. Is there anything missing from the house? Something valuable. Look carefully in your drawers. She's been stealing from a lot of people. My sister must have lost her mind after seeing such a nice mansion."

Grace usually didn't even think deeply about what jewels she had.

Grace looked through the bedroom after a very long time.

A couple of brooches were missing.

"There's really something missing, but....."

"As expected. She did it again."

Isabel held Grace's hand and said eagerly.

"Isabel will find the brooch somehow. So, keep it a secret from my parents. They're poor people. I'm so worried about

my sister. And... forgive her. It's because she has a disease, she's not a bad person."

Grace was silent for a moment, as if in agony. Then she nodded.

"Okay. I won't harm your sister for now."

"Thank you, Grace!"

"Anyway, you should get going for today. I need time to think."

"You should search the house carefully because you don't know what else she could've done. She's done nasty things at someone else's house before. For example, killing the animals in the house or making bad rumors."

Isabel spoke to Grace until the end.

"I'll send you back."

Grace said. It was nothing short of a congratulatory order.

"I... Can I come back to play again?""

Isabel said, looking around.

"Even after you found out that Isabel's older sister was like that..... You won't hate Isabel?"

"Of course."

Grace said gracefully.

"As you say, if there's a problem it's 'only your sister.'"

“Ah, I can’t believe I can keep seeing Grace. That alone makes me happy.”

Isabel said pitifully.

“But Isabel.”

Looking back, Grace said to Isabel on the back of her head.

“Do you know Karen and Jen?”

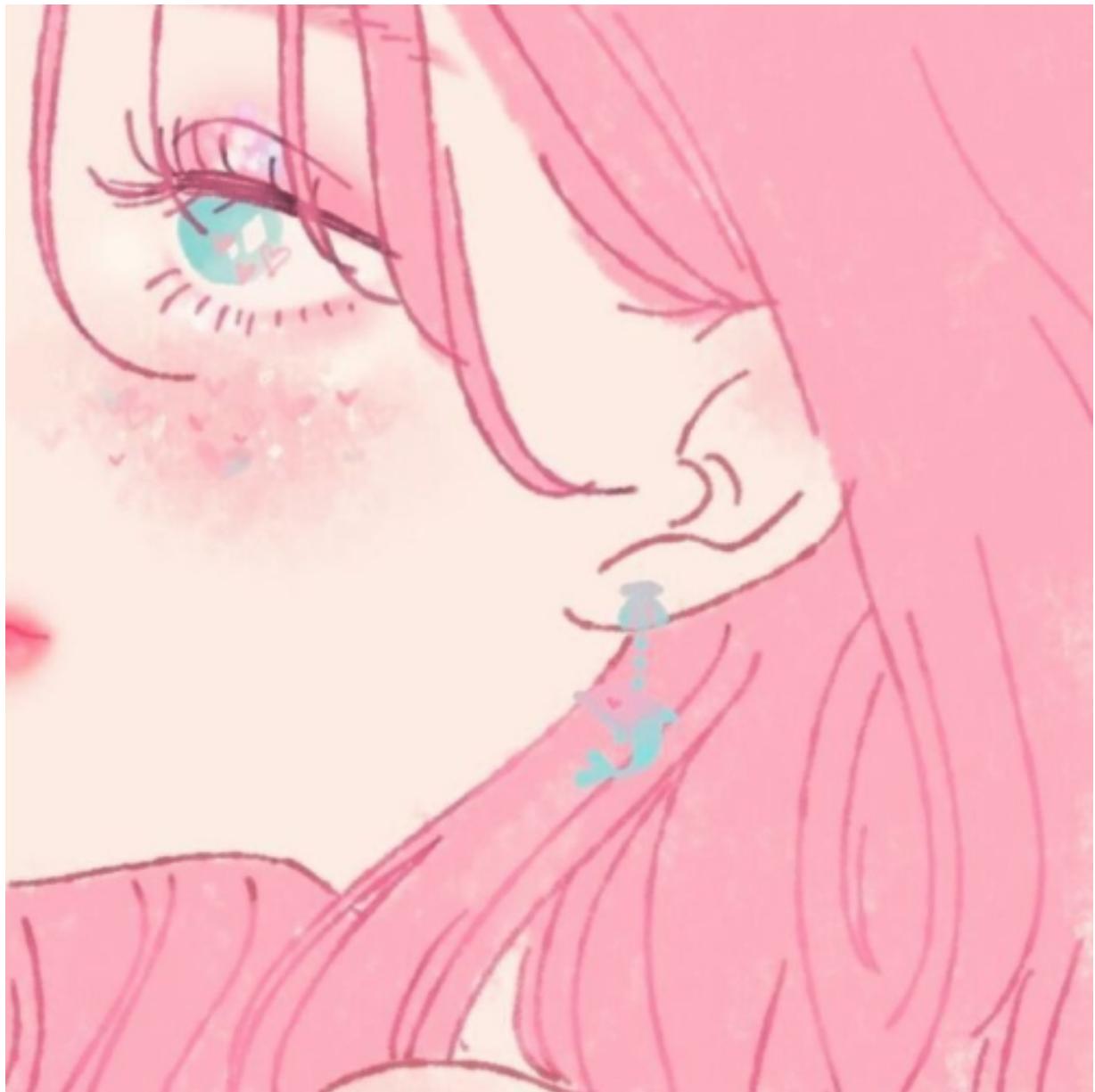
Isabel’s body hardened once again. She turned her head slowly.

“I don’t know them. I’m always with my family and sometimes I secretly come to see Grace. But... My sister sometimes shakes off our parents and sneaks around outside. Believe me.....”

“I see.”

Grace replied. And quietly closed the gate.

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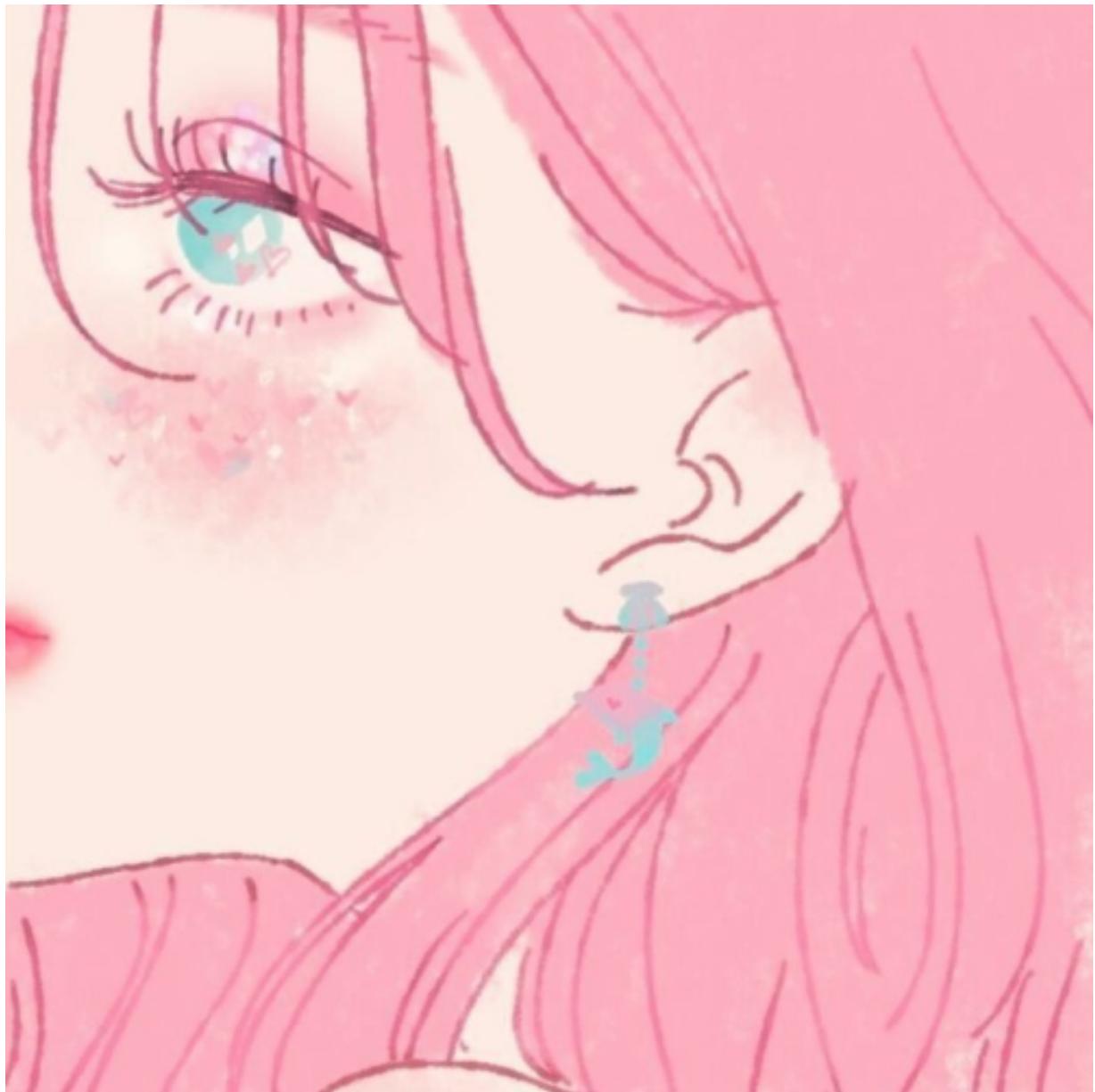


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# Chapter 21

'I won't let you go. How dare you....'

Isabel mused over her anger at Nicole for daring to talk recklessly all the way home.

'Grace, if she notices something, nothing will change. All the milk is probably already in town, and she will inevitably be hunted as a witch. I'll tell Jen to go to town and spread the word.'

Apparently Grace said.

"Nicole looked into cows and found out that they were sick."

'Nicole and I learned from Mother when we were young how to check the health of livestocks. But that idiot is dull. Besides, who told Grace about Karen and Jen? Is it Nicole, the idiot? No way.'

Isabel had the absolute prejudice that Nicole was stupid.

So she didn't imagine that Nicole had her all figured out.

Rather, she gained strength by thinking, "If Grace notices anything, I'll point her at Nicole."

'Grace is mine. Nicole, who almost ruined my plans, should know her place and be punished.'

Isabel thought.

Should she just kill her? It was too easy to kill her stupid family.

She'll just have to poison their breakfast. That's all she has to do.

Isabel knew how to manufacture drugs. It was all thanks to her studying the family's forbidden books secretly.

'They're a family whom I'll throw away eventually anyway. And it's been a long time since I've started feeding Mother poison.....'

Well, they're people whom she can kill whenever they want. At that thought Isabel felt a little better.

So when she arrived at home, she could enter calmly.

"Are you here now, Isabel?"

Nicole opened the front door and greeted Isabel. She whispered quickly.

"Why are you so late? Mother woke up from her nap, so I had a hard time hiding your absence. Come on to the kitchen. I baked some corn bread and cookies during the day. I left your share."

"Really? It looks delicious."

Isabel answered cheerfully but thought something else.

She happened to stop by Karen and Jen's cabin today. Thanks to this, Isabel now had poisonous powder in her arms.

'If you eat this, you'll get gastritis. I'm angry. Should I punish her enough to feed her this?'

Isabel smiled, thinking to herself.

"Sister, I'm starving. Please give me some tea."

"All right."

Nicole prepared the tea. And she put two warm cups of tea on the table.

"I want to drink honey in my tea."

"Yeah. There's almost no honey left, so I think you're the only one who should have it now."

Nicole got up to take out the honey. Isabel poured powdered medicine into Nicole's teacup in the meantime.

A clueless Nicole sat across from Isabel.

Isabel rolled her eyes while pretending to tilt the teacup.

"Hey, do you have anything to say to me?"

"There is."

".....what is it?"

"It's a little....."

Nicole fiddled with the old teacup several times.

Isabel's mouth almost rotted because she was acting frustrating.

"Sister, these nights..... Are you walking around outside? Do you happen to know anyone new?"

"Are you talking about Grace?"

Nicole looked around and whispered.

"You know her too, don't you?"

"You, too?"

"Isabel, why didn't you tell me such a secret? I was so disappointed. If you have met such a good person, introduce them to me."

".....did you think of that?"

"Of course. It's not easy to stay with our family all the time. I hope to meet a lot of people, too. And you know, she said she'd give me an allowance if I got her some herbs. I'll save every penny....."

Isabel was surprised. Isabel listened to Nicole with her ears pricked up.

'Does this mammoth also dream of getting outside of this hellhole?'

Isabel was in a good mood.

"Mother is sick, too..... Won't we leave here one day? It's good to save even a little money for that time. Father always goes outside to make money."

"But what is that story about the cows? I heard sister said that the cows in the barn were sick."

"Oh, I happened to go to the barn and the cows' eyes were red. I read in the book that cows' eyes become bloodshot when they get sick. That's why I'm just saying it's a little weird."

"....."

Isabel was dispirited. Come to think of it, she's thirsty. She sipped her tea. Also feeling hungry, she ate the bread as Nicole recommended.

"I was surprised that you thought of that. You always listened to our parents."

"We're sisters. I feel the same way as you do. And loving our parents is one thing but thinking about the future is another."

Nicole put her hands together and smiled tenderly. Isabel felt it was a waste of time being with this idiot.

At the same time Isabel became playful. She thought it would still be fun to mess with Nicole.

"Hey, hurry up and have a cup of tea."

"I will."

However, Nicole looked lost in thought, only fiddling with her cup.

"You don't want to drink it? Isabel drinks that, too."

Isabel jokingly said. Nicole nodded her head a little and sipped the tea a bit. No, she thought so.

“But Isabel. Did you happen to put something in the tea?”

“.....Huh?”

“I thought you were staring at me drinking tea too hard. Anyone will be suspicious because of that.”

Nicole said calmly.

Her expression that seemed to be in agony disappeared, and only the expression that was so calm, enough to be expressionless, was revealed.

“Why are you saying that all of a sudden?”

Isabel frowned for a moment.

“Why are you so surprised?”

Nicole smiled.

“Didn’t you get any nutritional supplements that are good for your body?”

“Nutritional.....? What are you talking about all of a sudden?”

“You know what you’re good at. Mixing secret ingredients with medicine. I wonder if you did it again.”

Nicole’s words seriously offended Isabel.

“You’re really weird today.”

“Your secret laboratory.”

*Stop.* Isabel’s hand flinched.

"The secret lab that was in the basement of your room. The drugs that were there. That's the medicine you made for Mother, right?

Isabel was appalled.

'As expected, I was right that someone came into the lab, right? When the hell did she find it?'

But Isabel replied calmly.

"Oh, you've been in my secret lab? Actually, I'm working on improving my medicine for Mother these days. I was making it in a secret place to surprise you."

"As expected, Isabel is very thoughtful."

Nicole rose from her seat.

And she took a small bowl out of the cupboard. Isabel's eyes turned when she saw the bowl.

It was full of poisonous insects. It looked like twenty at a rough estimate.

Isabel found out at once where the poisonous insects came from.

Isabel put a stack of poisonous insects in a small trash can that stores the ingredients to throw away on one side of the lab. All of them were leftover ingredients used to make Mother's medicine.

"This bug is a nutritional supplement, right?"

Nicole spoke mildly.

Isabel's mind hardened at a moment when she said something beyond imagination.

"What?"

"This bug, I saw a picture in the book 'Bug Pharmacology' from the East. I heard that if you refine it well, it becomes a very powerful tonic— or nutritional supplement. Where did you get this precious thing?"

"....."

Isabel was speechless.

'Is she too stupid to even recognize a poisonous insect? Did she mistake it for another bug? Or is she making fun of me by pretending to be a fool?'

In fact, some bugs are not harmful to the body and have become medicine.

But it's very rare and never seen in this part of the country.

Isabel began to get confused whether Nicole's question was sincere or just bullshit.

But either way, she couldn't admit it was a poisonous insect.

In the end, Isabel affirmed with an exaggerated expression.

"You're amazing, sister. I can't believe you recognized you at once! It's an insect I worked hard to get for Mother. Man, I've been hunting all day. And I secretly raised it and put it in Mother's medicine. I'll surprise you when my mom gets well!"

"That's what I thought."

“Anyway, it’s very good for your body if you refine the body fluid of this bug.”

“I’m glad you’re in good shape. Isabel, I already filled the tea you just had with this bug.”

Isabel’s face turned white in an instant.

“..... what?”

“Isabel, you said you’ve been having a hard time lately. Seeing that you were so weak that you couldn’t work in the kitchen, I thought you needed some. This insect called ‘Cordyceps’ is so effective that it is okay to boil it several times more. “It’s precious, so I’ll save some of it.”

She drank this damn poisonous insect? At that moment, Isabel’s heart was beating fast, it felt suffocating.

“Oh, how long? How many did you boil? Don’t tell me it’s all of this?”

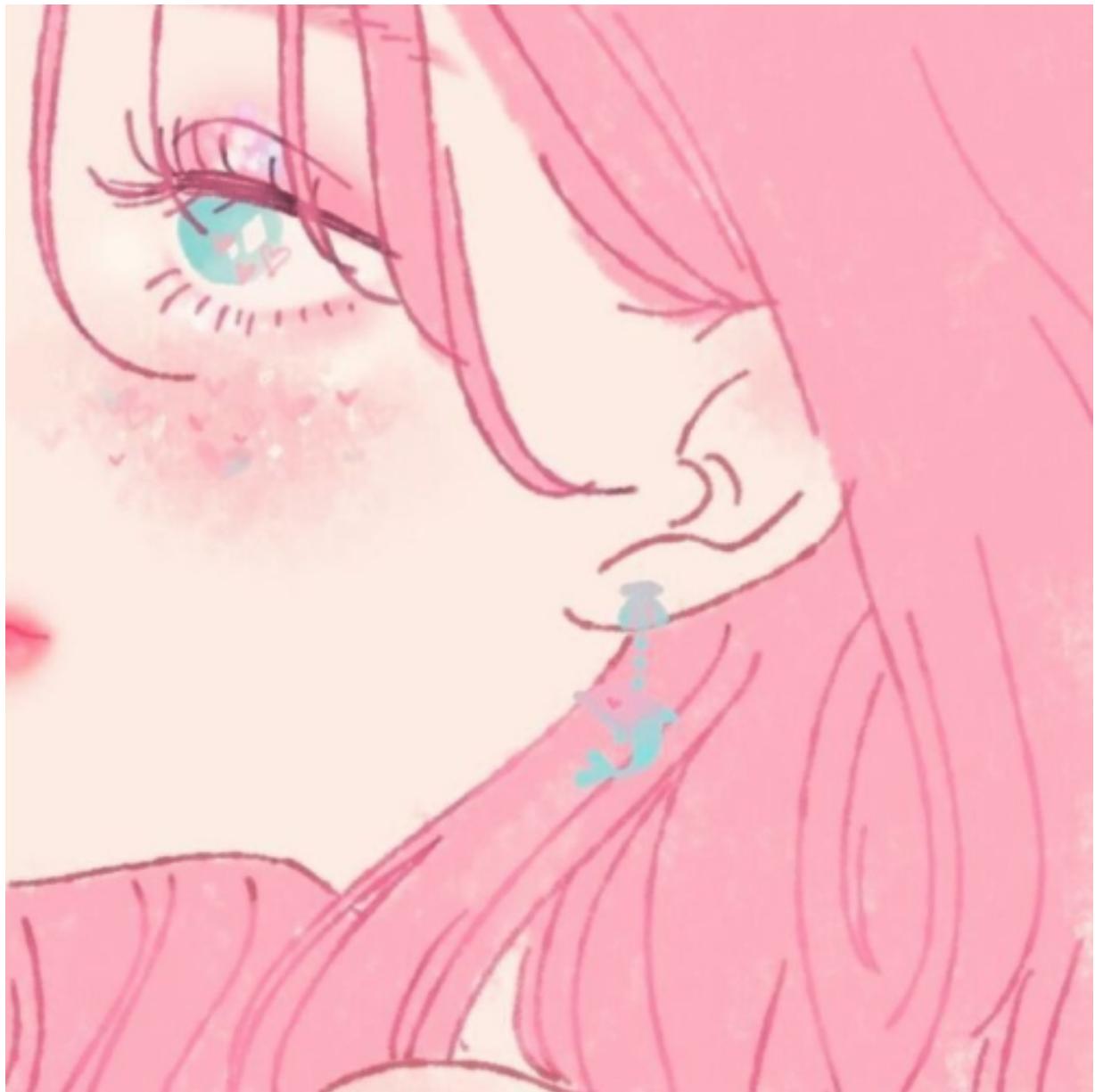
“Of course. Besides this, I added a couple more new ones and boiled them. There are some in your room that you haven’t used yet. I’m sorry I used it without permission. But....”

“.....”

“I was going to surprise you, too.”

Nicole’s mouth continued to have a calm smile.

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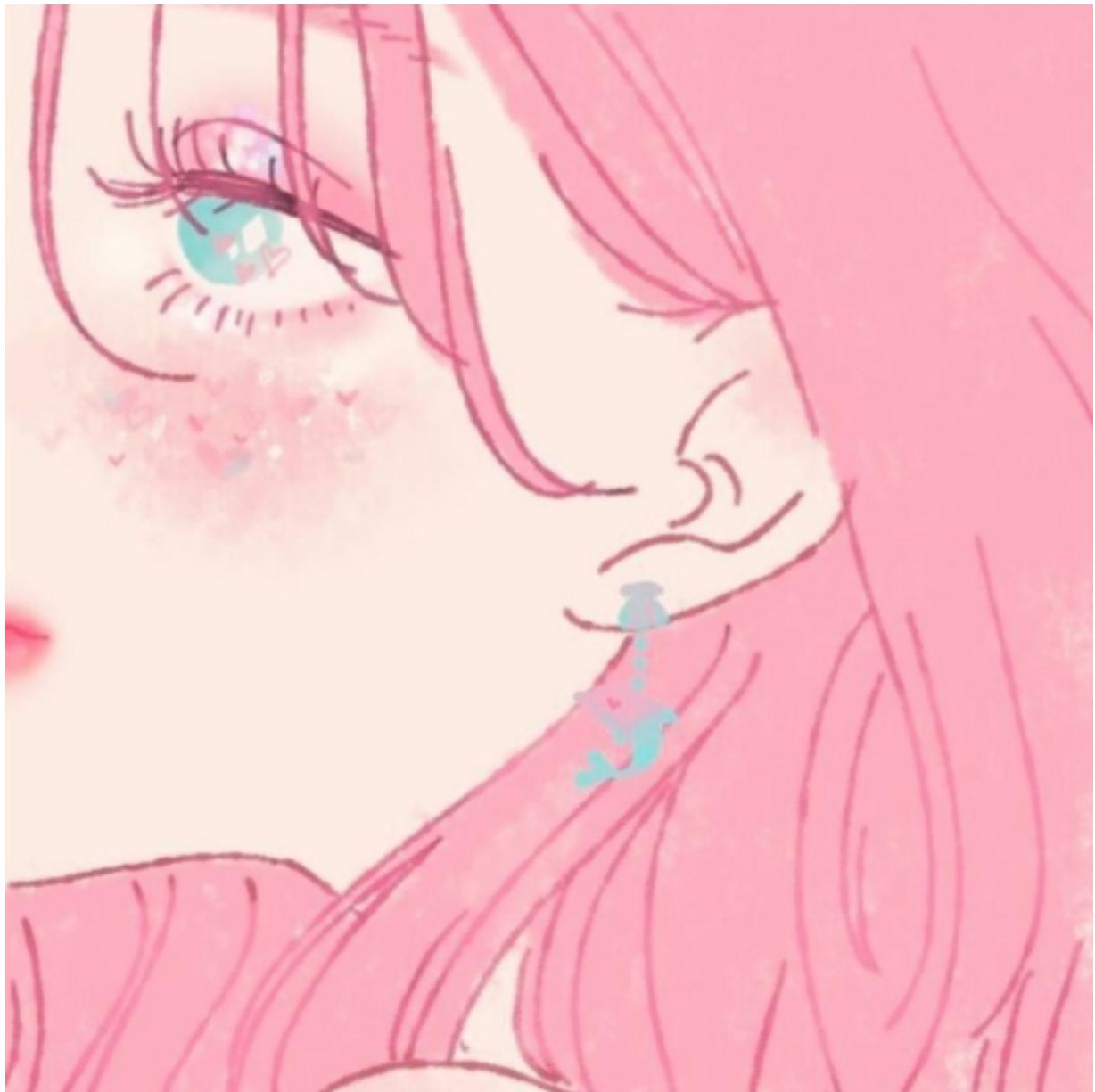


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# Chapter 22

Isabel touched her mouth. And then she got up from her seat.

‘That’s fatal. This is a very poisonous insect....’

Isabel was genuinely afraid of this situation as she trembled.

“My face, my skin!”

If you eat poisonous insects incorrectly, your skin could age, or you could have a disability.

“Give me medicine for vomiting. Where’s the puppet grass? That’s the medicine for vomiting.”

“Isabel? What’s wrong?”

Isabel, almost floundering, opened the kitchen door as she crawled on all fours.

“You damn thing, why did you feed me that stuff?”

Isabel, who ran outside swearing, tripped into something and collapsed on the floor. To make matters worse, her head began to hurt.

“Help me, hurry up, sister!”

At that moment Isabel felt something was wrong.

Freya and Jay, whose faces turned white, were looking down at Isabel.

“What did I just hear? What have you been feeding me so far?”

Freya held out her trembling hand.

“Mother heard it wrong, didn’t I? Right? You can’t.....”

(t/n: Freya is referring to herself as Mother in this sentence)

“No, Mother, this is!”

Isabel rose from her seat.

“I am wrongly accused. Sister tried to take what’s mine, and Grace..... Grace.....”

*Slipping.*

The door that was closed behind her back opened again.

Before she knew it, Nicole was looking at Isabel with a calm expression.

“Yes, Isabel. You forgot about your friend, didn’t you?

Isabel turned her head slowly. She looked at Nicole in disbelief.

“Karen and Jen. Why did you make such good friends and didn’t tell us? If you had told us, I would have invited you.”

“You, you...”

‘She did this because she knew everything.’

This was a trap.

Isabel pointed to Nicole with trembling fingertips. But it was Freya, not Nicole, who answered.

“At first, I didn’t believe it either. You’re trying to steal a lady’s house who lives alone. And you’ve been mixing my medicine with poisonous insects!”

Jay raised Isabel when she tried to plead her denial.

It was not a gentle nor a soft touch, but rather full of strength.

It was the first time she felt embarrassed by Jay, which was unusual.

Freya slapped Isabel on the cheek.

“Mother, did you just hit me? Not Nicole, but me?”

*Slap!*

Isabel’s cheeks were hit again several times.

Then Freya threw the bottle at Isabel’s feet. It was a small bottle of medicine that Isabel had made so far.

What was different from usual was that it contained poisonous insects inside.

“What is this, and what did you put in Nicole’s tea?”

“Did you see that, too?”

“I watched through the door as Nicole told me to. By the way, you, to your family..... You are....”

“Jay.”

Nicole looked at Jay. Jay grabbed Isabel’s clothes.

“Let go of me, what’s wrong with you!”

The force tore Isabel’s shirt.

*Tektuek*

Something fell on the floor. It was all poison and medicine that Isabel brought from the hut near the abandoned mine.

“Did you try to feed this to Sister?”

Jay looked at Isabel with disgust.

“You’re crazy. You’re a devil! I can’t believe you’re my family!”

Nicole was very calm. She only observed Isabel quietly.

This whole thing was planned from the start.

Her plan dates back to this morning.

Nicole overslept this morning.

‘I have to prepare breakfast. And I have to look into Mother’s condition.....’

As she hurried down to the kitchen, there were loud noises everywhere.

It was the sound of Jay scrambling.

“Jay? What are you doing?”

“Ah, sister.”

Jay looked awkwardly at Nicole.

“I tried to prepare some breakfast on my own because you seemed to be sleeping in because you were tired.....”

“You know what you’re doing.”

This year Jay was only 17. In addition, most of the vegetable garden behind the house was taken care of by Jay.

“I also know how to prepare food or light the stove.”

“Do you know that you’re about to put all the jam into the soup?”

“Why am I holding this?”

Jay said with a puzzled look. Nicole stopped laughing.

“Get out of here. Don’t make more work. I appreciate your heart.”

Jay, who was scratching his head, turned his back again as he was about to leave.

“Well, sister.”

“What?”

“Is there anything else I can do to help?”

“.....”

“I heard that Sister told Isabel to help you with the housework a while ago. I heard it from Mother. Come to think of it, I’m sorry, too. You always do the hardest chores because you’re the eldest. Don’t push yourself too much.”

Nicole was surprised inwardly. When did Jay grow up like this?

“Thank you, Jay. I thought you were closer to Isabel.....”

“That’s because she talks a lot!”

Jay put on a straight face.

“I always told you. Isabel is as innocent as the youngest, so I always watch and protect her. That’s why I paid a lot of attention.”

“.....”

“But Nicole *noona* was the one who raised me since I was young. It’s natural that I rely on *noona* the most.”

(*t/n: noona means older sister, if spoken by a male*)

His words touched Nicole’s heart.

“Thank you for saying that, Jay.”

At the same time, Nicole felt sad.

‘He has a great personality and is a genius healer.’

Jay would have enjoyed his life more if he had been a nobleman of the Yveschapel family.

Jay should not be a child to rot in this mountain either.

"Then Jay. I have a favor to ask of you..... Isabel will be out later."

Nicole whispered.

'I asked Jay to search Isabel's secret lab.'

Nicole thought it was important to reveal Isabel's true self to Mother.

'But Isabel is Mother's favorite child.'

In order for this revelation to not look like a setup, Jay and Nicole have to discover Isabel's strangeness at the same time.

⟨ Isabel did this to my medicine? No, my child wouldn't do that. ⟩

Of course Freya didn't believe it at first.

However, Nicole also calmly explained Isabel's plot to take Grace's property.

⟨ I also found out by chance while following Isabel secretly because she left home in the middle of the night. The plan that the child is plotting..... ⟩

Jay also helped Nicole.

⟨ Mom, I can't believe it either. I saw it... Indeed, Karen and Jen live in a cabin near the abandoned mine. As she said, I went to see them. ⟩

Jay was sensible in his own way.

So he knew Isabel kept going out suspiciously for a long time.

However, he pretended not to know because he thought Nicole and Freya's worries would increase.

Then, as Nicole said, he went down to Isabel's lab and was shocked with what he saw.

Nicole didn't miss that opportunity and told him everything Isabel was planning. Jay followed Isabel's trail near the abandoned mine and secretly checked on Karen and Jen.

⟨ Mother. Actually, I can't believe this either. So, why don't you try checking on Isabel? ⟩

Nicole said quietly.

That was the whole story of this plan.

"I can't believe you really fed Isabel poisonous tea. How could you... You're not even human!"

(t/n: Again, Isabel always refers to herself in the third person. Don't be confused)

"Isabel, I didn't feed you poisonous tea. What I fed you was a lot of sugar and nutritional supplements. If you take it a lot at once, you become excited and blood circulates quickly. So the symptoms you feel now are the effects of the supplements and sugar. Or the fear of being caught doing what you did."

Isabel quivered her lower lip. Then she clung to Freya.

"Mother, sister misunderstood something. Isabel doesn't do anything bad. Sister is the one who went out at night and went around seducing people!"

“Shut up, Isabel.”

Freya breathed helplessly but stared at Isabel with eerie coolness.

It occurred to her that Nicole had not seen this side of her mother in a long time.

“Even if we live on a mountain like this, we always tell you to live with pride. You’re a disgrace to your parents, Isabel. What you’ve done will be discussed again when your father comes. Until then, you should be punished.”

“No! I don’t want to be locked up. Isabel will die then!”

“Jay. Nicole.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Jay was strong, so it was not difficult to overpower Isabel.

Nicole had Jay bind Isabel with a rope she had prepared beforehand.

“*Eup, euup!*”

Isabel tried to say something, but her mouth was blocked.

“Keep her in the warehouse.”

Freya said. She barely stood holding onto the wall.

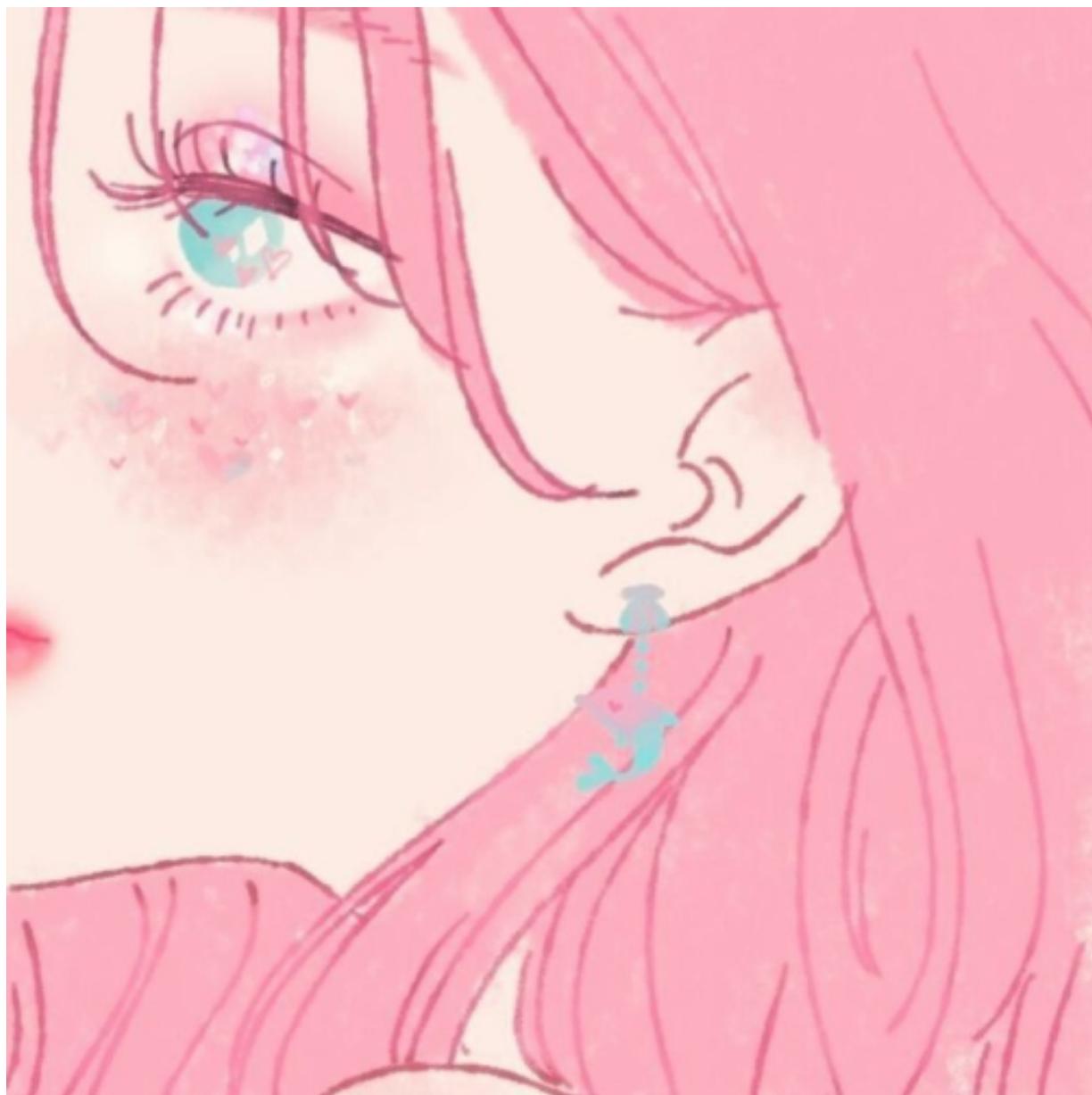
Nicole and Jay dragged Isabel to the warehouse.

“*Woo, uh, woeo!*”

Isabel resisted with a grotesque sound.

The two siblings locked the door. And they sighed and looked at each other's faces.

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# **Chapter 23**

Freya was seriously ill that night. Nicole nursed her all night.

“Nicole, Nicole..... How could Isabel have done such a thing? Am I wrong to lock her up?”

“That’s not true, Mother.”

For a moment, when Freya regained consciousness, Nicole told her.

“And Mother. If you feel better..... We have to run away as soon as possible.”

“Is it because of the woman named Grace?”

“She’s a problem too, but..... Well, I think I met Grand Duke Valentine. At Grace’s mansion. Fortunately, I didn’t get caught.”

Freya was appalled by Nicole’s explanation. She can’t believe the person who lives in such a place had a connection with the young Grand Duke Valentine.

“Never, they shouldn’t catch you. You don’t know what the imperial family will do to you. You don’t know how your mother’s people died. They are not human. Especially for children like Isabel and Jay who have healing powers.....”

“Don’t worry. I handled it well.”

Nicole said.

“Mother, do you have any way or means to contact Father?”

“I have. There is an emergency contact.”

"Then we'll leave as soon as Mother gets better. I'll leave messages to Father through the emergency contact ...."

After locking Isabel up, she told Jay about it, too.

⟨ We may have to leave here soon. So can you pack something important for me? ⟩

They were poor. They don't have a lot of valuable things to pack while running away.

'But the books that contain all the knowledge of the YvesChapel family... And seeds of ancient plants. Eggs of poisonous insects asleep in a sealed state. That alone is of great value.'

In her previous life, all of these properties were confiscated and placed in the Grand Duke of Valentine's House.

Only a few of them remained in Nicole's hands and were able to be used to study medicine.

Raul was originally a wealthy man, so he was not interested in selling those and even more so in pharmacology.

However, the knowledge of the Yveschapel family was so great that they released and sold only a few things that would be helpful for the public interest. As far as restoration is possible.

“First of all, I’ll pack books or the most important things. Father rode his horse, so when we go down the mountain, we’ll spend all our money on an old donkey. Mother has to rest until then.”

Nicole decided to stabilize her mother’s condition as much as possible.

She made medicine for her and put her mother to sleep.

For now, she’ll hide their valuables here

Nicole and Jay hid their luggage in a secret place under a big tree in a nearby forest.

It was the place Jay and Nicole found when they were young, and it was the mana stone repository created by miners a long time ago.

Isabel was not with them at the time, so it was a place only the two knew.

When she asked Jay, he also said he had never told Isabel about it.

‘I didn’t know that place would be so helpful. I’m so glad there’s a secret place that only Jay and I know.’

As long as Isabel was inside the warehouse, this place was the safest place.

“Why, why are you locking me up in the reflection room? Open it for me. Mother, Mother!”

Isabel, who had fallen asleep after struggling, opened her eyes.

Her hands were still tied.

And she's still in the boring reflection room that she doesn't even want to see in her dreams.

She found herself stuck in it.

"Isabel. If you keep yelling, I'll use medicine that paralyzes your tongue."

She called Mother with an earnest voice, but Freya didn't come.

Instead, Nicole's voice was heard through the gap in the window.

"It's no use doing anything. Jen and Karen can't help you. Because I informed Grace of the plot you were plotting."

Grace was originally a woman of great position with hunting skills.

There is no way she'll let petty criminals in the abandoned mine go after her-- that was Nicole's prediction.

"Ha, do you think Grace will believe you?"

Isabel's mask collapsed. She screamed loudly.

"I told Grace that you are a nutcase. The next time she sees you, she'll shoot you."

"I may have a chance to meet her, but you won't. Stupid Isabel. We're leaving you here."

"..... you're leaving me here?"

Isabel's eyes got bigger.

"Yeah. I'll give you sleeping pills before we leave here. With medicine to sleep well for a week. And when you open your eyes, you will be left alone here."

They'll leave me alone in this dark mountain house?

If her whole family leaves her behind, then she might be attacked by wild animals?

Isabel originally intended to leave her family behind.

But she will be abandoned in the mountains with her bare body.

'How can I be abandoned? I don't want to!'

Isabel was terrified.

"Mother won't abandon me. That can't be true!"

"But you tried to kill Mother. Do you think we'll let you near her? Even if she tries to forgive you and take you with us, she won't be able to because she's powerless."

Nicole told the reality in a cold voice.

“I’m going to make it that way.”

“You said you didn’t want to rot and die in the countryside, either. Trust Isabel. I did it to find my brother and sister’s way of life! You thought the same thing as me deep inside!”

“⟨ You’re not yet ⟩ good at lying. You.”

“..... what?”

“A way to live. Yes. Maybe you’re right. I always thought, ‘Isn’t Mother actually a person of great status?’ Then naturally, my thoughts continued like this. ‘Isn’t Mother the reason why we’re hiding here?’”

Nicole approached the door as if she were going to put her lips on it, and said softly to the gap.

“In addition, she controls us and never lets us get out of here. I think it’s Mother’s fault. Father is a gentle person, so he always follows Mother well. That’s why I was thinking. ⟨ If my mother dies, I can get out of here. ⟩”

“.....”

“But I need money to leave. Is there any way to make a fortune and abandon my family at the same time? It’s better if Mother dies before then. I don’t think it’s gonna be hard.”

Nicole spoke as if it was her own mind. But it was all hitting Isabel’s heart.

“And I think I can do anything if I go out to the outside world. Everyone will like me. I think I can easily take Karen and Jen as my subordinates with my talent.”

“.....”

“Is this what you’re thinking? Did I really think the same as you? Did I plot as cheap as you?”

Isabel, who was on the defensive, could not answer a word. Eventually, Isabel, who was in a cold sweat, began to beg.

“Sister, Isabel will join you in your plan to rob Grace’s house. Huh? Let’s all leave together with a lot of money.”

“Do you want to join me?”

Nicole’s voice gave a faint laugh.

“It was better when you were just a child leaning on me, Isabel. What a ridiculous thing to say.”

Nicole pulled herself out of the window without hesitation.

“There is no dinner. I’ve been in charge of meals in this house for a long time.”

She said. It was not her words that were uttered affectionately as usual.

“I’ll say goodbye. We won’t meet anymore.”

“.....”

“Once we meet again, you will have to pay all your debts, including for the time you’re not aware of. Before that, I’ll pay you back just as much as I owe you this time.”

Nicole reached through the window.

And sprinkled something over Isabel's body.

"Oh, it stings. What's this!"

cried Isabel in surprise

"It's the poisonous powder you gave me as a gift. Of course, I improved it a little bit more specifically. Whatever you do  
—"

*You are no better than me.*

Nicole whispered.

"Ah, ah, ah!"

Isabel rolled around and started screaming. Her whole body was itching like crazy.

'She can make a medicine that causes skin diseases with poisonous powder?'

At that moment Isabel thought. When did Nicole's pharmaceutical skills improve so much?

"By the way, I asked Jay to fix the window. So I can lock the door tight outside. Good night, Isabel. Your tongue will be paralyzed soon. I don't want to hear your loud screams or your lies anymore."

Nicole left the last word, locking the window tightly from the outside.

Soon Isabel's tongue hardened, and Isabel began to crawl on the floor like a bug and sob.

But no one came to find Isabel.

*Click. Ring*

Grace loaded the shotgun.

“One of the sisters is lying.”

Nicole asked her several times to look carefully.

‘This grass, it’s suspicious..... My servants only give the cows grain or hay.’

Grace found a strange-looking dried grass in the cow’s barn this morning.

It was only found on the floor of the manger.

She smelled something bitter.

⟨ Madam, around here, when a cow tries to graze on such grass, the cow is slapped on the back to prevent it. Who did such mischief? ⟩

When she asked the maid who came to work in the morning, she replied that it seemed to be a poisonous plant.

Grace used to feel infinitely weak when she saw a beautiful girl who was similar in age to her dead daughter.

But that weakness didn't mean she was stupid.

She responded faster than anyone else to threats to herself and those who challenged her authority.

Grace came from a place where she could only survive. She was once a top authority on both secret intelligence services.

“Maybe they’re both having a disagreement. Silly children are playing with me.”

First, she should look at the people that live near the abandoned mine that was aiming for me. And...

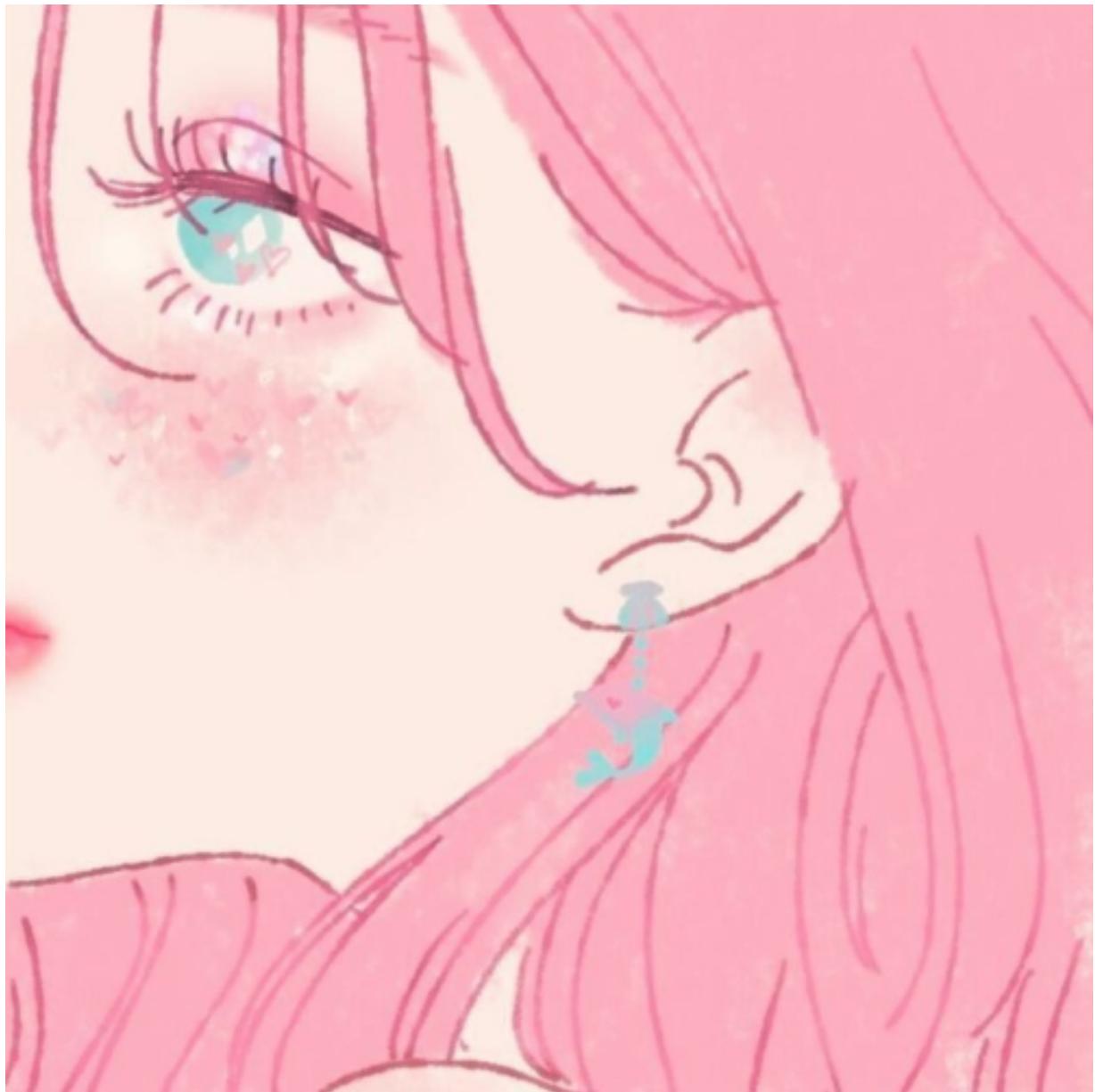
“Whoever deceived me should be punished. Either one or two.”

*Thump thump.*

She stepped forward.

Only the stuffed animals saw her off in the bleak mansion.

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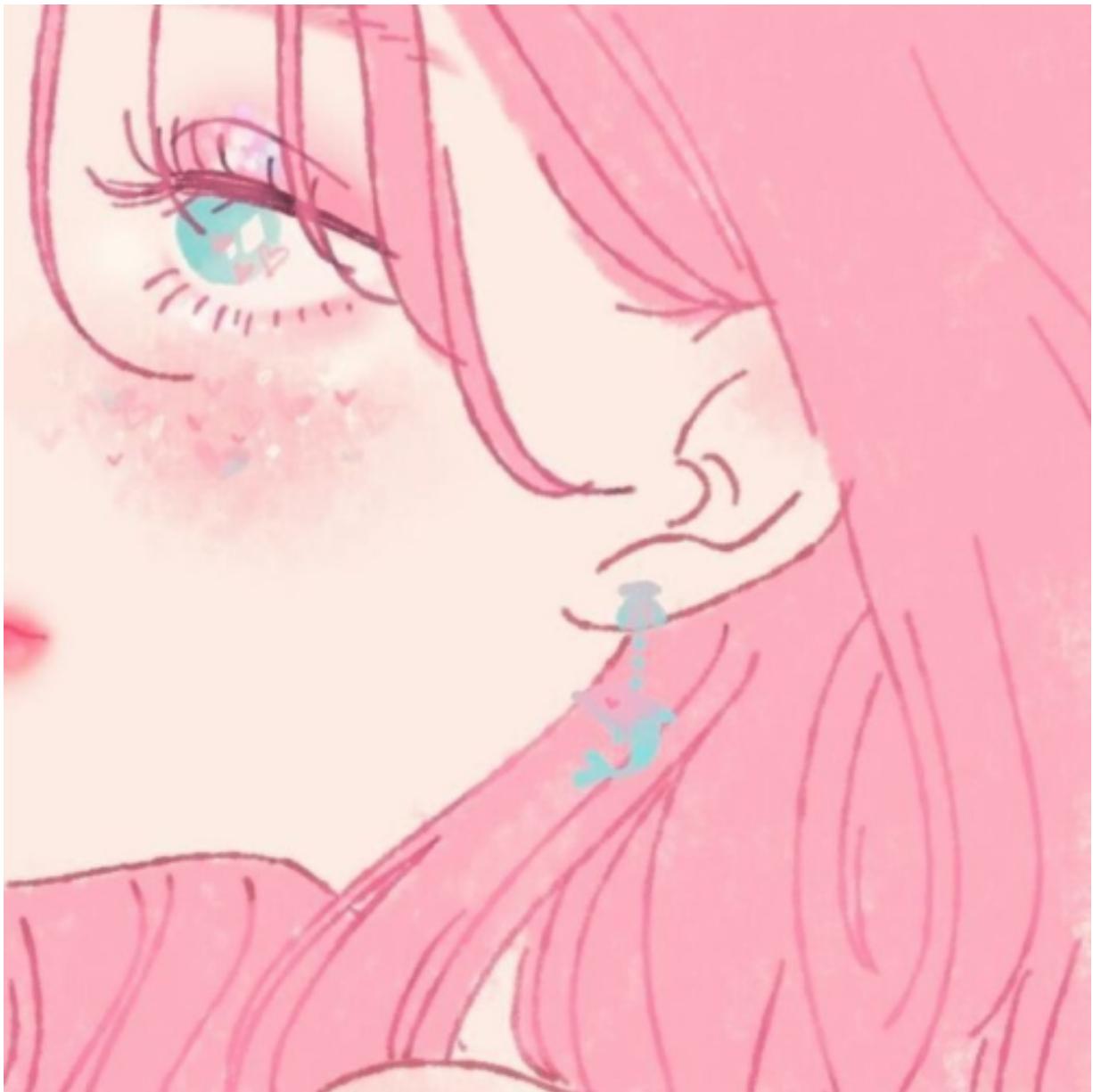


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# **Chapter 24**

‘Tomorrow morning..... It’s dangerous, but I’ll have to find Grace.’

She couldn’t visit her in person because Raul was nearby.

Nicole packed up in a hurry and felt deeply tired.

‘Raul was around here. When should we move?’

But it was difficult to leave right away.

Freya's condition was surprisingly serious that night.

Sometimes her consciousness was blurred and she even talked nonsense.

"Mother, I'm sorry. But I couldn't help it."

"Why are you sorry? My daughter."

Freya said quietly.

“I’d rather..... If I’ve hidden this.....”

“It’s not your fault. You handled it very well. Everything.”

“.....”

“Don’t ever doubt yourself no matter what happens from now on. Your judgment is right, and that’s our family’s way of living.”

Freya squeezed Nicole’s wrist. It was mysterious where such strength came from.

“Remember, you have to protect our family. Please....”

Freya said.

"Mother, please. Tell me everything you know. It's better if I know everything. To prepare for what's going to happen."

Freya barely nodded. Over the course of that night, Freya awoke repeatedly from unconsciousness.

When she was in good condition, she told her all the secrets about the family.

There were facts that Nicole already knew and information that she didn't know.

"Nicole... There's something you need to know more than anything."

Freya called Nicole to her side when she was most conscious. As Nicole leaned down, Freya whispered to her and told her something.

Nicole's eyes widened when she heard Freya's whisper.

A long night has passed. It was not until dawn that Nicole curled up in her chair and managed to fall asleep.

How long has it been?

She suddenly felt strange in my sleep.

**⟨Kyahahahahah!⟩**

Outside, someone laughed and ran wild.

It was like the devil's laugh from hell.

'It's so hot. It's hot.....'

Why is she out of breath?

Nicole opened her eyes with difficulty. The room was filled with acrid smoke.

At that moment, Nicole's heart sank at the realization.

'The house is on fire.'

She looked for Mother in a hurry.

Freya had a pale face and was breathing faintly in bed.

"Mother, wake up! We have to get out of here! There's a fire!"

"Noona!"

"Jay!"

Nicole coughed and coughed.

Smoke rose everywhere. Jay ran into the room and picked Freya up.

She couldn't remember what happened after that.

Jay ran to the front door with Freya on his back. Flames flared everywhere.

It was not a big house, so it would be quick to get to the door. But why do those steps feel so long?

Something fluttered before her eyes as she heard something. Her skin was hot.

⟨Kyahahahhahah!⟩

Once again, she heard laughter outside. Nicole recognized the sound of laughter.

It was Karen's voice.

'Window!'

Nicole saw a girl standing far away before the fire spread through the window.

There was no laughter in Isabel's eyes as she looked at the house.

Chang—

Isabel threw something into the garden.

Then she turned around and started running. Two other figures were running in front of her.

'Karen, Jen, and Isabel are running away.....'

At that moment, another thought came to mind at the same time.

Isabel locked us in a house on fire

What Isabel just threw was the key.

It's to show Nicole the locked the door.

Hwareuk—

Fire began to approach the front door.

Jay, holding Nicole and the fainted Freya, stood at the door and was at a loss.

Click—

Grace, with a loaded martan gun, was dressed in hunting clothes.

Her elegant face made her age impossible to guess. Her creepy expression glistening in the moonlight made her look even more beautiful.

“The rat must have run away.”

She came to the cabin as Nicole had written in her letter to organize it from here.

She was going to deal with Karen and Jen. But as if people had stayed there until just now, the living cabin was empty.

“Since they emptied their nest, it will be a hunt then.”

After chuckling low, she began to walk slowly toward the forest where the moonlight still permeated.

As expected, she was more used to hunting people.

‘Stupid idiots! How dare they lock me up? My whole body was itchy until dawn and I thought I was going to die.’

Isabel chuckled. And she walked with her back to the house that had started to burn.

“It’s lucky that Karen and Jen came!”

Karen, who has a good sense of intuition, says she’s felt a cold sensation since this morning.

So she didn’t stay in the cabin and wandered around.

It was such a lucky day. This is because Isabel could not inform Grace in advance that she had noticed Karen and Jen’s presence.

‘And something was a bit off.’

Jen mingled in the crowd this morning with his face covered.

It was to see what happened to children with milk sickness.

But the result was unexpected.

The children's diarrhea was being treated, and Grace's servant no longer brought milk and sold it.

Feeling something strange, Jen snooped near Isabel's house, wondering if there was any way to discuss it with Isabel.

〈If you don't see me for a few days, open the door to our warehouse and help me escape.〉

Isabel had asked them to do so several times before.

A few days ago, Karen gave Isabel a small present.

It was a whistle.

At first, it sounded like a bird crying at night, but it was a very sharp and far-reaching sound.

Isabel was smart.

So she hid the flute in the warehouse because she was afraid of being locked up for wandering outside.

It was easy to hide because it was a small item that could be hung around the neck.

And she was really locked up in the warehouse.

Her hands were tied and her tongue was hardened.

However, Isabel moved her body little by little and got her hands on the hidden flute.

Soon after, when she felt a movement outside, she blew the flute with her nose with all her strength.

Her teeth gritted at the thought of being subjected to all sorts of ugly things. She looked like a worm.

‘Fortunately, my tongue had loosened by then.’

As time passed, the paralysis was relieved and she could speak.

“For locking you up, those things deserve to die.”

When Isabel escaped, Karen and Jen’s first job was to collect all the firewood and oil behind the house and light the house.

“I’m going to kill you. I’m going to kill you.”

Isabel gritted her teeth.

To burn and die as painfully as possible. It was the most fitting end for her family.

“There is no time for this. I’ve given it a shot this time anyway. Let’s go to the city.”

Karen understood the word.

Isabel was smart. She memorized recipes for many drugs and poisons, including hallucinogens.

If this turned out wrong, Isabel would go to the city and make illegal drugs and Karen and Jen would sell them instead.

"Whoa, the killer hallucinogen you made, you'll make a lot of money. Don't worry. There's nothing we can't do."

Karen flirted and held Isabel's hands. Isabel walked with them along the forest path.

Jen said foolishly, scratching his head.

"Hey, the fire is getting bigger and bigger. What if there's a forest fire?"

"Then it will die off by itself. It often rains in the mountains."

Karen said.

“And what does it matter? Even if this mountain burns, it’s not ours. If we leave before then.....”

It was that moment.

Ping—

There was a small noise somewhere. It sounded like a person.

Isabel felt something strange spreading on her fingertips. And the next moment.....

“Argh! Argh!

Karen, who was holding her hand, fell to the floor.

“Karen, Karen!”

Jen bent over to Karen. Karen was bleeding in the middle of her forehead.

“Shut up!”

Crush, crunch—

A tall woman whose age is hard to guess approached.

There was an elegant smile around her mouth.

“This mountain is mine. It’s right for you to die if you touch someone else’s private property.”

“You witch! What are you doing!”

Jen’s face grew red and jumped at her. But she kicked Jen who was running.

Then she put the gun exactly on Jen’s head and pulled the trigger.

“Kyaaaahhh!”

Jen fell to the floor bleeding. His body trembled and soon drooped.

“Oh, oh, oh...”

Isabel crumbled to the floor.

Grace looked at Isabel with disgust and kicked her in the stomach.

“Ugh! Grace. Well, for me. I’m—”

“Shut up.”

Isabel collapsed just like that.

Towards the burning house, she pointed a shotgun at the front door.

Taaang--

The bullet hit the doorknob exactly.

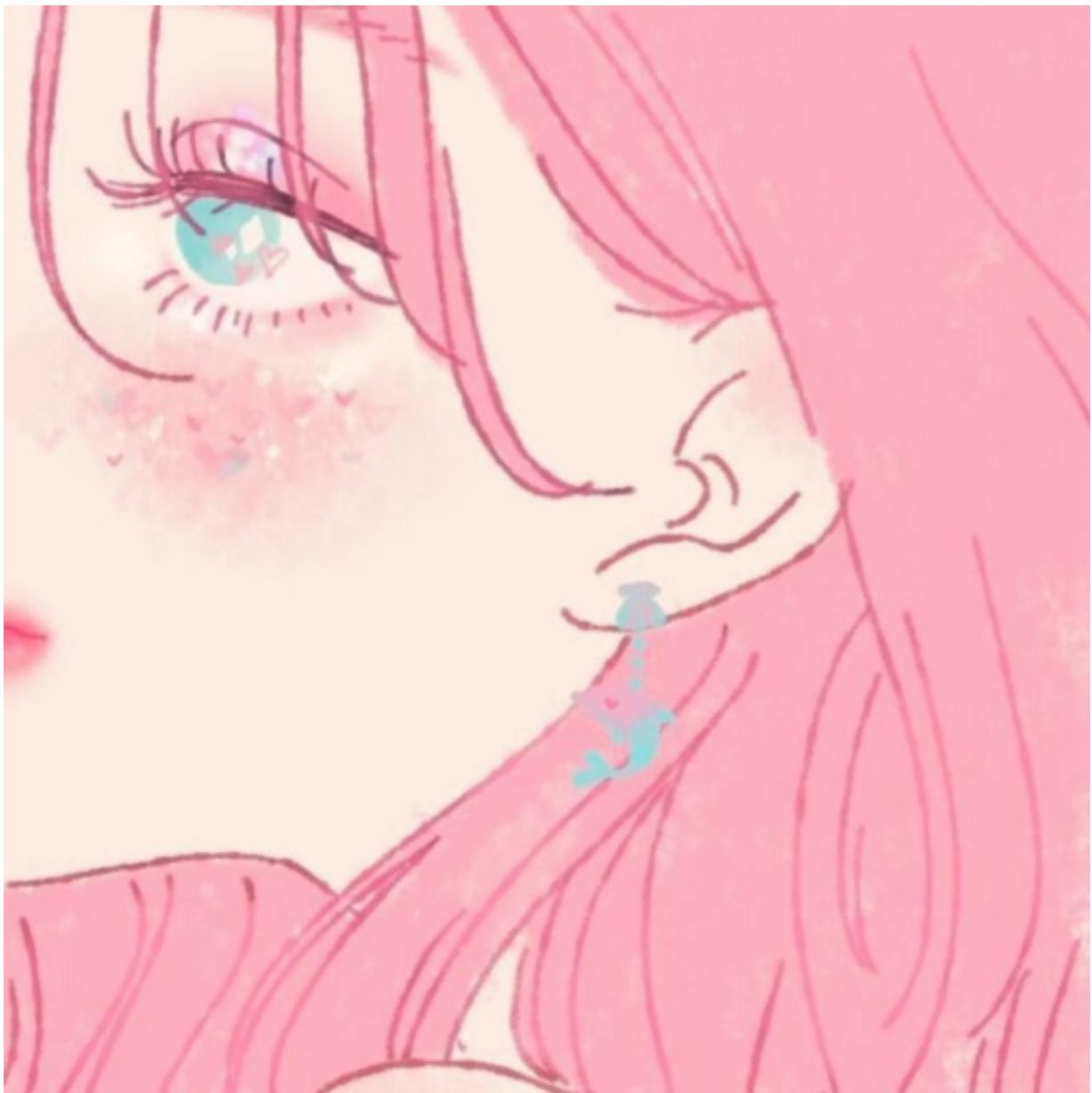
“You shouldn’t lock people in your house and set them on fire.”

She said as she clicked her tongue.

Soon people ran out of the house. It was Nicole’s group.

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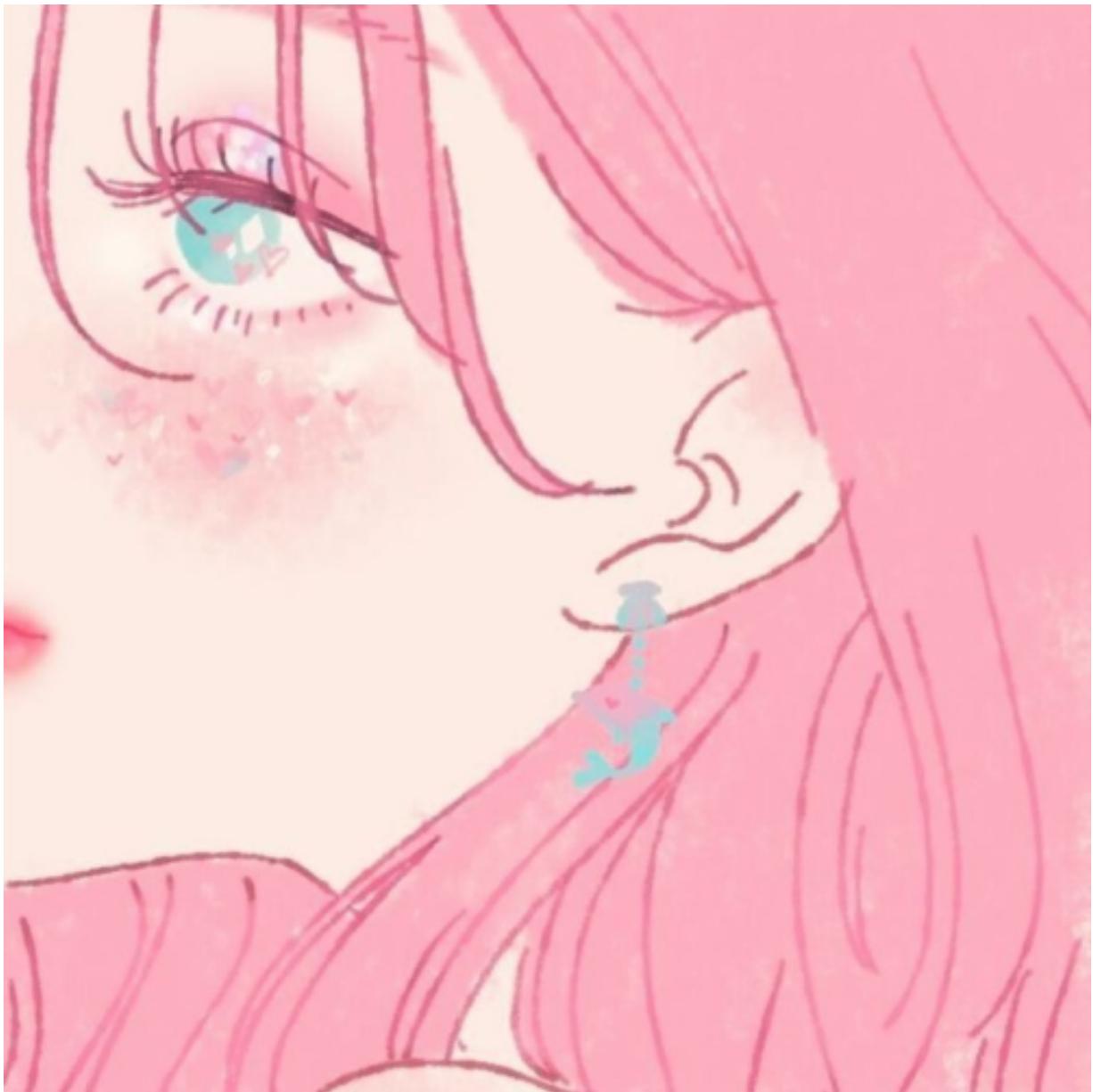


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# Chapter 25

“Noona, the door won’t open!”

“Cough, cough!”

How much did she shake the door while holding the doorknob?

Suddenly there was a gunshot, and the door burst open.

Nicole and Jay quickly moved out.

“Gasp, gasp.....”

The two went as far away from the house as possible.

Fortunately, no one was seriously injured because they were not locked up for a long time.

Her mother, whom she was carrying on her back, was injured by the fire, but it was not a serious burn.

They sank to the floor. Her lungs seemed to be filled with black smoke. She coughed for a long time and barely breathed.

The fresh air in the forest brought her to her senses.

And Nicole looked up. Isabel, who had turned pale, was in front of her.

“Isabel, you!”

It was then. Someone standing behind Isabel’s back slowly turned the gun and pointed it at Nicole.

Looking at it, Isabel had her hands up. And Grace with her gun was threatening Isabel from behind.

“Stand up, Nicole.”

Grace said coldly.

“Noona, do you know her?”

Nicole tried to nod her head calmly.

“Yes, that’s Ms. Grace.”

“Then... Did she save us? By shooting at the door?”

Jay said in a tone that is unsure where to be surprised by the embarrassing situation.

“Yes, and I’m thinking about whether to kill you or not.”

Grace said derisively.

“What... Don’t do that! We have done nothing wrong!”

Jay became contemplative and tried to block Nicole.

Nicole barely stood and stopped Jay.

“Let’s walk first. I don’t like this place.”

Grace said gracefully. Nicole realized that her tone was her true self.

“Follow me.”

She chinned Jay, too.

Jay, who bit his lips tightly, stumbled along with their mother on his back.

They went slowly into the forest.

They found two men and women bleeding to death near the mouth of the forest.

“Noona, they’re dead.”

Nicole is not surprised.

‘As expected, I was right in my prediction that Karen and Jen would be mercilessly executed by Grace.’

‘Grace was Raul’s teacher. I thought she’d be like that’

Caw, caw—

Birds flew away. Dawn began to break.

Fortunately, the fire did not spread enough to become a forest fire because it was not a windy day.

‘But no matter how remote this place is.....’

Smoke would have begun to be seen in the village. In rural villages, they are sensitive to forest fires. There will be a crowd soon.

Nicole stopped at Grace’s command.

Jay also carefully put his mother down on the ground. And sat next to Freya and supported her upper body.

“Do you know this?”

Grace took something out of her pocket and threw it on the floor.

“It’s a poisonous herb that causes milk disease.”

Nicole said quietly.

“Your sister claims that you fed it to the cow and staged it. And the medicine you gave me was paralytic.”

“.....I have never done that. Believe me.”

Nicole said calmly.

“No, it’s all my sister’s doing. I didn’t do anything wrong. It’s unfair. Help me!”

Isabel finally turned away and cried.

Grace still had her gun pointed at the family.

“It doesn’t matter who lied. For me, it’s best to dispose of all of you. What do you think? I’ve lived in an environment where there are a lot of people who threaten me and I’ve always done this. And I can cover up one or two deaths.”

“No, I don’t want to!”

Isabel realized that Grace meant what she said. She sprang to her feet and tried to escape.

Ping—

Grace shot Isabel without even looking to her right.

Isabel fell flat on the floor.

The magic bullet of the shotgun grazed Isabel's shoulder. As she collapsed, Isabel's shoulder was hit by a stone which made a bone break.

"Ugh, Ugh, Ugh..... Ahhhhhhhh!"

Isabel shed tears.

"If you know manners, don't cut me off."

Grace said quietly. Isabel sobbed and passed out slowly.

"It's a little quiet now. Now, tell me."

Grace looked at Nicole and flicked her gun.

"What is your identity? Did someone send you?"

"No, Madam."

Nicole said. She was trembling all over, too.

"Noona!"

"Stay still, Jay."

Nicole said quietly.

"Your excuse for hiding and living here due to debt is good. I need to know who tried to kill me. So tell me. If you don't, I'll hand you over to the authorities."

Nicole slowly raised her head. And she took a small deep breath.

Then she looked Grace in the eye. She didn't shy away from her eyes at all.

"I...."

She won't lose anything in this life.

She will no longer watch people with such weapons harm her and her family.

She will respond to it all with her own mouth, and stop it with her own hands.

"I am the eldest daughter of the YvesChapel family, who is branded as a traitor."

Grace's eyes shook. Jay looked at Nicole with a puzzled stare.

"I'm the one who the Prince of Valentine is desperately searching for to prevent his involvement with the imperial family."

"You?"

Grace tilted her head.

"If you were the teacher of Grand Duke Valentine, you would know my mother's face. I have a portrait of my mother when she was young. You can check it out."

Grace slowly turned her head and saw her unconscious mother's face.

Freya was barely able to open her eyes, only breathing out shakily.

Grace's eyes were shaking and full of hesitation.

Eventually, she regained her composure and spoke coolly.

“So you are my disciple’s betrothed. What about it?”

“.....”

Because Grand Duke Valentine has been searching for the Yveschapel family, he will be happy if you get into his hands. Do you think I am in a position to flatter you?”

“No, that’s not it.”

Nicole took a step closer to her. Again she raised her gun.

“Help me.”

“W, why?”

“Y... Your daughter wants to..... I don’t want to die like that poor man did.”

Then Nicole took a step closer. The gun almost touched Nicole’s head. The tip of Grace’s gun trembled.

“If you don’t wish to repay your daughter’s injustice with goodness, kill me now. I don’t want to be taken to the Grand Duke of Valentine and be exploited for politics. I don’t want to die at the hands of those terrible imperial people.”

Nicole rummaged in her arms. Then she took out a small rocket.

There was a small piece of paper folded several times in it. Nicole held out the paper.

“Grace, it’s a letter from your daughter. You don’t have to believe me. But please read this and think about it.”

Grace finally remembered her dream. Two nights ago, she had a dream about her daughter.

It was the night when she slept with the incense that Nicole gave her.

Her daughter stood by her bed and kept staring at her blankly.

Siena is one step closer. And she kept trying to hand something over to her.

Like Nicole now.

Grace put the gun down for a moment. And she took the letter with trembling hands. It was Siena's short will.

*(Mother,*

*Sith's agents told me to leave a will on what I cherish most, in case I die.*

*It's true that I long for Prince Valentine, but that's not why I joined the army.*

*Don't worry. I am working as a knight with patriotism and a good heart.*

*I hope you don't forget what I wrote in this letter even if I leave my mother first one day.*

*Don't hate anyone*

*If you love me*

*Because you miss me.... Please repay the injustice and hate with kindness.*

*Heal your mind by helping someone.*

*No matter where I am or at any time, I will definitely go back to my mother someday.*

*I love you, mother.)*

Tears fell from Grace's eyes. This was definitely Siena's handwriting.

Sienna learned the arts when she was young. So she had excellent drawing skills, and she knew how to sign in detail that no one could copy.

Whenever she sent a letter to Grace, there was a signature made for her mother, who had an occupational disease, in case she doubted the authenticity of the letter.

The signature was clearly written in the letter.

"Why do you have this letter?"

"It was..... I was touching the orgel on the altar and found this note in a hidden space at the bottom of the orgel. I accidentally dropped the note on the floor, and I picked it up and kept it. I had planned to give you the note last time I saw you, but ..... I couldn't give it to you because I had work to do."

Nicole replied. But that was a lie.

The day she left her letter at Grace's house. Nicole sneaked into the house. Then, she opened the bottom of the orgel and found Sienna's letter.

Then, she left her letter in front of the house and rang the bell.

It was in her previous life that Nicole learned about this letter.

In her past life, the orgel was given to Nicole. Nicole would often open the music box to listen to music.

Then she happened to know that there was a secret compartment at the bottom of the orgel, where she could store jewelry and various small props.

'When I opened the secret compartment, there was this note inside.'

It was a great coincidence that she found this note in her last life.

"A letter from Sienna..."

Shocked, Grace's gun fell to the floor.

"Please, help me. Grace."

Nicole took advantage of Grace's vulnerability and begged again.

"Cough, cough."

Then Freya opened her eyes. Freya, who barely came to her senses, was confused at the sight of her surroundings.

Grace approached Freya and asked

"She says she's the eldest daughter of YvesChapel."

".....!"

"Is she telling the truth? And are you the heir to Yveschapel?"

Freya's eyes were filled with fear.

"Mother."

Nicole approached Freya and briefly informed her of their situation.

That Grace saved them. And that she told her who she was and asked for help.

Grace looked down at Freya with eyes asking for an answer.

Freya nodded helplessly.

Jay closed his eyes tightly and hugged her even more.

"If you're... if you're someone I know..... Ms. Grace, then..... I think you know how to do it now."

"We can't make it out tonight....."

Grace seemed to understand the meaning of her words. For a few seconds, she closed her eyes.

Isabel's grunts. The sound of a fire burning an ominous sound of the wind

She slowly opened her eyes.

"You."

Grace pointed to Jay.

"Leave your mother under the tree for a while. And move this body to your house. You, too!"

Nicole did as she said.

Jay also faltered. They staggered and carried Karen and Jen's bodies as they were told.

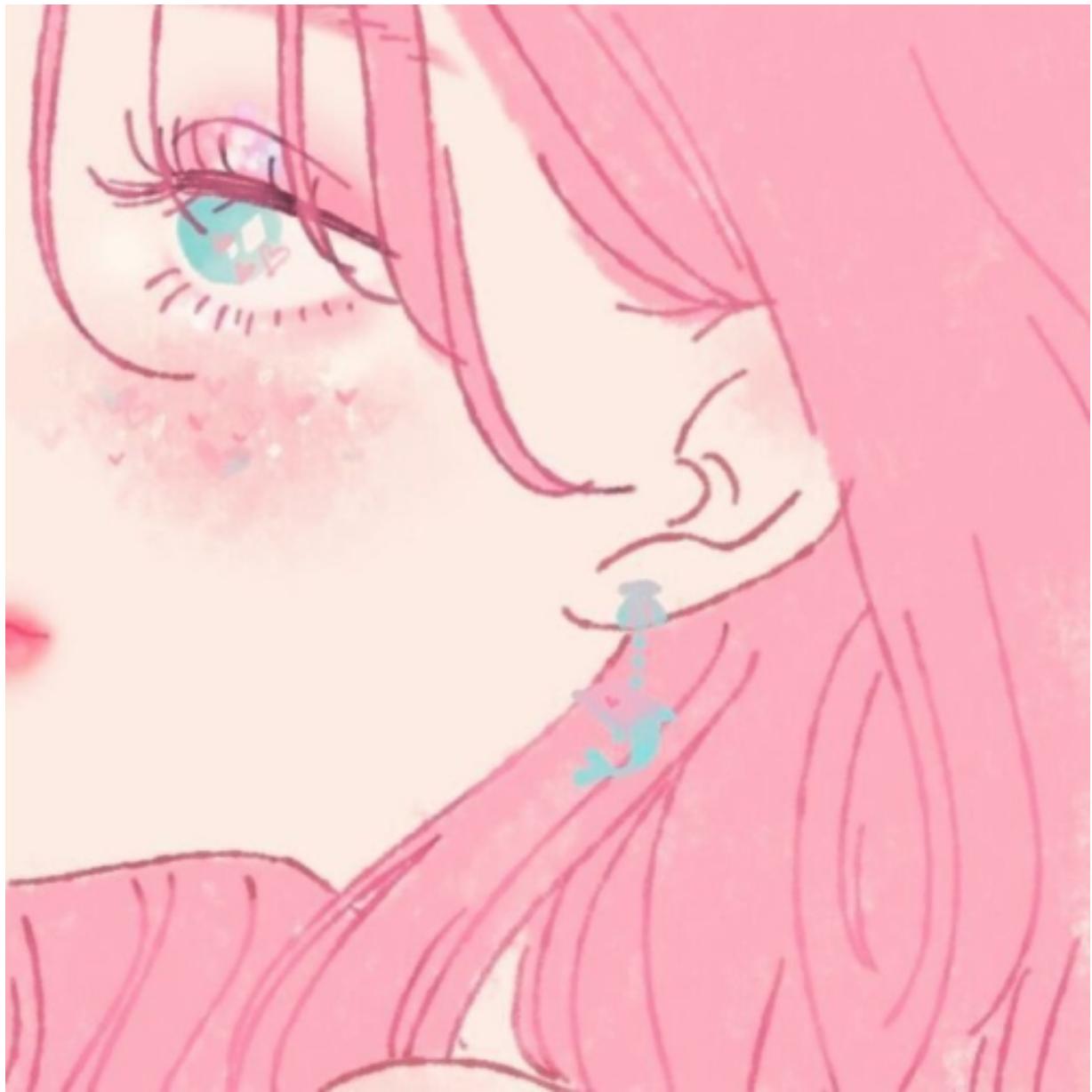
"Go back to the burning house. Why?"

Jay said as if possessed.

"It's dangerous over there."

"Someone should die on your behalf."

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# Chapter 26

Like people who lived in this house and died in a fire.

Then even if someone finds this place, they won't notice that they ran away.

"Take off their tops."

Grace ordered quickly. Both were wearing vests.

Jay hurriedly took off Karen and Jen's vests. It was strange seeing their dead bodies in the middle of the night being undressed.

Nicole and Jay shuddered and threw the body into the house.

The house was burning and they felt a burning sensation all over their bodies.

"These two hid in the cabin near the abandoned mine?"

"Yes, that's right."

Nicole managed to answer. Smoke filled her lungs and she felt faint.

"You two run away there."

"I can't leave my mother behind."

Cried Jay.

"Do as you are told. I've tied up the horse I ride here. That's only one horse, so I'll take your mother to the mansion and give her first aid. You go through Karen and Jen's belongings and get their IDs."

"....."

Nicole now understands what she means. No, she knew it from the beginning.....

It was Grace's plan to swap Karen and Jen for the two of them.

"It's like an opportunity God has prepared for you."

Jen and Karen were actually siblings, and they were about the same age. They may be criminals, but at least they weren't of traitorous descent.

"Are you scared? If you don't like these methods, don't even think about getting my help. And I'm only helping you in order not to repeat my daughter's tragedy, and to give a blow to my disciple, Prince Valentine, who neglected her death."

Grabbing the hesitant Nicole by the collar, Grace whispered.

"Will you do as you're told?"

"I will. Please take good care of my mother."

"I could feel the wind blowing. Now we have to go down to town. And...."

Grace twisted her mouth and said.

“Raul, he’s coming. If that fire spreads into a forest fire, he’s the only one who can handle this.”

Nicole nodded. She knew it too.

“Isabel is missing!”

Then Jay shouted. There was no sign of Isabel where she had fallen.

Nicole bit her lip.

‘Isabel, you rat. It’s just like you.’

While they were busy disposing of the body, she ran away.

But there was no time for Isabel.

“I have a favor to ask of you. There’s luggage that I hid in the forest. It’s from the Yveschapel family. Can you take it for me?”

Grace replied that she would.

Nicole quickly disclosed where she had hidden the luggage.

Then they hurriedly moved.

“Take care of my mother.”

Nicole looked back at Freya several times and ran to the cabin near the abandoned mine.

Grace and Freya did not move as they looked at where the two had left.

Freya leaned against the wooden lantern and looked at Grace quietly.

"How far do you know...? Our family's situation....."

"I don't know anything. Even though I belong to the Imperial Intelligence Agency, the secret about your family, which is the "perpetrator of ability," has not been disclosed."

Grace's tone changed after she was convinced of Freya's identity.

Sith, in her words, is the name given to the Knights and the Secret Intelligence Service of the Grand Duke.

Likewise, the royal family has a secret intelligence service.

Grace held high positions in both institutions.

Freya did not know about the Sith or the Imperial Intelligence Agency, but understood Grace's words.

"Never, my children..... My children shouldn't be in their hands. My parents... I can't let them suffer the same way as my family did....."

Freya beckoned Grace. It was a desperate plea.

It became apparent to Grace that Freya was dying.

She was already sick in the first place. And with the amount of smoke she inhaled from the fire and the trauma she suffered tonight, Freya was already at her limit.

'Isabel, you're such a horrible girl. You did this to your parents.'

Isabel is trying to kill them. Grace was sure.

Grace leaned over Freya. Freya vented a few words into Grace's ear.

"Will you help us?"

"..... Won't you regret it?"

Grace helped her. Freya shook her head weakly.

"I will take good care of your daughter."

Grace treated Freya with respect.

Grace wanted to pay tribute to Freya as a mother like herself.

"As I missed my daughter, what can I do if your daughter says she doesn't want to die the same way as mine?"

"Thanks to you, I will leave this world with hope. I'm so grateful. I can't believe such an incredible person is helping my daughter."

Freya said.

"I was really stupid. I loved my husband, but we were both immature. I wanted to protect them, but I had no strength or ability."

She continued in a low voice.

"Nicole... My eldest daughter is a very smart child."

"Yeah, she played with me slyly. I tried to take care of Karen and Jen by my own hand. And she's got me all over the place. Looking like my daughter..... I was going to kill her because I thought I'd been caught up in such a hassle."

Grace grumbled. Freya smiled faintly.

“Until now, Nicole didn’t know her true value. Even I had forgotten how clever she was. She knew this would happen, so she packed our things in advance. Thanks to her, I am able to rest with my valuables on my body just in case.”

Freya held out her parched hand. There was a loose ring on her finger.

A ring given only to the seven great families of the Empire.

The ring is the same kind as the one handed down to the Grand Duke of Valentine and was engraved with the emblem of the Yveschapel family.

This was a magical tool from the imperial family a long time ago.

“Only the owner and the person with the owner’s permission can read the contents of this ring. You know that, right?”

“All seven great families have it, I know.”

“I need a pen and paper. Could you bring it to me?”

The paper and pen she usually carries on her saddle were brought by Grace.

Freya struggled to write.

She is a sinner who lived in hiding for fear of the imperial family for a long time.

As soon as she heard that Prince Valentine was near today, she was so terrified that she decided to leave the world.

⟨It was my two children who slept in the cabin.....⟩

Freya wrote a false will.

It was a letter saying that the descendant of the traitor killed her own children and set fire to their house. This was because she was tired of their life living in hiding.

And Freya made the ring recognize the contents of the letter.

The ring was not damaged by the fire nor with heavy impact.

Besides, it's not accessible to just anyone, so it'll prove her identity.

When the fire goes out, people will find the bodies of Jen, Karen, and Freya.

'That's enough. My children will be treated as dead. They'll mistake the bodies of those two for my children.'

Finally, my children get their freedom. Even Isabel who abandoned her.

"I'm dying soon."

Freya said. And with Grace's help, she hung a long white cloth on the tree at the entrance of the house.

"When I close my eyes....."

"I will stage your suicide."

Grace said.

"Never let my children blame you. I'm dead because..... It's because of my illness..... I can't see them with my eyes anymore. Since you're a mother, you understand."

"You've been running away for a long time and survived. Won't you regret it?"

"Why would I regret it? I'm... I'm glad. I should have done this earlier. As a parent, it would be a great pleasure to sacrifice and die for your child."

Freya, who was looking at Grace, nodded.

As soon as she closed her eyes, she remembered her beloved husband. Their life of fleeing passed like a flash.

Then... a happy memory came to mind.

The moment their children were born. The moment they were in their arms. The happiness of seeing their growing children.....

'Nicole, I'm sorry.'

The last face that came to her mind was somehow Nicole's.

'Your mother was such a fool. Embrace your emotions and be greedy for anything..... As I grew up, I only learned from my parents, so I raised you the same way.'

Nicole stuck like a sore finger as she was their first child.

'I reasoned that it was my first time. I didn't know how to make you happy because I only thought about not losing you.'

She poured her love on her second and third children, something she couldn't do for Nicole.

'If you're going to be born as a child of another family in the next life, do so. But if you were to be born again as my child,

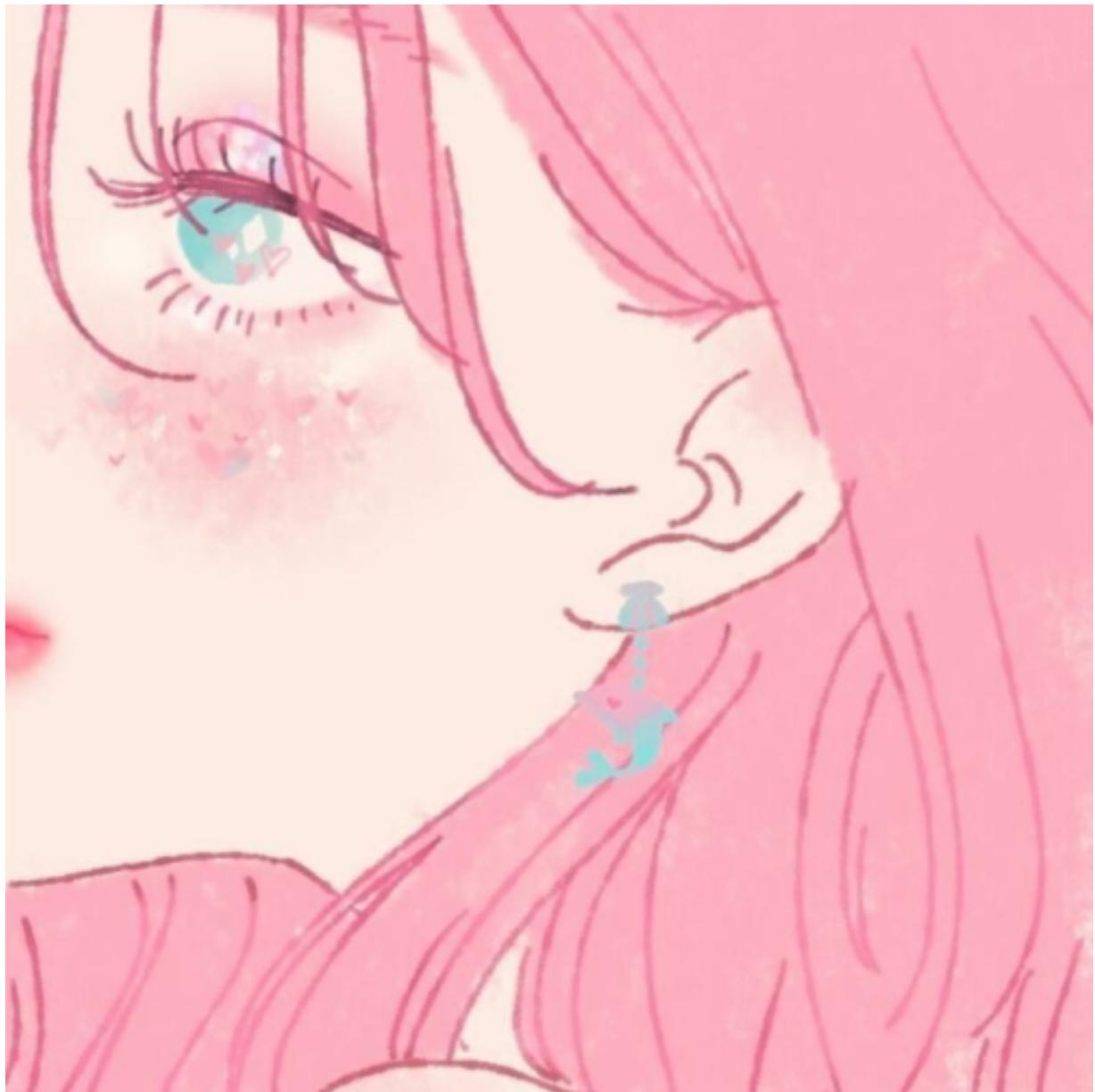
if I could..... I'd really do better then. I'll do my best to make you happy then. My daughter.'

Freya closed her eyes thinking so. Grace looked at Freya, who had died, as if she were asleep.

Then she slowly wrapped Freya's neck around a white cloth.

Now, it was time to make up a clean suicide. Fortunately, Grace was an expert in this kind of work.

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# Chapter 27

Nicole and Jay arrived at the cabin in the abandoned mine, completely exhausted. Nicole has been silent for a while.

Jay didn't look well either. It was even more so because he used healing power on Freya.

Nicole barely opened her mouth and asked.

"Jay, are you okay?"

"Yeah. I can't heal Mother's illness, but at least I could relieve her pain."

"You did your best."

Nicole said.

"More than that, if this gets bigger, the villagers will come here."

"Then..."

"They will investigate why the mountain was on fire. We could be held responsible. So take it easy."

Jay got goosebumps when he heard Nicole's calm words.

'Since when have you been this kind of person?'

She judges the situation calmly and even takes measures. Her calmness made her look a few years older than her actual age.

Nicole and Jay slowly searched the cabin.

“Noona, here.....”

There was a backpack that seemed to belong to Jen and Karen.

Inside, what the siblings were looking for came out.

An identification card of the size of two palms combined. It was issued in the border area.

‘These people are certainly free people.’

Usually, these wanderers do not have proper identities, so this was lucky.

‘Besides, Karen is the same age as me, and Jen is only a year older than Jay.’

Nicole scrambled to tidy up the cabin.

Finally, the fire that night turned into a forest fire.

The house burned down for a very long time, slowly.

It was because the dried wood could not even hold the fire properly.

In the meantime, the fire spread to the forest and grew little by little.

“Is it a forest fire?”

Raul, who was staying in a nearby village, said. In front of him was a complex stack of ledgers and trembling men were kneeling.

All of them have been pocketing the village’s subsidies for a long time.

“Yes, it’s a small forest fire, so it’s so hot.”

“The mountain is where Master lives.”

Raul clicked his tongue.

“I should go there myself. I can fix it. It’s about an hour’s drive by horse.”

“You’d better be careful when you use your ability.”

“Yes. It would be wise to be careful until Master is burned to death.”

Raul said sarcastically. Bastard had a shuddering look.

“By the way, why does he have to deal with such minor corruption? Today, he’s here to investigate money laundering and embezzlement by the upper management group.”

Estok, who was waiting outside, said while watching the men sweating on their knees.

“You don’t know? He usually reprimands other people’s corruption only when he’s in a foul mood. That’s his hobby.”

Another knight standing next to Estok spoke quietly.

“They are still noble.”

Estok poked his tongue out.

“Master is pretty good, too.”

“.....She’s one of the few people who can influence him.”

The previous Duke died early. Raul was orphaned, and the Valentine family was shaken.

At that time, Grace accepted Raul and raised him with dedication.

However, it was said that their relationship fell apart after Sienna, the only daughter Grace loved, grew up and naturally loved Raul.

Raul neither gave her affection nor treated her badly.

However, Sienna was known to have loved Raul excessively, so she did not mind going to the dangerous missions, and eventually died during a mission.

Raul was not at fault in this matter. However, Grace later resented Raul and developed a severe mental disorder.

However, even though resentment remained, they were still like a family.

“What will we do?”

The horse is ready.

Raul came out with Bastard and climbed the horse.

Pointing to the room where he had just emerged, he told Estok calmly just before leaving.

“Choose one and execute him. You’re good at things like that.”

“Why do you give me such a heavy task?”

“We need to set an example everywhere.”

“Well, then..... It can’t be helped. All right, I’ll pick a good one.”

“Oh, don’t kill them gracefully. The example should be cruel.”

Raul said calmly, pulling the reins.

“Yes!”

Estock nodded vigorously.

Then, humming, he entered the room, dragged a chair and sat down.

“Come on, we received 30 testimonies last year, that you held a lavish party with courtesans while the residents of the territories were dying of an epidemic last year. Who do you think should die when the receipt for calling these courtesans is revealed? Who should I pick? Let’s guess.”

“Eup, eup!”

The men who were speechless looked at each other and shouted something.

“What? Who should I pick?”

“Ugh, eup!”

“Let’s not be resentful. Whoever goes, this is also considered a public service. Originally, power and love are similar. The farther away you are, the more relaxed you become. You’re far from central power, so your brains become loose, aren’t you?”

Estok said excitedly.

“Anyway, ignorant people like you think that when the government gives a lot of money for a good cause, it is a chance to pocket it. Besides, it’s so novel that once you start doing it, you can’t stop. Do you know that word? Oh, would you know it since you’re educated?”

Estock grinned and said. Then he pondered.

Wow, my boss. Grand Duke Valentine, what a man. Even though he\* is a village lord, he is kneeling down in front of a knight.

(t/n: he here refers to the corrupt men kneeling earlier)

‘And by the way.....’

Since he asked me to look for an example today.....

“He seems to be in a foul mood. Won’t he be angry at whoever caused the forest fire?”

Estock said. Then he pulled a silk string out of his arms.

Since it’s been a while, he thought it would be better to do a decent strangulation.

Nicole arrived at Grace’s mansion earlier than expected.

A damp wind blew. It seemed likely for the fire to spread into a forest fire. Maybe it's already started.

"This is the house she lives in? How could there be a place like this here?"

Jay's reaction was also similar to when Nicole first discovered the mansion.

"The world has many secrets that we don't know."

Nicole said in a low voice.

But something was wrong. Grace obviously brought her mother here, gave her first aid, and asked to go down to the village with her.

But the house was empty. When Nicole entered the house, only a rustle rang.

"No way."

Nicole hurried up the stairs in the living room.

Nicole knew where valuables were usually stored in these noble houses. It was in the landlady's bedroom.

"Take this jewel, and this....."

Someone murmured. Nicole opened the door to the room believed to be Grace's bedroom.

Inside, Isabel was rummaging around and packing valuables in her bag.

"You, you!"

Isabel raised her head with a start at the sound of the door opening. Even her usual pretty face looked haggard.

“Are you trying to steal Grace’s stuff and run away?”

Nicole had no energy to feel contempt or disgust anymore.

What the hell is wrong with this kid?

“Evil! You tried to kill your own family with Grace’s help. How could you do such a thing?”

However, Isabel did not feel shame, but rather cursed Nicole with a devilish face.

“Evil? Who’s evil?”

Jay, who followed Nicole in a hurry, said. Now Jay’s face was filled with intense hatred and disgust.

“Jay, it’s like that for you. Have you ever trusted Isabel in this situation? You’re only on her side!”\*

(t/n: this is Isabel speaking)

“You tried to kill the whole family. Yet you have the audacity to say that?”

Jay couldn’t hold back any longer and grabbed Isabel by the collar.

“Are you going to hit me? Are you sure?”

Isabel had a tearful look on her face as if she was really innocent.

Jay went blank for a moment. He felt like he was dealing with a monster.

“Don’t deal with her.”

Nicole said. She approached Jay. Isabel squealed as Jay loosened his grip on her collar.

“Brainwashing Jay to bully Isabel! It’s not Isabel who set the fire. Because Mother abused me, that’s why my friends were trying to save Isabel and the misunderstanding grew! Karen set the fire! Isabel is innocent.”

Isabel had no guilt at all while doing evil things.

She truly believed in her excuses as she rationalized her evil deeds.

Now Nicole knows how to deal with Isabel. The key was not to respond.

Tsak!

Nicole slapped Isabel on the cheek. Isabel faltered.

“You!”

Isabel raised her hand. Nicole took her hand and slapped Isabel again on the cheek.

Slap, slap, slap!

Nicole didn’t stop until the blood burst around Isabel’s mouth.

“How can you, you, you.....”

Nicole grabbed Isabel by the collar and pushed her against the cabinet. The cabinet made a bang.

Isabel’s eyes trembled and her beautiful face bled.

“What? I’m not killing you now.”

Nicole whispered without taking her eyes off her.

“It’s because Mother and Father’s blood flows through your body. Today I learned you’re evil beyond my imagination, so next time I see you, I’ll really kill you. In a way you can’t imagine.”

Nicole pressed Isabel on the shoulder. It was her shoulder that was grazed by the magic gun’s bullet.

“Ugh!”

Isabel struggled, but she didn’t let go and continued.

“Forget what you heard today. Even whose descendants you are.”

Isabel’s eyes got bigger.

“Whose descendant is Isabel?”

Nicole was relieved. Isabel was unconscious when she told the story of the Yveschapel family earlier.

She suspected that she pretended to faint since she was Isabel with such a sly stomach. But from her expression right now, Isabel seemed to have heard very little of the important story, since she fainted.

“Whose descendant are you? A descendant of the devil. Would you have done this otherwise?”

Nicole pressed Isabel’s wound more forcefully.

“Ugh, sister, it hurts! It hurts!”

“Leave now. Before I tear that smug face apart.”

‘It will be hard for her to survive after tonight anyway.’

Nicole slapped her face one last time.

Isabel picked up one or two pieces of Grace’s piece that fell on the floor while grinding her teeth and rushed outside.

“Can we let her run away?”

“The forest fire will spread soon, and it will be hard for her to survive.”

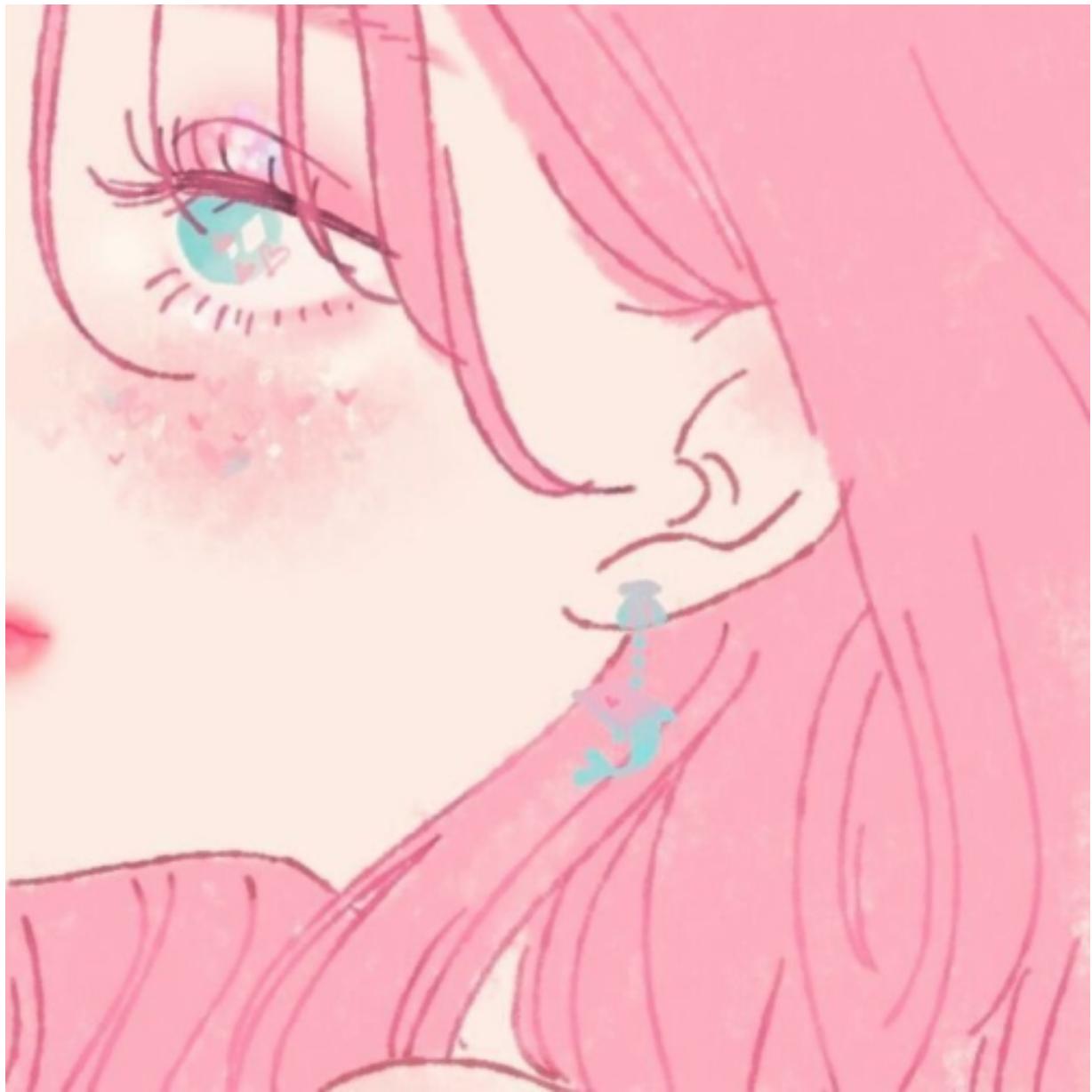
Nicole said calmly. She has committed murder before. If she was as strong as Raul, she would surely have killed her today.

But she meant to kill Isabel when she meets her again.

The dawn broke before they knew it. The haze of dawn was cleared and the morning was beginning.

Nicole stared blankly at the light.

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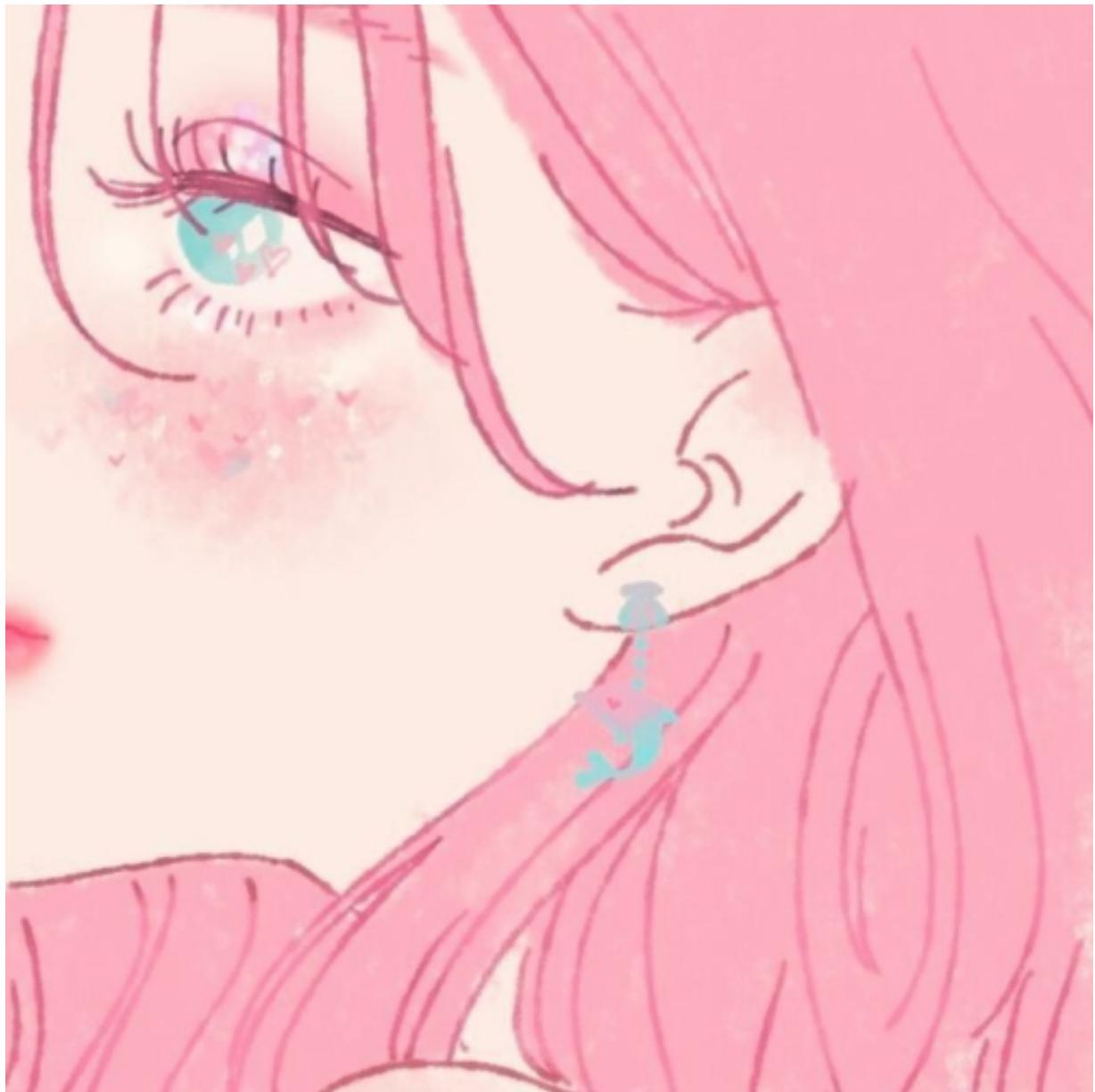


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# Chapter 28

“Heuk, Heuk!”

Isabel hurriedly ran.

Grace, who was riding back on her horse, spotted Isabel.

Grace immediately guessed the situation when she saw Isabel running out of her mansion, along the coniferous trees.

She was stealing from her own house.

Taang—!

Isabel turned her head hurriedly. In the distance, Grace was riding a horse and pointing a shotgun at herself.

“Argh! Help me! Help me!”

Isabel started running in the opposite direction with tears and snot running down her face.

Grace ran after her with her horse. Isabel climbed the mountain almost on all fours.

Huuek—!

The hot wind blew harder. The trees were rubbing against each other, and fire was spreading across the mountain.

'No! Why do I have to suffer through this? It's unfair. I was just trying to live with my friends!'

Grace's shotgun was an object that only a few people in the entire empire could use.

In particular, Grace's shotgun was famous for being able to control sound and power perfectly.

Taang—!

Grace deliberately adjusted the volume and shot into the air.

Isabel then made a grotesque sound and ran further toward the top.

Talseuk—!

Running with tears and a runny nose, she fell to the floor.

The topography of the mountain was flat, but it became rough and erratic just a short distance away from where they lived.

The animals ran in fear at the sound of gunfire. Isabel was run over by a deer and almost died.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Isabel rolled down, without knowing how many times.

Losing her consciousness, the last thing she saw was the cliff.

'No! No!'

Isabel knew where this place was. It was a cliff leading to a deep and rocky valley that Mother prevented them from ever approaching because it was dangerous.

Isabel floundered. But her body was already falling down the cliff.

She was swallowed up by the water, unable to scream.

It was quite a different result from Isabel's splendid and happy future she envisioned.

"What about Mother?"

As soon as Nicole saw Grace coming in alone, she asked in contemplation. Grace shook her head gently.

"Mother..."

Jay looked incredulous.

"Your mother inhaled a lot of smoke and with her sick body she eventually couldn't hold out. She was relieved that you left, saying that she didn't want you to see her close her eyes."

Nicole's eyes darkened.

"Get a hold of yourself."

Grace spoke low.

"You'll have to go down to town."

“The forest fire... ...but my second sister did it.....”

Jay was enraptured, but barely spoke.

“I want to see her body at least. How did she die....?”

“I left her body the way she wished. And she left me a will to tell you never to return to the cabin.”

Jay’s expression was distorted. Nicole’s heart seemed to be torn apart when she saw the boy collapse.

“It’s not something you can take responsibility for. Don’t worry, there’s someone close who can solve this problem.”

Grace sighed and took out her pocket watch.

The watch, which is very luxurious, was marked with a daily date.

“Looking at today’s date, they can definitely solve it.”

“What do you mean by the date...”

Jay asked back blankly. But Nicole understood that.

‘Raul’s ability.’

What shocked Nicole the most about coming out into the outside world in her last life was that there were people in the world with really mysterious abilities.

Such people were treated as noble families.

In the Empire, only seven families had mysterious powers, and Raul the Grand Duke of Valentine was the strongest of them all.

'The great thing about Raul is that he doesn't know the limits of his abilities.'

Even in the Yveschapel family, the abilities of the members of the family were not fully revealed. For example, their healing power is widely known, but their ability to grow plants and poisonous insects is not widely known.

But Raul's ability was different.

Raul sometimes controls the weather, including light rain.

Some time ago, he was even able to stop a huge army with just a small number of people.

He was simply a living miracle. But when asked if he had all those abilities, he always answered vaguely.

'There are times when I have and times when I don't.'

That was his graceful reply.

Nicole only found out later.

His ability to use his power varies from time to time, and the way he could use his ability depending on the time was very complicated and tricky.

Knowing that, she could understand what Grace said while looking at her watch.

'I can't think of anything, Mother.....'

However, Nicole's mind was mixed up, so she couldn't think straight.

She was so shocked that she couldn't think of any other emotion.

She knew she had to let Freya go soon.

But she thought it would be a little different in this life.

In the end, Freya died at the hands of Isabel again this time.

Would the results have been different if she hadn't surprised Mother with the truth?

"What was her last will?"

Nicole tried not to shed tears. It hurt as if someone kept hitting her heart with a big bat.

"Follow me down the mountain. This place is no longer safe."

"....."

The situation is the same in the lower village. Jay's hands trembled with confusion and fear.

He had never been out in a crowded place. So is Nicole in this life.

"I watched your mother's death and she asked me to do her a favor. Such memories are like restraints and oaths. Do you understand? I got involved in this, too."

"Thank you, thank you....."

Nicole barely opened her mouth and said.

"I'll tell you your mother's will while we're on the way. So pull yourself together. Down to the lower village, from now on you are Karen and you are Jen. Got it?"

"Yes."

The two nodded mechanically.

A mother would want her two children to survive.

Now she has to protect Jay. Only the thought of that responsibility made Nicole move like a machine.

Nicole and Jay took Jen and Karen's clothes out of their luggage and changed. Then she took the cloak that Grace had lent her.

It was a cheap cape without any character. Grace said it was something she used to lend to her employees.

"No matter what happens, you shouldn't show your healing power. And don't talk as much as possible."

Nicole whispered to Jay.

"I brought your luggage well, so don't worry."

Grace's saddle was lined with leather pockets. It was all Nicole's stuff.

Grace skillfully fastened the wagon to the horse. It was a small, roofless cart that was commonly used in the countryside.

Fortunately, the road down to the lower village was flat enough to pull the wagon.

Nicole and Jay climbed into the wagon and held their breaths.

Grace climbed into the horse seat.

The wagon carried the legacy of the Yveschapel family, which was hidden in the box.

“There’s a forest fire!”

“I’m sure it’s the wandering people’s fault who were roaming around in the mountains!”

While looking at the forest fire, people gathered at the foot of the mountain near the village entrance and were shaking.

As people came down from the mountain, they looked at them as if looking for someone to blame.

There was one rider and two people on the wagon.

It was natural for people’s eyes to become violent at the sight.

In addition, Nicole and Jay looked more shabby than usual in Karen and Jen’s clothes.

They looked very tired, with soot covering them everywhere as if they just emerged from the fire.

“Did you guys start the fire?”

Someone asked point blank.

“They must have lived in hiding on that mountain. They’re suspicious things.”

People whispered. People with angry eyes gathered.

This region was extremely poor, and the village lord was a man of no status.

‘They’ve been openly exploited for a long time, so the public is in a state of chaos.’

To make matters worse, the capital had no interest in them.

Since there were no taxes collected, the capital had to provide them with money.

The subsidies were all embezzled, and even that fact was revealed only afterward.

These people whose lives were so impoverished were constantly looking for scapegoats.

'In my previous life, Grace was witch hunted..... The reason why they killed her with such an uncivilized method was because their circumstances were so cruel.'

They live near the forest. They won't let them go unless they catch the culprit who set the mountain on fire.

"They didn't start the fire. It's very irrelevant."

Grace said as if she was dumbfounded.

Grace was a noble who didn't ignore others, but she didn't know the way these rural people thought because she lived alone in a remote place.

"What do you know!"

Grace, however, was dressed in expensive clothes and looked nothing like an ordinary person.

There happened to be people who recognized Grace.

"She's the lady living in the mountains, isn't she?"

"That's right. She owns a lot of land on that mountain."

"She handed out milk and gave us silver coins."

They were the servants and maids Grace hired from the village.

They couldn't prove Grace's words because they weren't at work today, but they built a relationship of trust enough to warrant her identity.

The eyes of the people looking at Grace softened.

"What about them?"

"Are they the children of that lady?"

"No, there are no children in the house."

"They look like tramps."

Nicole and Jay lowered their cloaked faces even more.

"They're a strange face, pull them out!"

"We'll see if they caused the fire."

Eventually, people surrounded the wagon.

"Stop it! Didn't I say these kids were innocent? Why are you doubting these kids recklessly?"

"That kind of forest fire doesn't just happen. A few years ago, wandering bandits started a forest fire while drinking and playing."

But people didn't even listen.

Grace recalled the martan gun hidden under the wagon.

However, they are not in the mountains now and the number of villagers was large.

In addition, even Grace could not shoot other people at will.

It would ignite their madness even more if they did it carelessly.

“Ah!”

People grabbed Nicole and pulled her out.

Then the hood came off and Nicole’s beautiful face was revealed. Greed flashed in the eyes of the men.

“I’m going to take this girl and interrogate her myself.”

“Stop! Don’t touch my sister!”

Jay said and shook the man’s hand. However, his hands were trembling because he was surrounded by many people for the first time in his life.

‘No.’

Nicole felt a slight dizziness.

The execution of her previous life came to mind.

The sight of a lot of people surrounding her and screaming for her to die.

It was then.

“Stop.”

Someone said, people have become as quiet as a lie.

The speaker’s voice was not loud. However, it was calm and clear, attracting people’s attention even in such a noisy place.

Soon there was the sound of horse hoofs.

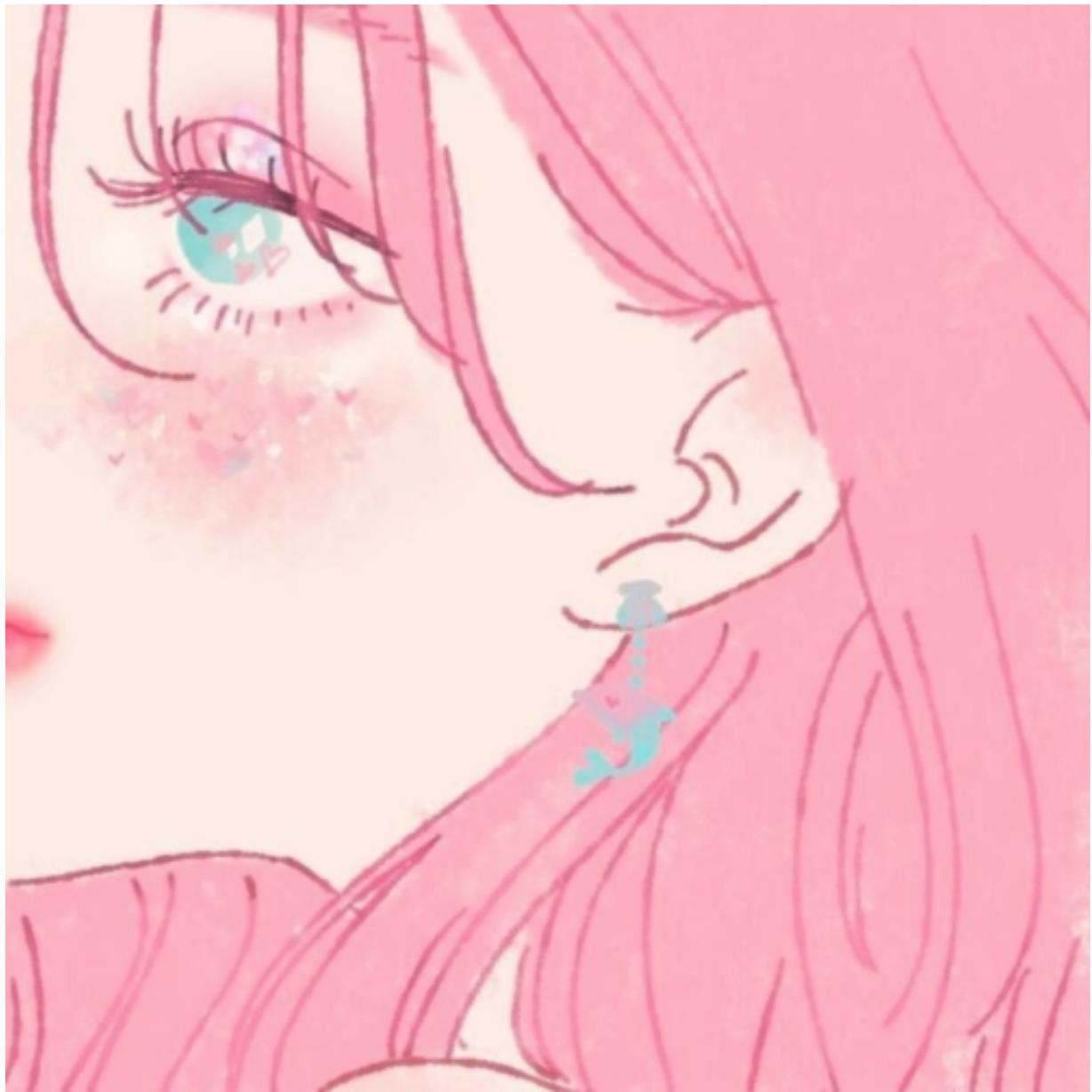
The morning sun happened to set, and Nicole had to knit her brows to be able to look up at him.

Slowly he came up to them on his horse. After that, the knights on horseback followed.

“I am Grand Duke Valentine. What did they do?”

When people saw the knights, they changed their expressions, trembled, then knelt in unison.

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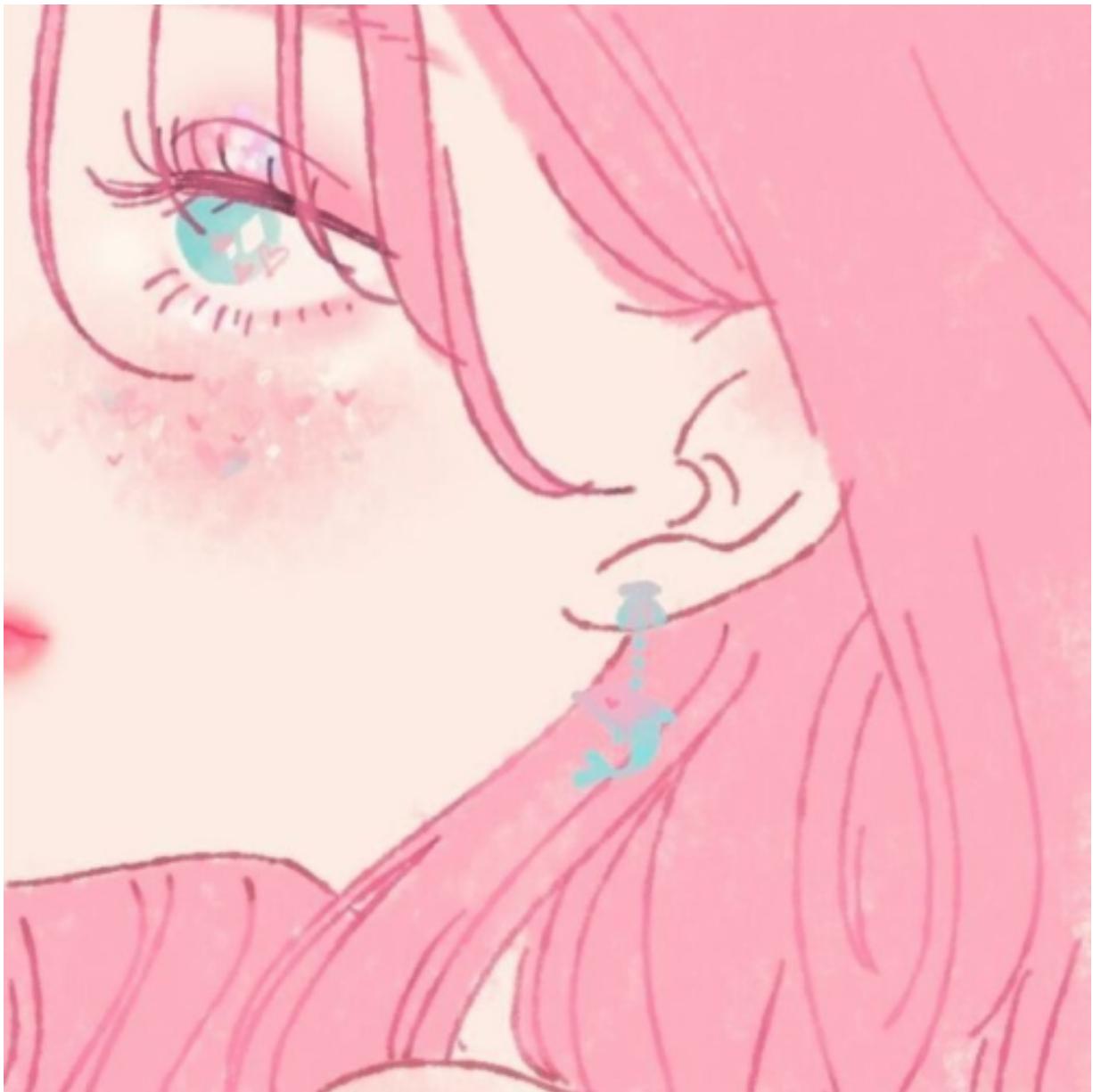


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# Chapter 29

t/n: I will be translating Estock's name to Estoc.

They did not dare to answer Raul.

When Bastard came forward and pointed out to some farmers, they spoke in a trembling voice.

"That lady and those two wanderers, we're questioning them because they're suspicious."

"There are only abandoned mines in that deep mountain, so no one lives there. But those wanderers are the only ones who came down from the mountain which is on fire, so they must be the arsonists!"

Raul nodded when he heard the people.

"Then, put them in custody."

"Grand Duke Valentine."

Then Grace stepped forward.

"They did nothing wrong. I just took them out with me to protect them while running away as the mountain caught fire."

Grace used honorifics to Raul, perhaps because they were in front of people.

‘I don’t want my luggage to be searched.’

Nicole swallowed her dry saliva inside. She was nervous.

Grace’s wagon carried the Yveschapel family’s belongings.

“Do you know them?”

Raul asked coldly.

Grace nodded a little.

“Karen and Jen are siblings and are just poor children who just wander around. They just stayed in the mountains because they have no place to stay in the summer, and they didn’t bring me any harm.”

“I’ll have to look into that.”

Raul said.

“Or let the villagers judge for themselves.”

“.....”

Grace looked at Nicole. Nicole nodded her head and said it was fine.

“Protect Master and let her rest, and detain the two of them.”

At that time, Estoc came running from afar. A neutral cut-haired Estoc had his eyes twinkling.

“Can I question both of them?”

Grace’s expression was perplexed.

“Estoc, why did you bring that crazy thing here?”

“He uses the knife well.”

“What about the boy?”

Estoc reached out his hand and tilted the hood freely. Then Jen, or Jay's pretty face was revealed.

He couldn't tell if this opponent, Jay, was a woman or a man, and he was in a state of great mirth with a strange look on his face.

“No way!”

“Do you know each other very well?”

Nicole was mortified at the thought of how cruel Estoc was when it came to interrogation.

The knights of the Grand Duke

The most famous Knights in the Empire, they were called the Sith.

Like their name which means “weapon,” all the knights close to them received the sword's name as their nicknames.

(t/n: so that's the reason for Bastard's name lol)

And the identities of the knights were no longer disclosed.

‘Estoc is so famous among the vassals of the Grand Duke that he's a crazy person..... But I've rarely met him in person.’

Estoc was one of the strongest knights in the Knights.

In addition, he was famous for being cruel and belligerent.

It was unusual for him to have difficulty determining someone's gender.

"Doesn't Estoc enjoy bullying a pretty boy? I hate to see Estoc do such a perverted lunacy. It's disgusting."

Grace said as if she was dumbfounded.

"I enjoy bullying pretty girls the same way and I don't do physical perversions, so relax!"

exclaimed Estok earnestly. But no one here was relieved.

Raul looked at Estoc with his eyes, as if telling him that he's a fool.

Bastard sighed.

"I'll question both of them myself, so don't touch them. They're an acquaintance of my precious teacher, so can I be generous?"

Raul said, pulling the reins.

"I'll take care of the forest fire on my own, so don't worry."

"You're going to go in there alone?"

One of the village captains standing next to Nicole muttered as if possessed.

'Even if others go, they will only get in the way.'

Nicole thought a little.

“There’s a tower in the center of the village, right? Lock them up there. Especially the woman.....”

“.....”

“I’m going to interrogate them very slowly, so feed them something to keep their strength. Seeing that they keep catching my eye, they are getting suspicious.”

Raul laughed and took off with the horse bridle.

Estoc, who lost his chance to interrogate, looked sad.

“But why are you here?”

Grace looked at Estoc as if it was ridiculous and said.

“Oh, that’s right. I came to inform Grand Duke Valentine that I already executed the sentence he ordered.”

Estoc spoke as if he had remembered.

“What’s that?”

“Yes, I have an announcement for you. The ruler of this province..... Your lord has died.”

“.....”

In the first place, Raul must have ordered Estoc to kill the lord.

If the clerk, the accountant, and the lord were left, of course Estoc was the one to cut the lord’s throat.

It was good news for the villagers who had been suffering from the exploitation of the land’s lord.

However, due to the high status of Grand Duke Valentine and his knights, they were unable to be openly pleased with the death of an aristocrat.

‘Then do I have to wail?’

Some people thought so, but all they were able to do was twitch their lips.

Most of all, this situation..... It was so weird. As much as Estoc's eyes are shining.

Soon, forgetting everything about Nicole and Jay, the people just blinked at each other.

It was the strangest view Bastard has ever seen recently.

“.....Take the two of them.”

When Bastard finally ordered, the knights, who were only looking at each other, managed to move.

Within an hour, it rained in the mountains.

Only in the mountains did it rain very strongly and refreshingly. The people who saw the rain cheered only then.

“An able aristocrat from the capital showed a miracle!”

“The forest fire is being extinguished!”

In the meantime, Nicole was escorted to a small office. The place was old as if it had been unused for a long time, but it was basically cleaned.

Grace had been away for a while to handle Nicole's luggage.

My brother... He'll be okay, right?

Nicole had a complicated mind. Above all, her mother died.....

But she couldn't even cry. It wasn't a good time to express her feelings loudly now.

'I couldn't even recover Mother's body. I wonder if she passed comfortably. She must have worried a lot.'

Nicole heard from Grace what she had done with Freya's body while they were coming down to town.

'Mother only thought about us until the end. She sacrificed herself to the point of death.'

Her heart felt like it was about to rot.

'Mom...'

Nicole lay face down on the desk.

Soon the knights brought her a simple meal, but she didn't want to eat one bit.

'What will happen to me now?'

Perhaps they will be found not guilty of the arson charge.

Grace offered to help them. So she has to stay calm.....

'Don't waste Mother's sacrifice.'

*Survive, Nicole. You should only think about yourself and your family.*

Freya spoke to Nicole several times last night as she was ill.

Nicole slowly closed her eyes as she recalled her mother's voice.

'I can't hold on any longer.'

She fell into a deep sleep, half fainted.

Nicole opened her eyes again when she heard someone talking.

"Freya, the fugitive of the Yveschappel family, died."

"You mean that person?"

Bastard said. His voice was bewildered.

"She was found in the mountains, in a state that seems to show suicide. Turns out it was the YvesChappel family who started this fire."

It was Raul who spoke in a tired voice.

"She hung herself and died, but she left a will inside her ring, the symbol of their family. When she heard that I had arrived in this region, she couldn't stand her fear, so she killed her two children and killed herself."

Nicole held her breath. She touched the desk with trembling hands.

"She set the house on fire. Perhaps... for the act of burning the family's legacy. And it must have been to keep the bodies of the children who inherited the healing power from the imperial family."

“Our last hope is gone. Now there is no excuse to postpone the marriage with the imperial family.”

“If I don’t accept it, that’s it.”

Raul laughed and said.

“But it will get a little tiring.”

She already knew it, but when she heard it in Raul’s voice, Nicole felt like she was confirmed dead.

‘My mom is really dead.’

She still couldn’t cry.

The man she feared and missed the most was beyond that door.

Nicole tried to pull herself up. Then the chair made a squeak.

“Who’s in there?”

Bastard answered as if he only remembered then.

“The woman whom you said you would interrogate personally..... The lady is in that room.”

He was silent for a moment, as if Raul had forgotten.

Nicole took a step back. At the same time, the door burst open.

Raul was standing in neat clothes. She can’t believe he went into the burning mountain.....

He looked at Nicole carefully.

Nicole's heart began to pound.

She was now mentally exhausted and on the verge of collapse.

And Raul is still..... He is Raul. She doesn't know what he's thinking and he seems cruel.

'I think I'm broken somewhere.'

But strangely, his presence was a relief.

So she looked at him unconsciously as if she was asking for help.

"Hello."

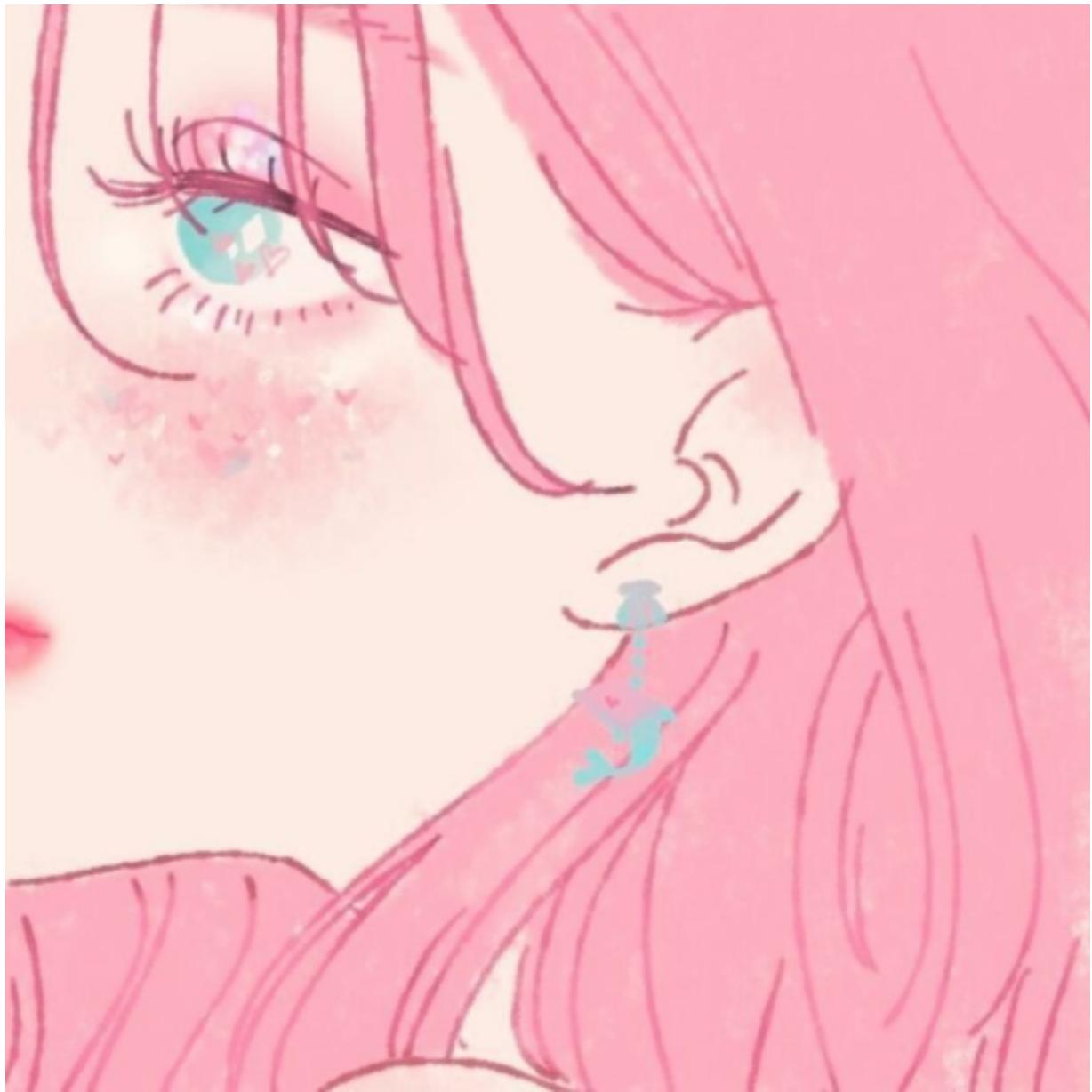
Raul said.

Nicole bowed her head slightly to reciprocate the greeting.

"Why don't you sit down?"

He whispered. Nicole stepped back and sat opposite to him.

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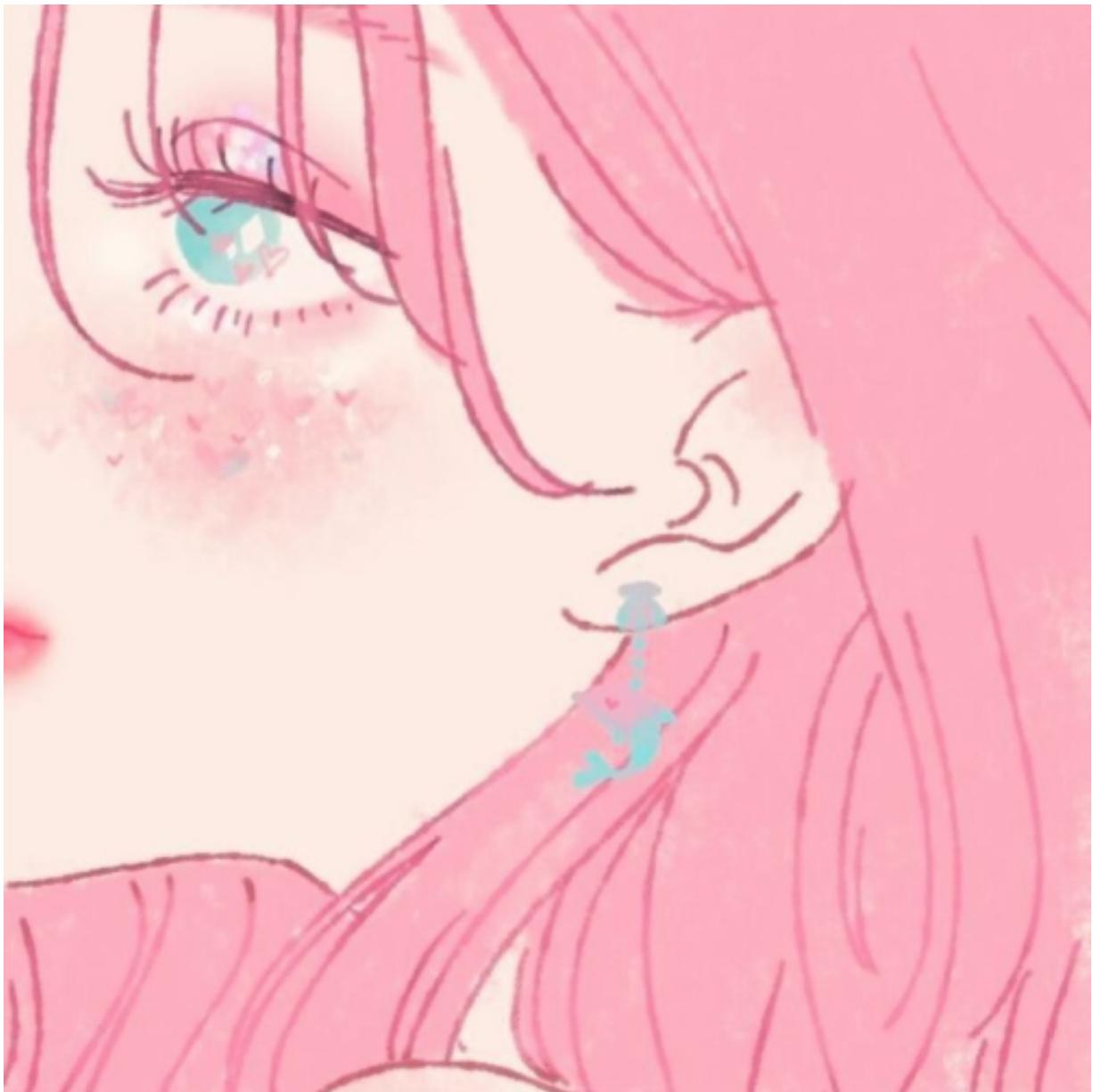


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# Chapter 30

And Raul looked at Nicole for a while, as if he had found a very interesting nuisance.

Nicole blushed more and more. And it became difficult for her to hold back her tears that seemed about to burst.

Strangely, the more she stared at Raul, the more she remembered her mother's touch. Maybe it's because... There are only a few people who have sacrificed for her throughout her previous life and now.

It was the two of them.

In the end, Nicole couldn't resist and opened her mouth.

"I'm not the one who started the fire. I just stayed with my brother in an abandoned cabin because we had nowhere to stay."

“Name.”

He spoke indifferently. Then he looked through the documents Bastard handed him.

“It’s Karen.”

“Yes, Karen.....”

Raul said.

“There is an easy road and a difficult one. The easy way is to become a chatterbox from now on and reveal everything I don’t even ask for. What are you and your brother’s identities who suddenly appeared at this suspicious timing?”

“.....so, what’s the hard way?”

“What is it? Bruise your skin and torment your sensibilities underneath it. I’ll slowly make you feel where the pain is in your body, and then I’ll get a confession at the end.”

In other words, he meant to torture.

But Nicole almost blushed with shame because he recited it as if he was saying something very sweet.

'He threatens me and plays with me at the same time.'

Nicole never thought Raul would treat her like this.

In her past life, Raul has been just treating Nicole like furniture throughout their marriage. She believed so.

Then, what about Nicole now for Raul?

In the past, they were married, but now she's just a wandering Karen. She is an opponent he could handle at will.

Even if she's the same person, since the situation has changed, she can see a different side of him. Perhaps that's why Raul's tone was unfamiliar.

'Was he someone who acted like he was making fun of people?'

But Nicole soon regained her composure.

When she hated Raul for a long time in her last life, she wanted him to cheat on her.

But that has never happened. Besides, he's arrogant and won't touch a woman of ambiguous status like Karen.

Thinking about it like that, she could answer calmly.

"I don't have a history to introduce. If you're curious about me, ask Grace."

"Your brother, whom my subordinate questioned, said the same thing. To ask his sister about himself."

Grace whispered in Nicole's ear before leaving. Whatever Raul asks, simply tell him you will exercise your right to remain silent, and instead direct him to Grace.

Likewise, Nicole instructed her brother to do so.

“Then you can ask her.”

Tuk. Tuk.

With a bored face, Raul laid his chin on one arm and tapped the desk with his hands in gloves.

Soon he slowly took off his gloves.

“My men are competent.”

“.....”

“The wandering Karen. You have a couple of misdemeanor records. Do you know what it is?”

“.....”

Nicole was silent.

"Oh, then let me change the question."

He laughed with his eyes as if he were having fun.

"I've looked into you. Someone testified, there's a scar inside your thigh. And if you're really Karen, you'll have that scar. If you show it, I'll believe you're Karen."

Nicole's eyes got wider.

Naturally, there was no scar on the inside of her thigh. But..... is Raul the kind of person to say these things in vain?

'It's only been six or seven hours since Raul was away.'

He managed to find someone who knew Karen's body secret in that amount of time? It's unbelievable. But wouldn't it be possible if Karen was really on the run or someone with a criminal record? What's his information?

Nicole clenched her skirt. She raised her head at once.

'No, it's not like that.'

Nicole knew how they communicated.

There was a telegraph office in the empire. Any information was delivered quickly using a telegram.

However, telegraph offices have been set up at least in small towns and beyond.

There are no telegraph offices in these rural areas, so it would be impossible to hear information about an ex-convict within a few hours.

'In other words, it's likely just a lie.'

That's how Nicole judged it.

"I'm afraid you've got it wrong. There's no scar on the inside of my thigh. Even if you do, I can't show you."

“Why?”

Raul said as if her answer was interesting. He leaned over Nicole.

Nicole’s heart sank. It’s not unpleasant, but..... she really didn’t know what he was thinking.

Why does he make such an elaborate mockery of a woman of humble status, who used to be indifferent to other people?

“There are two reasons. First, no matter how humble my status is, I don’t show my body to any man. Unless he’s my lover or my husband.”

“.....”

“Secondly, you are a famous person. A man like the Grand Duke questioned people without any cause, curiously asked a woman to lift her skirt herself and show her legs – what would happen to your reputation if I start making a fuss? If you tease an aristocratic woman, you will get a reputation as a playboy, and if rumors spread that you tried to touch a woman like me.....”

“.....”

“You will suffer a great deal from your reputation. I'll be the one who'll incur the Grand Prince's anger.”

Once the words burst out, they burst out like rapid fire.

It was rare for her to talk this long, so she was embarrassed.

In her last life, Nicole had few people to watch and learn from.

Raul was always sarcastic, sometimes embarrassingly so. It could be said that she imitated that attitude.

But Raul's reaction was strange. He was silent and soon smirked.

“You know how to speak for so long. When I first met you, I thought you couldn't talk.”

When they first met, Nicole's cheeks flushed again at the memory.

She recalled the moment when she fell in front of Raul with her legs exposed ridiculously.

Then the sensation of her body revived. She drew back without realizing it.

"It's fun to tease you, but don't worry. That's not the kind of interest I have in you."

"....."

"Do you want me to tell you a secret? Few people mean anything to me. My teacher Grace is among the few. She accepted me as a student and protected me when I just lost my parents when I didn't have the strength to protect myself."

"..... Is it her?"

"Yes."

He spoke in a low voice.

“So I’m in debt that I can’t pay back. The reason why she, who is from the seven most prestigious families and a talented family, fell so much is because she protected me to keep my parents’ will.”

“If I were an acquaintance of such a person, you shouldn’t treat me like this.”

Nicole bit her lip and said.

“That’s the problem.”

“.....”

“I have a duty to protect her even if she hates me. She’s like a parent to me. How can a child abandon his parents just because they’re on bad terms? She is weak and vulnerable compared to when I was young, and she’s especially weak to young women. Even more so if they look like her daughter. So I have to suspect you’re a pest that’s stuck with my teacher.”

Raul said.

“So tell me. Who are you?”

“Once again, I’m nothing. And the thing about me is.....”

“I’ll tell you.”

Then the door burst open. It was Grace with a gun. The sight of the gun made Raul’s eyes colder.

“I don’t think you intend to speak the truth.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We found the body of Freya, the fugitive of the Yveschapel family.”

“And?”

“Why didn’t you pretend to be surprised? Others don’t recognize it, but I do. The bodies of the two burned young people were also found. Freya’s will says the bodies are her children.”

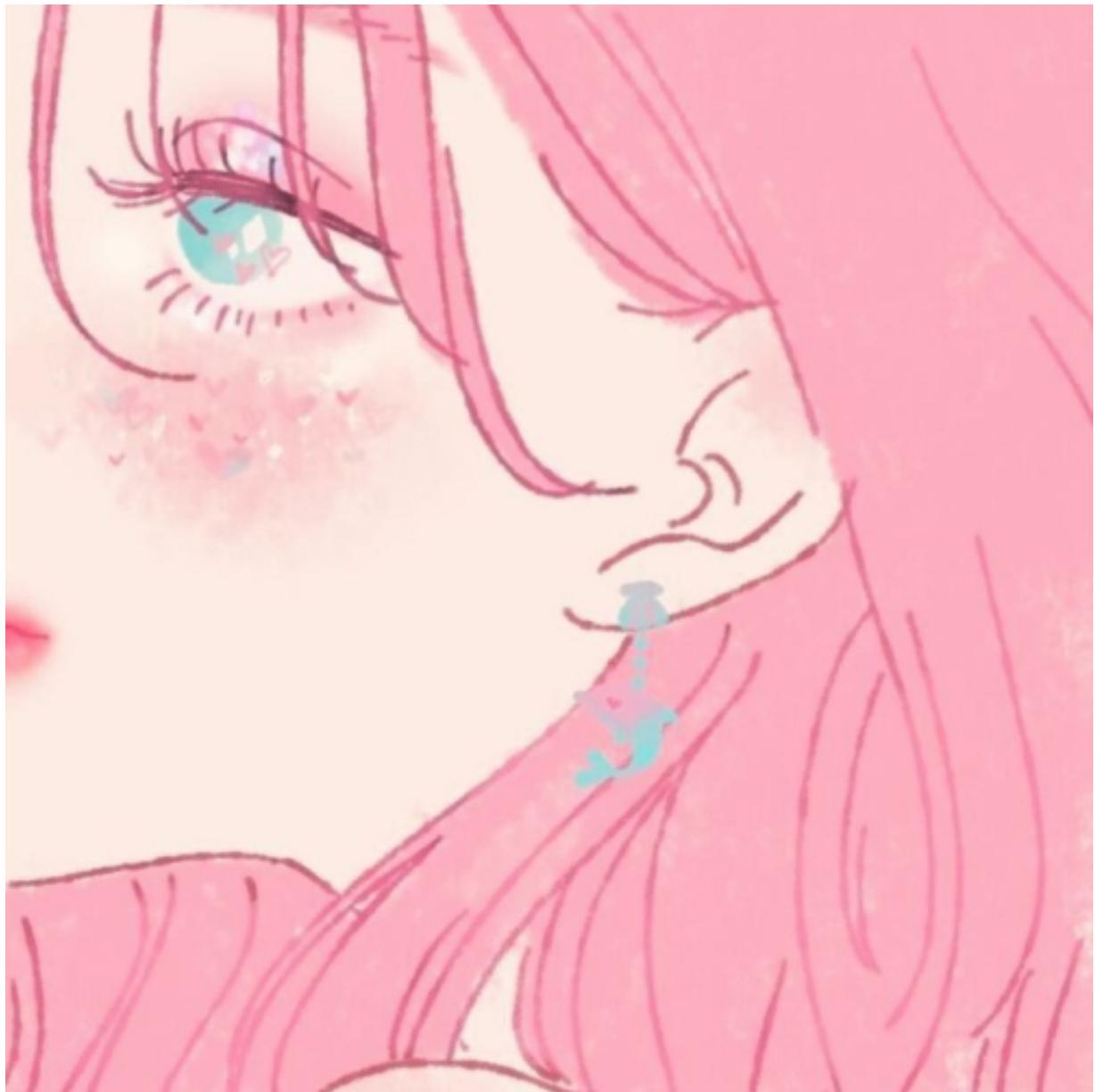
“Your fiancé is dead.”

“Unfortunately. But why was there a mark of a shotgun on the body’s head? I don’t know about anything else, but I recognize it.”

Grace and Raul are the only ones with martans around here. If so...

Nicole was perplexed at heart. But Grace only smiled coldly, as if she had anticipated this situation.

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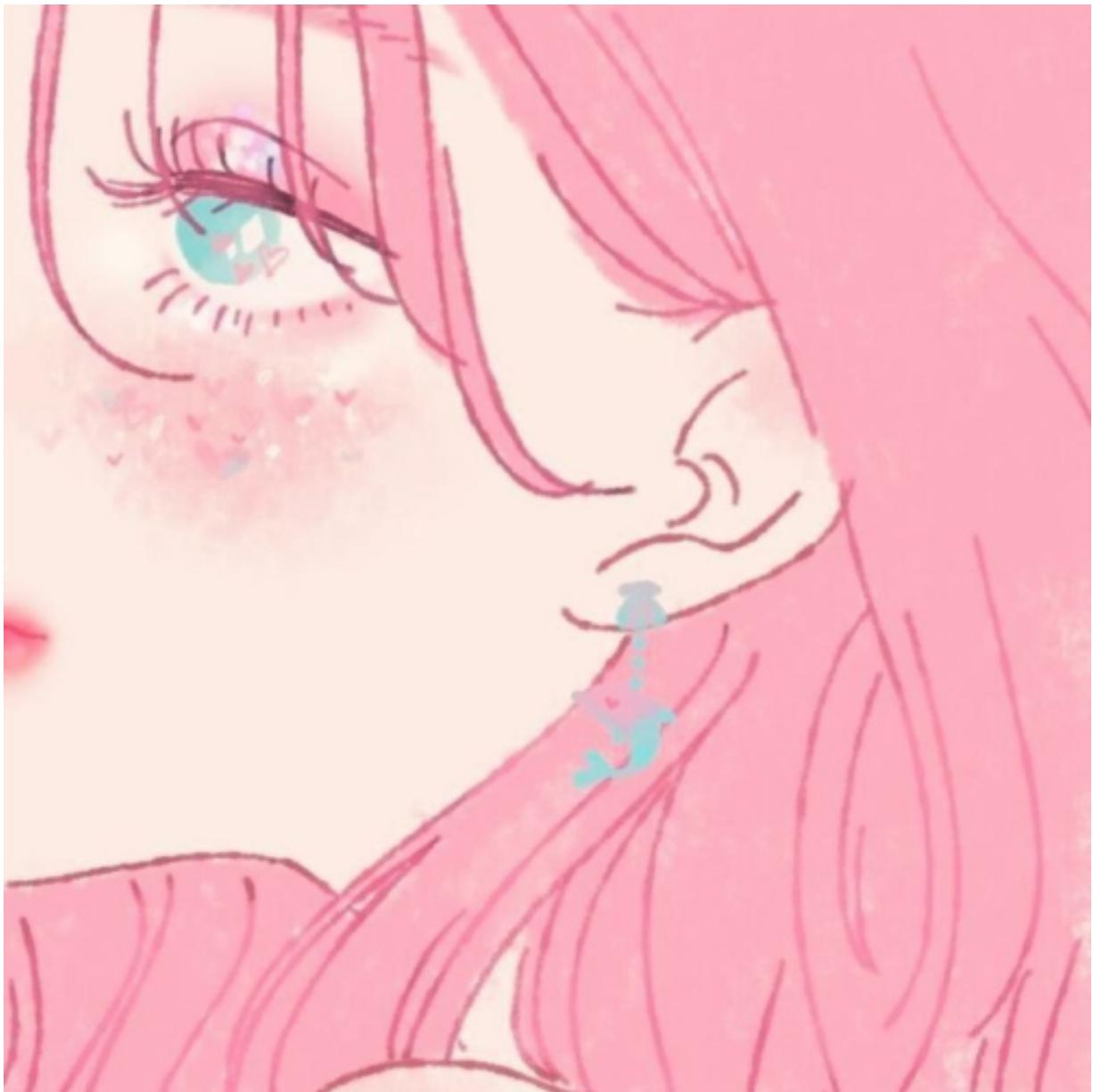


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# Chapter 31

“Why? Did you want me to catch the Yveschapel people and offer them to you?”

“At least you shouldn’t have killed them. Because I wanted a breathing fiancee.”

“I’ll tell you the truth if you want.”

Grace said.

“When I found Freya, she poisoned her children. They were dying in pain. In order to save the poor Yveschapel family, I sent them comfortably with a martan gun, as Freya begged. And it didn’t stop Freya from killing herself. Prior to that, I did not stop her from burning her own house so that the family’s inheritance and the bodies of her children would not fall into other people’s hands.”

“It’s a coincidence that you were in the hiding place of the Yveschapel family?”

“It’s a coincidence, but it doesn’t matter if you don’t believe it. If you want, you can eliminate me with that great power you have.”

Nicole’s hands trembled. Raul turned his eyes to Nicole.

“This woman has heard too much.”

“So I can’t let her go.”

Grace said.

“You don’t have to let her go.”

“.....what is this woman?”

“Even if I’m retired, I need eyes and ears. So I was training with my limbs. It’s been a long time since I trained an agent, but this kid has what it takes.”

Nicole understood Grace’s meaning.

Grace intended to wrap Nicole’s status as a kind of spy she had selected.

If so, Karen’s humble status is also explained.

Usually, those who do rough things like being a spy often have suspicious origins.

“Then why hasn’t this woman confessed?”

“Because I taught her to do so. *Don’t say a word if anyone interrogates and threatens you.* That’s how I ordered her and tested this child.”

Raul’s expression was filled with exhaustion and strange irritation.

“She’s been well educated.

“...then this child will be—”

“It just so happens that I didn’t have enough female agents. If Master took my fiancee away from me, I’ll take something from you. I’ll take this woman. I needed someone to take on an important job at Sith.”

Nicole clenched her fist under the desk. Her hands trembled slightly.

“She’s just starting to get an education. She still lack learning.”

“Didn’t you just say that she was selected because she had enough talent?”

Grace bit her lips.

“Let me tell you, the people of the Yveschapel family chose to escape their fate and become comfortable. I didn’t take your fiance from you.”

This time Raul shut up.

“And I need at least more time if you’re going to take this child. She can’t live long if she works poorly next to you, can she? Or—”

Grace said spitefully.

“Do you want to see her die like my daughter?”

Raul raised the corners of his mouth faintly.

“Then let’s do this. I’ll send her to the education center in the capital.”

Nicole didn’t know what an education center was.

“I will keep her if she gets educated there and let her take the final exam and get excellent grades. If she fails....”

“.....”

“Then I’ll take care of it myself.”

“No.”

“Why not? Grace, my Master, created the procedure for cultivating the Shadow Agents of Sith. If this woman was the first disciple I received since then, she would have passed that much with excellent grades. In addition, I can’t attach a close aide with poor skills to my Master.”

“I said no—”

“By the way, give me her brother, too. It’s worth teaching if they’re young, with or without qualities.”

Nicole couldn’t stand it any longer.

She couldn’t send Jay to his death twice. Freya wouldn’t want to either.

‘Yes, my mother wouldn’t want it either.’

Now, she could no longer suppress her sadness. Eventually, tears began to drip from Nicole’s eyes. A tremendous amount of pain swept over her heart.

“I’ll go.”

Nicole said. Raul looked at Nicole, a little embarrassed as she began to cry.

“Don’t send my brother to a dangerous place. I’ll go.”

Grace swallowed a little sigh.

“Give me some time. This is the last disciple I decided to bring in.”

Raul was determined to say no.

It was also out of concern for Grace. He was really suspicious of Nicole.

At least he was convinced there was something suspicious about this woman. Additionally...

Nicole was biting her lips and crying silently. He's never seen anyone cry so quietly.

Raul felt a strange discomfort in his chest.

"Let my brother stay with you, Grace. Grace, you can't be alone either. And he's young. If you allow me to do that, I will do anything for you."

"Why are you crying?"

"What's with those words? How can a young woman still endure when you're bullying her like this?"

Grace said, unable to resist.

Raul was a man who had no tact. But this woman.....

She was a little weird.

When he first met her, she ran away barefoot. And acted like a stupid country woman.

It turned out that this woman was just a vagrant. In the meantime, she boldly responded to Raul's direct interrogation.

And now she was crying like a child who was hit on the head by someone.

He genuinely wondered if she was a mentally unstable person.

No, the way she looked at him was strange.

She looked at him as if she had been terribly hurt by him.  
Raul was belatedly aware of it.

“.....just three months.”

In the end, Raul spoke with rare generosity.

“It’s a condition that the Master returns to the capital. Train this woman and send her to me during that time. The conditions for entering the education center remain unchanged. You can keep her brother with you.”

In fact, it was tantamount to saying that he would not reach for Jay.

Nicole swept her heart away.

Before Grace could say anything, Nicole stepped forward and bowed her head.

“Thank you, Grand Duke.”

That’s how Nicole became a woman named Karen.

And she returned to him with the lowest status.

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“Sister!”

Jay came to Nicole with a pale face. Nicole held Jay’s hand.

“Jay, are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. What happened?”

"First, we will follow Grace to her house in the capital."

"....."

"The capital..... Let's call Father. Since Mother told us how to contact him in an emergency, we'll be able to meet Father someday."

Father will know that Freya is never one to commit suicide over her family.

As soon as he hears about the arson, Father will doubt the truth. It was this belief that kept Nicole together.

'Once we try to use the emergency contact network, we have to go to the big city.'

Nicole thought and held Jay's hand tightly.

She was grateful to be able to rely on Grace, and she was relieved.

'Raul, who is extremely harsh to others and to himself, vouched Grace's personality.'

Raul was not a believer in anyone. However, he expressed his sincerity as if he was talking to himself earlier.

Raul believes in Grace even if she falls apart.

In other words, Grace was not the one to sell Nicole and her family because of the bounty on their heads.

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Ten days later, Nicole followed Grace to the capital.

For the past 10 days Nicole has quietly wiped away her tears for her mother.

As soon as she came to the capital, Nicole was able to go to the Great Temple because of Grace's consideration.

Nicole and Jay couldn't even hold their mother's funeral for fear of identification.

However, they wanted to offer a memorial prayer for their mother.

Not long ago, they made an excuse that Grace's daughter's death anniversary had just passed. Grace took the two to the Great Temple unnoticed.

Nicole knelt down and prayed for a long time. Jay also had his eyes closed next to her.

Jay also couldn't say anything for a long time, as if he was full of emotion.

"It hasn't hit me yet. I don't know where Father's gone, and Mother's no longer in this world....."

Freya taught Nicole how to do the emergency contact with her father before she died.

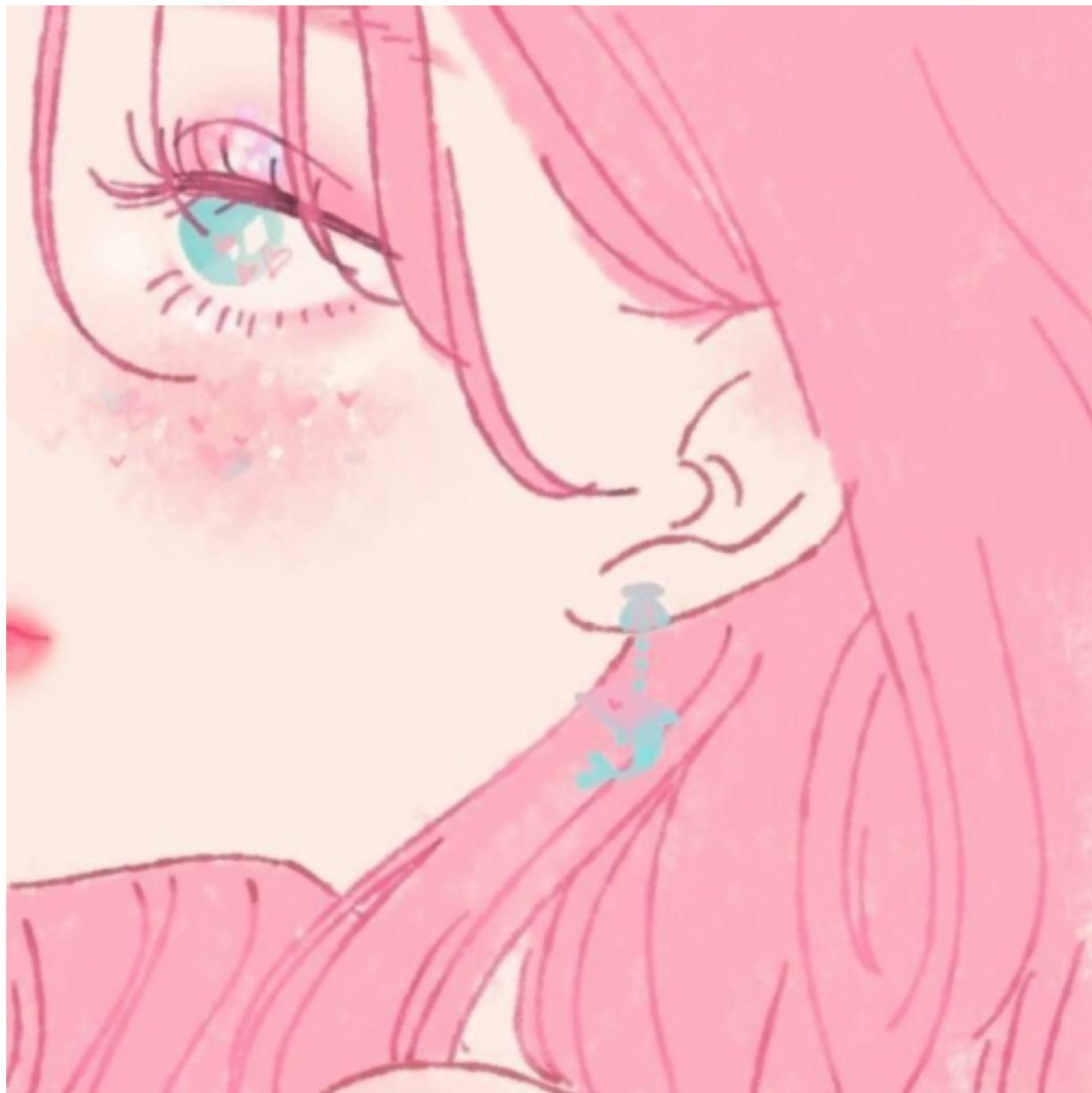
It was none other than a way to use the anonymous mailbox.

The mailbox, which can be rented anonymously, was able to communicate through any mailbox as long as the location of the branch was known.

Mother said her father would be the first to look for the mailbox if he learns they were missing.

Nicole just wanted her father to check the mailbox first without despair.

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# Chapter 32

‘It’s gonna be okay. I have no choice but to trust my father.....’

Grace said she would rather kill Nicole with her own hands than let her go back to the area to see her father again.

No matter how much Grace was Raul’s master, Raul was a rare authority as Grand Duke Valentine.

Deceiving Raul was not easy for Grace either.

But Grace was lying to Raul for Nicole and Jay, who are not even related to her by blood.

Nicole now had to act carefully, too. She could have caused Grace a lot of trouble.

‘Please, I hope to hear from you.’

There was no one in the chapel at the Great Temple. Nicole clenched Jay’s hand in silence.

“I will protect you, Jay. Mother will want me to protect my brother. We don’t know if Isabel is alive, and even if she is, she’s no longer my sister. So now we have only each other.”

Jay held back his tears and nodded.

Grace waited for them for a long time. Then she told Jay.

"Jay, an apprentice priest must be selling flowers outside the door. Buy some flowers for Mother. Choose carefully and buy pretty flowers."

"Yes."

Jay nodded.

Grace opened her mouth after Jay left.

"Nicole, don't you have something to tell me?"

Nicole slowly raised her head. And she got up.

"From where did you plan it? Now that you've become Karen."

"....."

"You can't fool my eyes."

"Since when have you noticed?"

"Since the burning of Karen and Jen's bodies."

"....."

"Until your mother's death, is it in your plan?"

Nicole looked directly at Grace.

"I can swear a hundred times. I never wanted my mother to die like that. But... it's true that I kept your daughter's letter in my arms to persuade you. I also aimed for Karen and Jen's status."

To be exact, Nicole wanted Grace to take care of Isabel.

Anyway, that goal has been achieved to some extent.

"I thought the Grand Duke of Valentine would doubt me if I suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The only person who will protect me then is someone who can influence him. It's you, Grace."

And as Nicole knows, few people in the world could influence Raoul.

"You've got some guts. Why did you think I'd help you out there? Do you think I'm going to be delirious because you look like my daughter?"

"No, I don't."

Nicole shook her head.

"Because I believe in love and hate."

".....love and hate?"

"There is no emotion as powerful as love and hate. Grace, you hate and cherish Grand Duke Valentine. You want to resolve your feelings with him. To the extent that it does not hurt him. You are a person of high rank. Those kinds of people will never accept anyone again without ever venting their grudges. You are turning a blind eye to the Yveschapel family, which helped you gain passive revenge on Grand Duke Valentine. You're like family, so you won't hate each other forever."

Grace was silent for a long time, and then she burst into laughter.

"The sophistry is very great. You're talking nonsense. But....."

“.....”

“I’m helping you, and I will continue to do so. Because I saw your mother’s death. And I don’t want you to die like my daughter.”

“Did your daughter... really die at the hands of the imperial family?”

“I think so.”

Grace said.

“If she was punished for loving a cursed man, that’s right.”

“Cursed... man?”

“If being loved by a witch is not a curse, what would it be? There is a witch attached to Grand Duke Valentine.”

The witch means the Imperial family. Nicole asked, feeling appalled.

“What does the Imperial Family want from the Grand Duke of Valentine?”

“For the Grand Duke of Valentine to marry the youngest princess.”

That’s what Nicole knew. It was the imperial family’s long-cherished desire to have Prince Valentine as their son-in-law.

“I know that Grand Duke Valentine has a superior ability than other families. But why is the royal family obsessed with Grand Duke Valentine while being wary of other families with abilities?”

"There are many reasons, but well. The royal family was originally a family full of people with special abilities. But now they're losing that power..... They believe that they should bear a child with the most outstanding person."

Nicole was so surprised that she almost stopped breathing.

There was obviously already a crown prince in the imperial family now. But the child they want between the youngest princess and Raul..... They want to make that child the next emperor?

In addition, the child would be Valentine's Grand Duke only relative.

"The Grand Duke of Valentine only has a few surviving relatives. Raul lost his parents not long after Yveschapel's demise. The royal family wants to devour Valentine itself through marriage."

"Is that possible?"

"Imagine a possible scenario. So, whoever is next to the Grand Duke of Valentine will be tormented by a witch as if in hell. Just as my daughter has been through."

Grace laughed.

"More than that, there is a memorial section for my daughter. Let's hide one of your mother's belongings there and enshrine it together. The Lord said that spirits that could not even be buried do not live. My daughter's memorial space is the most expensive and spacious one, so it can also be your mother's place."

Grace is asking to share her mother's soul in a memorial space for her daughter.

Nicole bowed her head because she was so surprised by the words.

"Thank you very much, Grace. I know what your daughter means to Grace."

"....."

"I must..... I'll repay you someday."

"Don't show yourself dying like my daughter. That's all you have to do."

Grace said so and grumbled softly.

"I thought I would get involved in such a hassle, so I was just going to shoot them all to death."

Nicole could laugh weakly at her words this time. It was the first laugh she had in ten days.

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That's how time passes day by day.

Nicole couldn't even see Raul's nose, contrary to her initial worries.

This is because on Raul's whim, she was allowed to stay in Grace's mansion. The mansion was not large, but it was cozy and had many servants, and Nicole was treated as a guest.

'Grace was a much better person than I thought.'

Nicole stayed at Grace's house and thanked her from the bottom of her heart.

'I didn't expect her to send Jay to safety so soon.'

Grace sent Jay to a prestigious local academy.

The place run by the temple was famous for producing excellent holy knights and scholars.

She made an excuse to sponsor a student, but Nicole knew right away that Grace had sent Jay to the safest place.

'Besides, Grace was the head of the seventh family.'

Grace was a member of the Sotia family, one of the seven most prestigious families in the Empire.

She lost her parents a long time ago and only Grace remains. Grace then married early, but her husband died soon after due to illness.

After her daughter died, Grace lost interest in capital life.

"A family that produces talented people, resulting in seven families, including the imperial family."

These were the families of meritorious men who founded the empire, but at the same time they threatened the imperial family.

Because they were people with 'special abilities'.

Perhaps because of the vigilance of the imperial family, not many of the six families have been in good shape so far.

It was natural that Hyperion, the imperial family among the seven families, was in good health.

Next, there was the Perval family, which now rules the Holy Land, and the Valentine family, who are the most powerful.

'Other than that, her family, Yveschapel, was destroyed, and the Rodrias was killed in an accident. At this point, is it the Saratev family with Gaston that maintains its reputation?'

Like Grace, their family was on the verge of collapse due to the dissolution of the family, but there were cases where he still enjoyed high status and wealth.

However, at present, the Sotia family was the only one among the seven families in such a case.

'This is all Grace taught me.'

Nicole was sitting in front of Grace preparing tea.

Nicole looked like a different person with her hair tied with a ribbon and in a neat pink dress that clung to her body.

"Your manners of preparing tea are wrong. Again."

Grace said. Nicole practiced as she was told again.

Despite Grace's capriciousness over and over again, Nicole didn't blink an eye. Grace looked at it as if she liked it.

"But... Is this really all I have to do?"

Everything Grace has taught Nicole lately has been easy.

The state of the capital and the culture of the aristocracy and how to prepare tea or walk like an aristocratic lady.

"Right now, that's all you need to learn."

".....I thought a spy would learn something more dangerous."

"Because you're that kind of spy."

“.....that kind of spy?”

“There are two types of spy. A spy to be treasured. And a spy who is used on something major and should quickly retire after.”

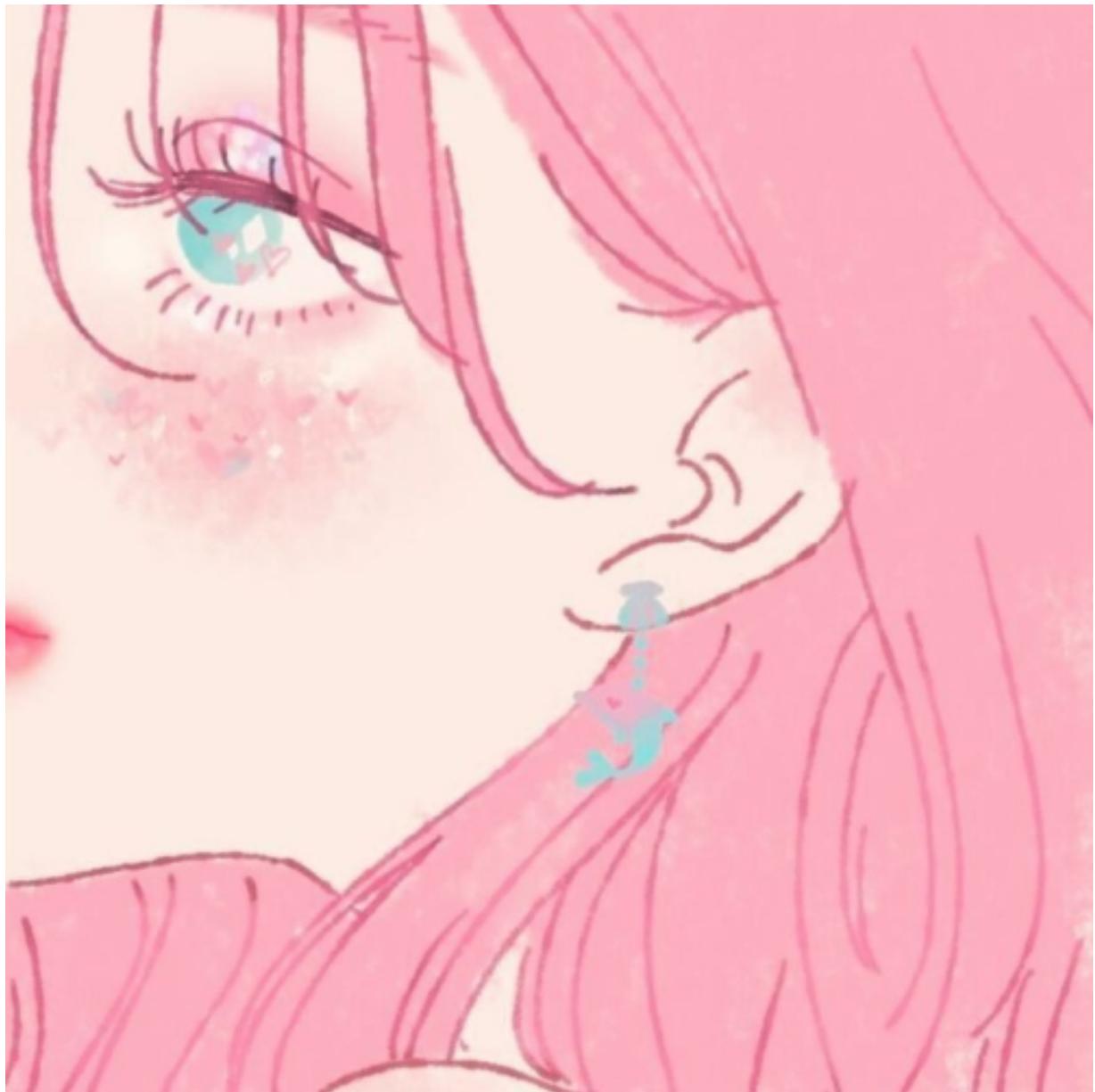
“Which of the two types am I?”

“Of course, the latter. You really don’t know that?”

“.....Are you intending to just use me and throw me away?”

Nicole paused.

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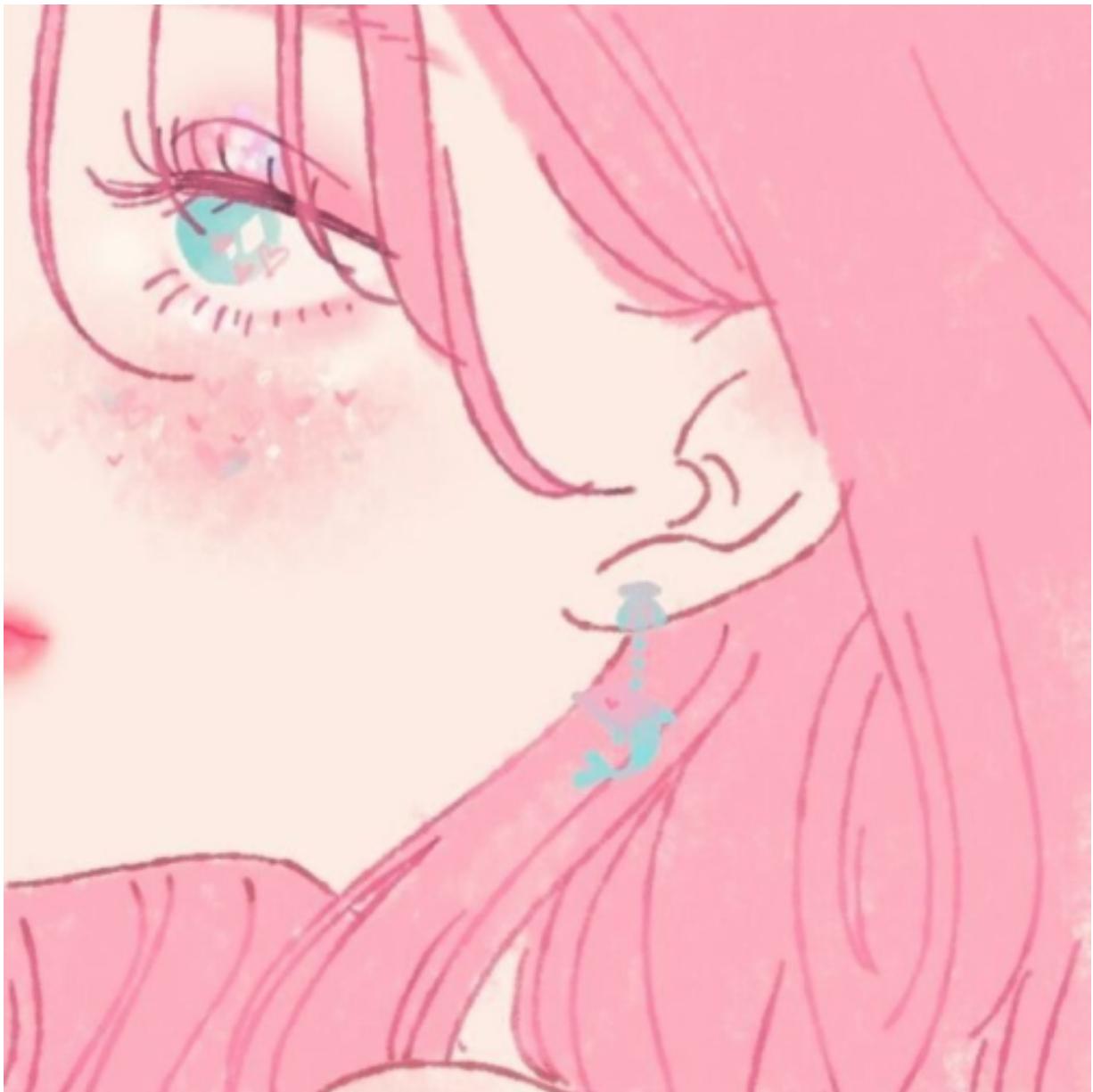


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# Chapter 33

Grace burst into laughter. Her cruel way of speaking was a joke of her own.

'It must be because she's Raul's master.'

Nicole was embarrassed at first, but now she's fine.

"You're a spy who can never be used for long."

"Why?"

"Look in the mirror. You're pretty."

"....."

"A striking appearance is the most dangerous weakness for an agent. Didn't even Grand Duke Valentine pay attention to you from the start?"

Compared to Isabel, Nicole only looked a little pure, but calling her pretty is unfair.

So Nicole has never been confident in her appearance.

But Freya was an outstanding beauty and her father was also a beautiful man. Not only her sister but also Jay took after their parents' appearance.

"Then I..... Aren't I not qualified?"

“Are all the answers in my words? Do you know Marquess Malentin, who rocked the capital decades ago?”

“I don’t know.”

Nicole is not adept at social gossip.

In her previous life, her maids and ladies-in-waiting always talked about this and that, but she was not interested.

“She is a courtesan and has shaken the hearts of countless men. In the end, she became the wife of the 70-year-old Marquis Malentin and eventually changed her identity. But the woman was later exposed as a former spy from the Holy Land. Instead, she collected information about the Imperial nobles under instructions. Anyway, she’s been a spy all her life with only one fake status. That’s Madam Malentin. In other words, you can’t use a pretty card for a long time, but you can use it big once you pull it out. Do you understand?”

“...do I have to go as far as becoming a courtesan?”

Grace laughed out loud at her remarks.

“I won’t stop that. Anyway, there are places you can only enter using your appearance. You can infiltrate the ladies’ saloon and collect rumors pretending to be a lady. Think about it. Why don’t you sneak into a casino where only young and decent employees are recruited? It looks so plausible on the outside, so there is a way to infiltrate as an imperial maid.”

“.....that means, depending on my efforts, my retirement may be quick. But..... the grand duke’s retirement method should be very elegant.”

“That’s smart. From the standpoint of your superiors, it’s easier to just take the lead than to give them severance pay and retire beautifully.”

“.....”

“So keep that in mind. If you know a lot of secrets, you’ll be watched forever like me. You should never step into the core business. But if you want to ‘do your job properly and graduate’, you have to work well. Keep out of sight, but keep on the right line. The biggest lesson I want to give you is that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Moderately, pretending to have no eyes and ears. Don’t be punished for failing to do what you’re told, but don’t get involved in big things.

“But if you go to the education center, you have to get excellent grades. Raul can do it if he wants to.”

Nicole was able to come here and hear the explanation of the education center.

Grace was a member of the Imperial Family Secret Intelligence Service and then worked for Raul as a key member of the Secret Intelligence Department at the Sith, or Raul’s immediate Knights.

It was a kind of spy training center she built.

To be exact, it was called an ‘agent’.

Raul said he would “dispose” Nicole if she did not get good grades.

“I’m really... Will I be all right?”

“There’s a better side to it. Karen has a record of arrest. It’s hard for a person with such a record to get a job or live like an ordinary person in the future. And refugee status.”

“.....I know that.”

However, at the Grand Duke of Valentine, a minor offender could be excused. Except for the imperial family, it was the only family with such authority.

“So serve as an agent, and conceal your identity.”

Grace was right.

‘If I do well, I can work under the Grand Duke of Valentine and live as an ordinary person.....’

After all, Nicole was surprisingly talented as an agent.

Freya tried to teach Nicole everything she knew as a child.

Even playing musical instruments and light manners, which are aristocrats’ traits. As Nicole was her first child, Freya educated her with all her heart.

In addition, Nicole was accustomed to country life and was skilled at miscellaneous tasks such as sewing and cooking.

As Grace said, there are many things to observe while pretending to be a lady. It was in optimal condition.

“And one more thing.”

Grace beckoned Nicole. Nicole stopped arranging flowers and approached her.

“Never have a deep relationship with Raul.”

Nicole was so surprised that she almost pushed the vase. A flame came into her cheeks.

“W, what do you mean?”

“I’m saying this out of genuine concern.”

“I don’t fall for... ...any man.”

“Raul’s face is attached to that man’s skin. The face of a guy who’s the most handsome guy in the capital. And it’s no use even if you’re not interested. The problem is that Raul is keeping an eye on you.”

“.....he was originally..... I mean.....”

Nicole didn’t know what to say. At last she asked outright.

“Does he like women of Karen’s status?”

“He doesn’t like anyone. Even if I suggest he go out with a girl, he pretends not to hear me. He’s crazy about running his job and the family. That’s why I’m concerned. I think he wants to bother you. He’s never shown that interest in anyone before.”

Nicole was stabbed in the hand by a rose thorn. Grace clicked her tongue.

“And always be calm.”

When Grace held out her handkerchief, Nicole clasped her hand.

“You shouldn’t be swayed by such teasing.”

“.....well, I know.”

Nicole said.

“But where did you learn to talk like a doll? It doesn’t match your current status at all.”

“Shall we practice more vulgar words and actions?”

Nicole remembered Karen she had seen once or twice.

Karen was at the level where half of her words were slang.  
Nicole was quite the opposite.

She spoke with dignity in a good way, classic in a bad way, a little mechanical.

This was also related to the emotion-killing education Freya had given Nicole since childhood.

“My mother said that if I use an exasperated tone or get emotional and speak faster, I don’t look dignified. She always told me to speak in peace.”

“Yes, then let’s leave it as it is.”

Grace found Nicole interesting.

“You can just say that your tone changed gracefully while I was educating you. And I’ll teach you how to behave dirty if you need to.”

“How does Grace know that?”

“I was a special soldier. I served as Director of the Imperial Intelligence Service. I’m retired now so I’m just goofing around.”

“.....”

Nicole thought Grace was a very unusual person, too.

She was born with a noble status, but what is the point of living in such a state?

Indeed, I've heard that people in capable families are generally out of their minds.

“Anyway, pass the test first. After the deadline set by Raul, you will have to be trained with other spies. The agency will test you.”

Two months have already passed. Autumn has already arrived.

Nicole will go to the education center before winter arrives.

“Remember, there are only three types of people who are willing to work as spies. Criminals who want to conceal their identities like you do now. The second group includes those who are greedy and want to get ahead even on the ground. The third one is... Their temperament itself is eccentric and strange.”

“I don't think I should be close to them either way.”

“That's right. So be careful at the education center because someone might bite you. Originally, people in dark places were more fierce against each other.”

Nicole nodded her thanks again.

\*\*\*

Her life in Grace's mansion was peaceful.

Enough to make her forget a little bit of the shock of her mother's death.

But Grace couldn't protect her forever.

Time passed, and she had to enter the education center.

'There are regular agents and shadow agents in the Knights of the Grand Duchy.'

Knights who receive the name of a sword are regular knights. Like Bastard, Estock.....

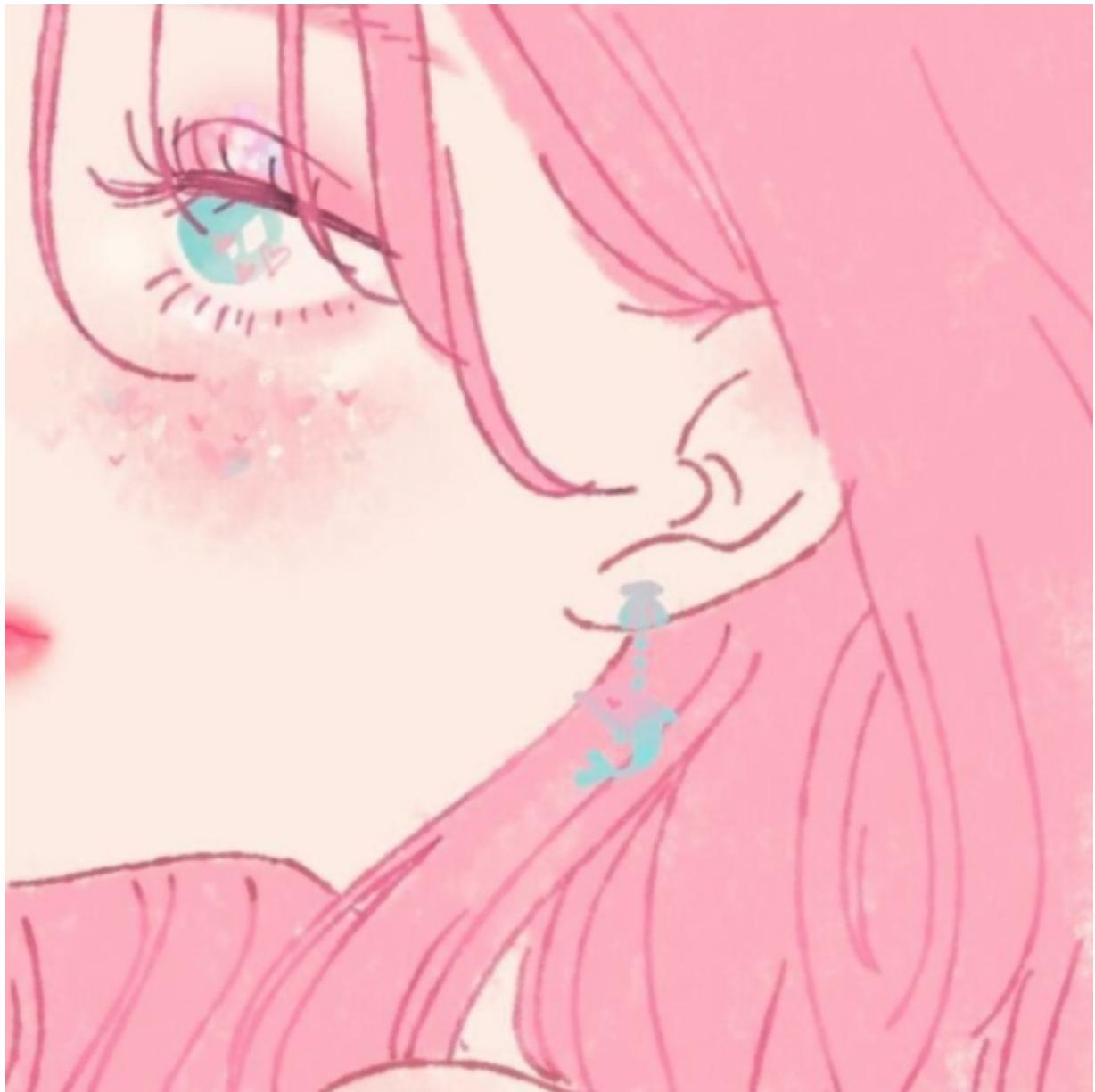
They served as knights and limbs of the Knights of the Grand Duchy.

However, the Grand Duke thought that it was not enough, so they began to train agents directly under the Sith.

'Those who can't reveal their identity. People like me.....'

That was the kind of agent Nicole was supposed to be.

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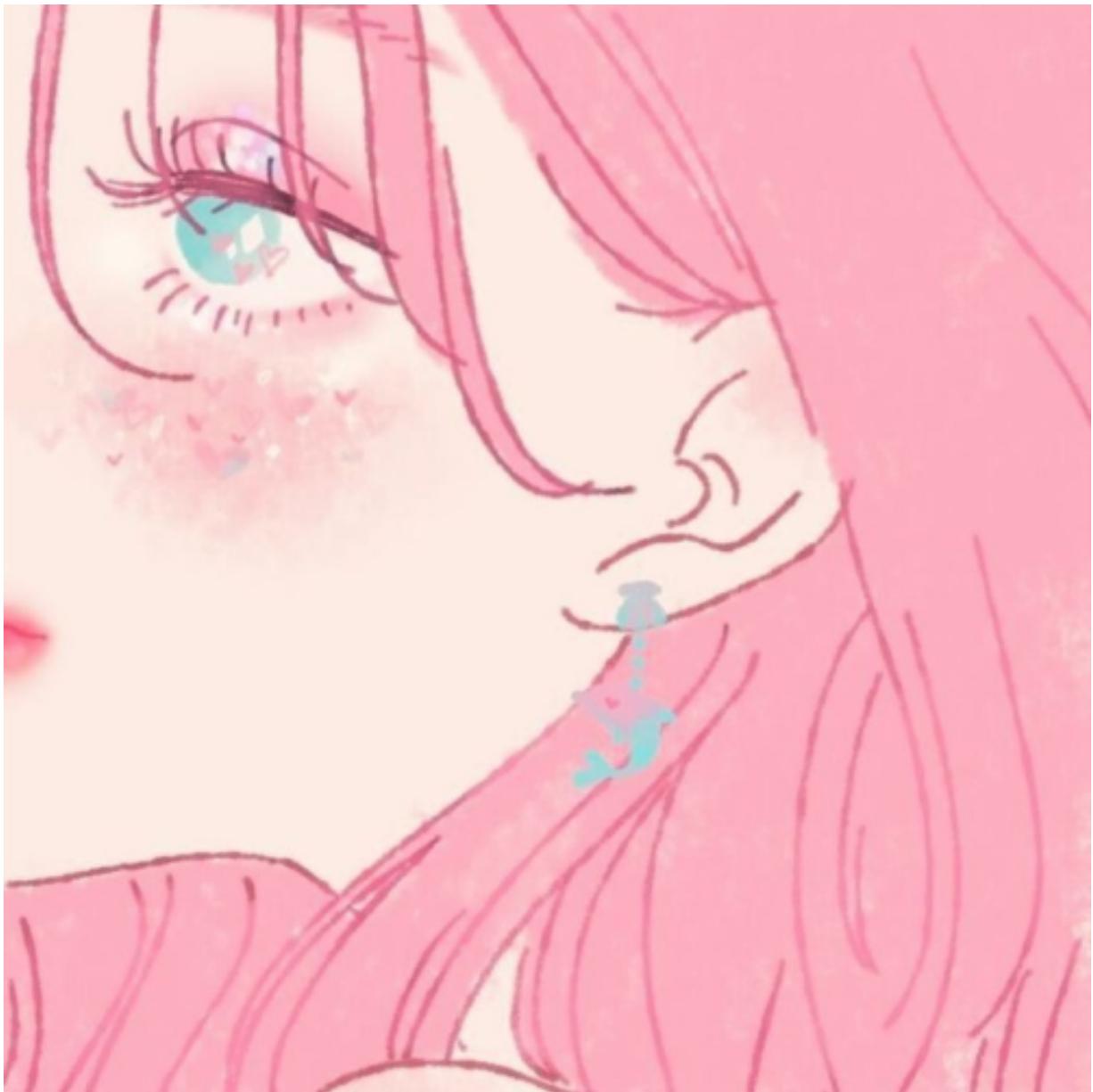


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# Chapter 34

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And unfortunately, all of the 'shadow candidates' were young women.

Women between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five

All of them were neat-looking, but they did not have a strong personality, and most of them were similar to Nicole.

"Is that her? She's the one who gets special treatment."

"She was chosen by someone of high status, and Grand Duke Valentine is keeping an eye on her."

Nicole was used to other women whispering about her.

'Even when I was the Grand Duchess in my past life, I was always accused of being a traitor.'

Wherever she went, people showed a territorial attitude.

Thanks to her memories from her past life, Nicole was able to respond nonchalantly.

'I've gotten quite used to this place, too.'

The place where the candidates were trained was a secluded building near the port.

The building had nothing to do with the Grand Duke of Valentine nominally.

However, considering its complex name, the real owner was the Valentine family.

The old classroom, which served as a training area, blocked the outside by affixing wooden boards to all the windows.

There was no desk, no blackboard. There were only chairs that squeaked in numbers of people.

Nicole sat in a chair given to her.

Twice a week, Nicole came to this safe house and was 'trained'.

All the women gathered here didn't know who would be chosen or kicked out.

All Nicole knows is that almost all of them came up from the bottom, just like her. And because of desperate circumstances, they took this path after receiving a large amount of money in advance.

And that they could die from this training. They wrote a pledge that they would suffer the consequences if they revealed the information outside.

'And if I pass the final exam, I will be offered a tremendous amount of money, an opportunity, and a new identity.'

The candidates themselves don't know who brought them all together. They have no idea who is behind all of this.

'I can't believe they came all the way here without knowing their prospective employer. I'm sure everyone has their own

reasons.'

However, they blindly believed the words they heard at the beginning, "If you are hired, you can get ahead and get paid, and you can take care of your family well."

It may be because of the large amount of cash they received upon entering here.

They became increasingly anxious when Nicole, who is said to have a benefactor, entered the picture.

Nicole remembered Grace's words and calmed her mind.

However, as the days of training continued in this remote place, the days she spent living in the Grand Duchy suddenly came to mind.

The days when she was always under surveillance.

'For the first year..... What did I do? Yeah, I studied.'

No one expected Nicole to play the role of a proper Grand Duchess.

But even if there was a dog or cat sitting there, they would have been educated.

A chaperone also joined Nicole who is in charge of her education and taught her a lot.

As Nicole learned various manners at Grace's house, she realized that what she had learned at that time remained in her body, even if it was sparse.

Progress was much faster when learning the same thing.

There was a time when she spent a long time in a room unwillingly.

'Certainly... Was it when I was seriously injured in a carriage accident? I lived in a room where I couldn't even open the window for a while.'

I think it has been about a year since they got married.

On the way back from the Great Temple, she was involved in a serious carriage accident and she had to recuperate as if she was in captivity for a while.

'A rare and distinct memory of that time..... The first night with Raul..... That was close.'

Raul was somehow a little free at the time.

He looked after Nicole for a few days as if he cared.

About a year after she was brought in, Nicole was slowly losing hope.

It's still hard, but Jay said it's worth it to be a member of the Knights under the Grand Duke.

Isabel seemed to be doing well at the time.

She was very sad that her mother died, but she thought it couldn't be helped because she died due to a chronic disease.

Meanwhile, Raul somehow showed her interest, and she felt a bit at ease.

'I became a little aloof when I learned it was between families.'

Just as Nicole, who is being held, bears her obligations, so did Raul.

She knew that the Imperial family and the Grand Duke of Valentine was involved in the destruction of the Yveschapel family.

But Nicole wasn't very smart at the time, and it was just a world away from her.

One day, a maid came in and said she prepared a good bath bomb for the night.

Then she massaged Nicole's body and changed her clothes into silk pajamas.

By this point, Nicole was not an idiot at all, so she could tell. That Raul is going to spend their first night together with her after a year.

'Later, I... I was ashamed to accept it.'

Political conflict or political marriage was too difficult for Nicole at the time.

Regardless, Nicole got married and the two were obliged to sleep together.

In a way, she could say that he was an enemy, but she doesn't hate him...She thinks she misunderstood.

But somehow Raul was late. Isabel stopped by the house late at night under the pretext of delivering flowers. Then she handed her a tranquilizer.

Then she said with a swollen face.

⟨I'm sorry. I think you're doing well these days, so I've been hiding it all this time, but when I heard from Sister's maids you were preparing for your first night, I thought I shouldn't hide it anymore. You shouldn't sleep with him. Because of him, Father killed himself. This is Father's will.⟩

The will was full of words of apology to his children. Nicole was stunned to see the will.

'Now that I think about it, Isabel deliberately hid it from me and confessed it that day. Because she was afraid of me becoming the real Grand Duchess. That silly devil. Even if we slept together, I couldn't be a real Grand Duchess even if I died and woke up.'

When Raul arrived in the bedroom late at night, Nicole had a dry nausea. It was because she was so angry and sad.

Then she hit him at random and came at him.

Nicole fell into bed with her hands overpowered..... she doesn't remember the next thing that happened.

Since then, her relationship with Raul has reached its worst.

'Come to think of it, it was a very strange relationship.'

Raul has ignored Nicole for so long, but he never openly bullied her.

'Rather, the employees ignored me more.'

The maids and servants openly despised Nicole.

But it's... Now that she thinks about it, she also has a problem.

'In any case, I had no intention of improving my situation nor actively moving to survive. I was always lethargic and hid myself, so I must have looked absurd to his subordinates.'

Nicole smirked.

No matter how much she thinks about it, she doesn't have a good memory from her life in the Grand Duchy.

If someone asks her to go there one more time, she'll never be able to hold out.

Then someone giggled. Nicole remembered that the laughter was strangely familiar.

Nicole looked at her laughing partner. And she was surprised by the unexpected face.

'Marlin?'

Marlin was her maid of honor when she was a Grand Duchess.

'Does that mean that Marlin was also an agent of the Grand Duke?'

"It must be from downstairs."

"I heard that the kids downstairs are taking classes together from today."

The women next to Nicole whispered.

'Downstairs.....'

Nicole knew where downstairs was. It was a space for candidates to learn how to use swords.

It was close to simple self-defense or assassination, but women with excellent physical ability receive such training.

Training in this facility was diverse. Not all of them took the same class because of the same motivation.

It seemed that she only saw Marlin today because their classes overlapped for the first time.

“Is that her? The ‘Special treatment’.”

Marlin asked. Exactly staring at Nicole.

The women’s lips formed a smile.

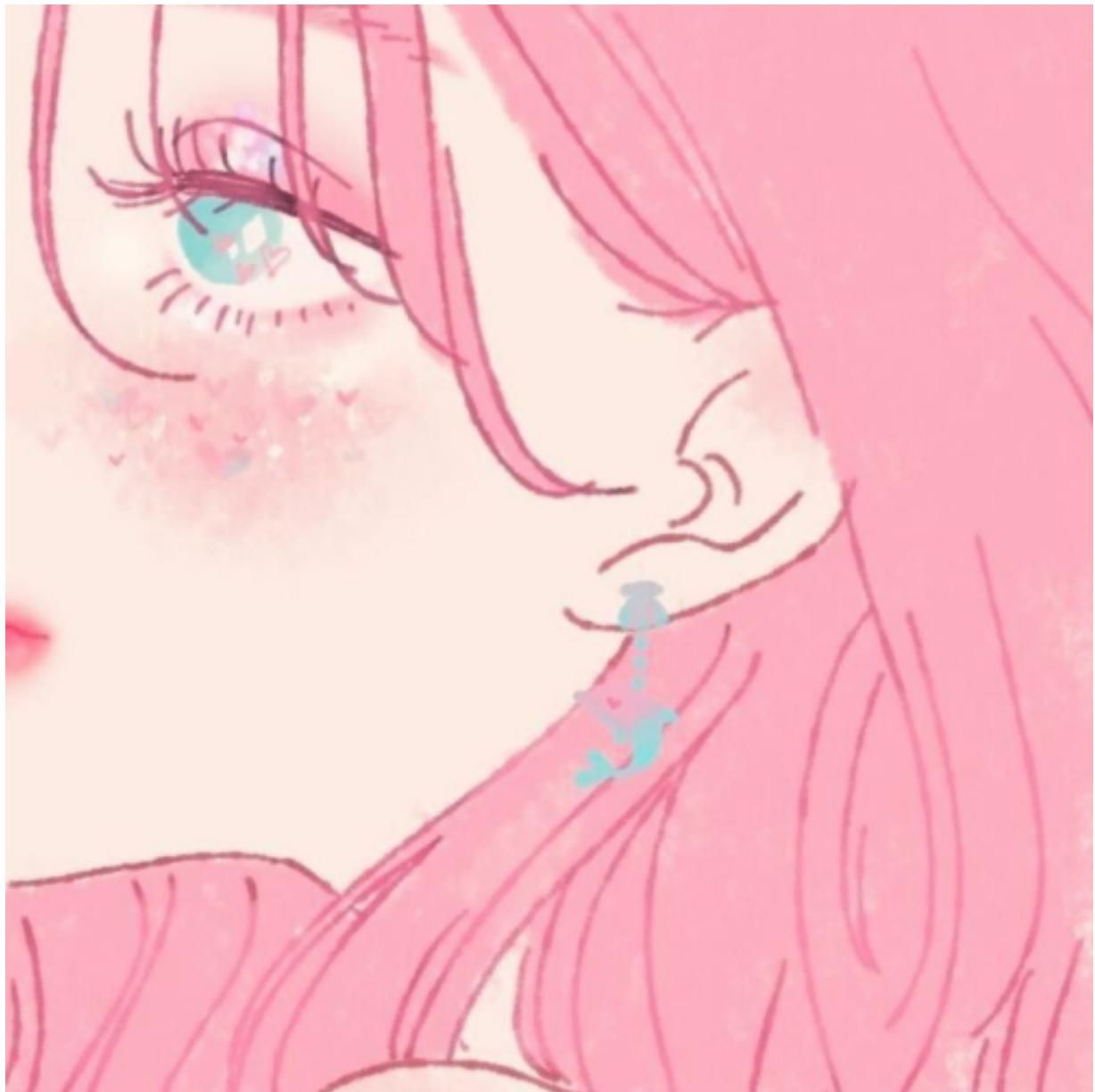
“A high-ranking person picked her.”

“She’s someone who was selected **externally\***. The bottom life ended up the same way. Why do you use such an elegant word? Who cares if she’s a precious person who’s been selling her body?”

**(t/n: She used the word “발탁” which is used when contracting, electing, or appointing a person who is not an internal member of each company, team, political party, etc.)**

Nicole looked at her. Honestly..... it was embarrassing. Because she was so different from what Nicole used to know.

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# Chapter 35

When she was Nicole's maid, Marlin showed all kinds of charms to Nicole.

'I remember her as a friendly and welcoming maid.'

She shared all kinds of rumors.

At the time, Nicole had no proper conversation partner and was always lonely.

She didn't hate such a Marlin because she was waiting for Isabel's visit endlessly.

The world was unknown to Nicole, and Marlin was her only connection with it.

〈Thank you, Marlin. This is my sincerity.〉

Nicole gave Marlin some of the Grand Duchess items that she paid little by little, be it jewelry or cosmetics.

It was months after Marlin took charge of her that she showed her true colors.

〈I'll tell you an interesting story. At a theater in the downtown area of the capital, a lady found her husband watching a play with his lover in the box seats. I know you don't like this kind of vulgar stories, but it's still so funny. When the wife collapsed after slapping their cheek, the husband also grabbed his wife's waist and collapsed, and

his lover grabbed the fallen husband and rolled around together. The three of them were more interesting than the play.)

〈But the cheating husband's wife later shouted like this. 'Why do you like a woman with a stupid face like the rumored Grand Duchess? Look at that ridiculous expression. You're not picky when you date someone. Do you like being with a girl from the countryside that much?'〉

〈Oh, madam..... I made a slip of the tongue. Sometimes immature women say that the Grand Duchess of Valentine's face is very tacky, and every time you make an expression, it's very ridiculous. They say that the Grand Duke of Valentine doesn't even go near you because you smell like you rolled around manure from the countryside. But never mind. Because I've been standing in front of people and telling them that it's never like that, and madam is a person who smells good like flowers.....〉

Marlin, who shared a strange rumor at first, gradually increased her gossip.

And at the end of her stories, she added how despised, ridiculed, and deemed unattractive Nicole is in society.

'I wouldn't even pretend to hear that now.'

But Nicole was out of her mind at the time.

She felt a great deal of guilt because she had spent a year in the Grand Duchy without knowing about her father's suicide.

Nicole's depression got worse as she talked to Marlin like that.

In addition, if Nicole told Marlin to stop because she didn't want to hear her, Marlin would exaggerate and curse Nicole in front of other people.

The Grand Duchess, who is from a humble background who knows nothing, is vicious to her servants. They would think she was trying to be a real aristocrat.

'But... she was an agent of the Grand Duke of Valentine.....'

Nicole was stunned. So Raul had put an agent on her at that time? Why?

'Was it... to check my movements?'

Raul wouldn't harass her on purpose anyway.

'Raul wouldn't have known this little thing. I can't believe a maid harassed me.....'

In addition, Raul later removed Marlin himself.

This is because Marlin was accused of not being loyal to the Grand Duchess, and was in contact with others.

She didn't know that until later.

'Obviously, she was disposed of for having an association with someone Raul didn't like.'

It turned out that Marlin has been accepting gifts and money from a lady.

That lady.....

Nicole stopped thinking.

This is because Marlin put her face close to Nicole when she ignored her.

"What's wrong with your eyes? Look at her. You think you're an aristocrat? How can you sit up there?"

Marlin burst into laughter. Nicole felt a slight dislike for her.

'A person can be a completely different person depending on where they meet.'

Previously, Marlin had been a constant psychological torment for Nicole.

However, she pretended to be an infinitely good person yet acted meanly.

'It seems that this training center has an influence on making such a woman behave like a decent maid.'

Nicole thought.

"Why aren't you answering me?"

Marlin thrust her head in.

Nicole slowly turned her head and looked into Marlin's eyes.

"Isn't this why everyone is here?"

"What?"

"I'm here to be educated so that I can imitate anyone, even a nobleman, if necessary. So I don't think you need to take issue with my attitude."

Nicole spoke quietly. She didn't feel the need to be kind because she didn't like Marlin.

Because Marlin wasn't smart enough, she couldn't understand Nicole's words easily as her face turned red.

"Marlin, you should know how to act like this person. That way, you'll be sent to a good position. I'd rather take her as an example."

Then someone said softly. Nicole looked at the person.

Before she knew it, someone was sitting next to Nicole.

'Oh, she's pretty.'

It was Nicole's first thought. She is very tall and thin. She was a beauty with rather mysterious, neutral features.

To be honest..... she really didn't seem like a person to be in this position.

"Are you on her side? This rag."

Marlin, who saw her, strode up.

"Huh? Answer me. Dalia, you damn thing! Once you get hit, you can't get your act together."

Marlin put her cheek up at once.

Nicole was so surprised. This is because she made a clear sound of mating.

"Stop it."

The woman called Dalia only protested feebly.

At that moment Nicole felt real sympathy and was embarrassed that she felt that way.

"You and this woman are of a similar kind. Things that wander around snobbishly yet do dirty things behind the scenes."

Marlin giggled. Nicole was shocked a second time.

A life driven to such a dead end that she ended up here. Does that make her feel entitled to torment others?

Marlin, who saw Nicole's frowned face, said.

"I'll get tired of class if I see you. Oh, yeah. Do people here know that? You have a hidden child. You'll be very tired if they know, right? You watch your language if you don't want me to talk. You're my food now."

Marlin smiled like a demon at Dalia.

Nicole is already tired.

\*\*\*

Slowly, a day or two passed.

From etiquette to family members of the Great Families, and from how to follow others silently to how to dress up.

The classes that followed in the education center were quite extraordinary.

"But we only take easy classes. There's a really harsh class. That girl Marlin and Dalia. They're going to have a harsher class downstairs."

".....is there a big difference between them and we?"

"They're learning to fight. I'm sure it's mainly about assassination techniques. Anyway, children who can

infiltrate as maids or servants and have fighting skills are valuable."

Nicole returned home and served Grace's tea.

Grace, who saw Nicole look pale, said.

"Why? Don't you want to take classes?"

".....No. The woman named Marlin keeps bothering the woman named Dalia. Who's trampling on who..... I don't want to see it. She keeps attacking her in front of people."

"Why? Aren't you not interested in other people's business?"

".....the woman named Dahlia seems to have a daughter."

Dalia said she was raising her daughter at a young age for some reason.

'Raising a daughter alone..... It's gonna be pretty tough.'

Dalia reminded her of her mother. Nicole still thinks about her mother every day.

'My mother too... She raised me in a tough situation without abandoning me.'

Nicole secretly asked Dalia if she was okay and gave her a handkerchief the day she sided with me.

*(It's okay, it's not a big deal, well.)*

She spoke quietly. Her figure was so thin and pretty.

*(Do you have a daughter?)*

⟨Yes, Marlin thinks my hidden daughter is a weakness. They treat people who have something to protect as weak. But I don't care. If I do well here, I won't get involved with anyone like her again.⟩

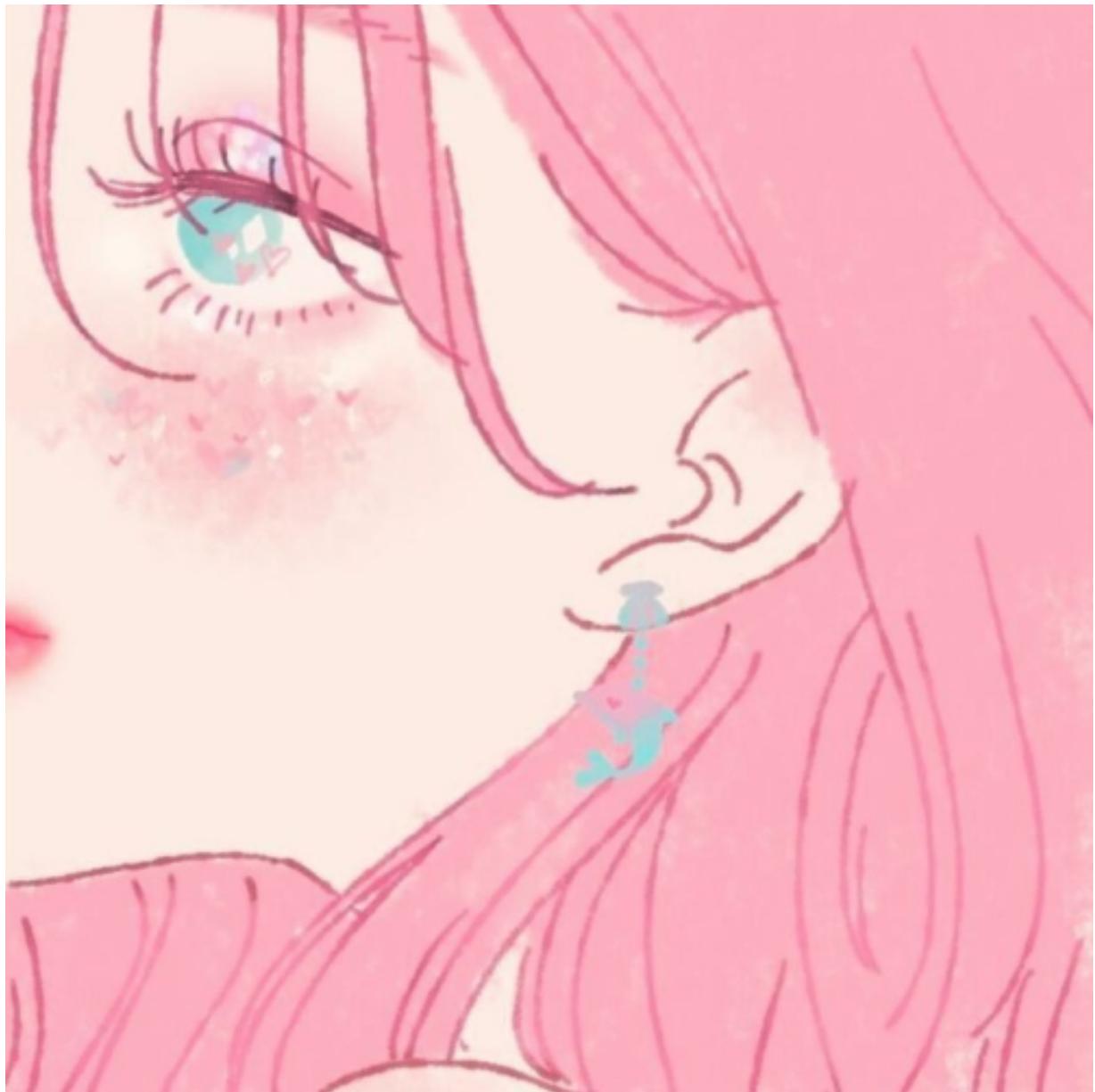
Nicole was strangely impressed with her.

⟨It must have hurt. I'll get you some medicine.⟩

⟨I'm fine. I only need my daughter to be safe. I can endure anything.⟩

'Poor thing, I want to help. But right now, that kind of feeling is a luxury for me.'

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# Chapter 36

She wants to help Dahlia.

Nicole has secretly thought about it ever since.

When Grace heard the aftermath, she laughed low.

"I see you still have a good side. Maybe you're just not cut out for this."

"I think so, too."

When Nicole nodded in agreement, Grace waved her hand.

"You said Marlin hated you because you had a backer, right?"

"Yeah."

“Then why don’t you use that to your advantage? I’m going to show you how to manipulate people. It’s simple, you tell someone what they want to hear, and let them think what they want to believe that you make a very easy living with your backer, which in return makes them jealous of you and covets what you have.”

Nicole listened intently to Grace’s words.

“Go tell her this.”

<You know, there are actually spies among us in this class, people who have already been recruited as agents. They’re hiding in here, watching us, grading us. Like secret examiners. Want to know how I know that?>

“So you think she’s inclined to mistake me for one of those ‘agents’?”

“There’s never a more deceptive moment than when a person is jealous of someone, because they have an inflated view of the other person, and they make up their own minds. They must have something to envy, who are better than themselves, and I think it is advantageous for you to make use of those jealous people.”

Grace explained.

'I wonder if this is how Raul was trained?'

Nicole really hadn't had many close encounters with anyone in her two lives.

And Raul..... was the most unique person she'd ever known.

'He could sit in the office and move things around and solve complex conspiracies in one fell swoop, sometimes digging his own traps.....'

Since her regression, Nicole has gotten into the habit of asking herself, when faced with a challenge, what would Raul do?

Taking on the identities of Jen and Karen was a corollary of that thinking.

Unbeknownst to Nicole, her behavior and mindset were moving her closer to Raul.

"Now don't make any more noise. I don't want you to be tired, and you're such a good student, you'll get the job without doing much."

Nicole returned to training the next day and quietly warned Marlin. Marlin was intrigued.

"Hmph, thanks for the tip. I guess you're pretty useful."

"....."

"Let's keep in touch."

From then on, Marlin stopped bullying Nicole and seemed to be more subtly harassing Dahlia in classes where Nicole wasn't present.

Marlin also started a rumor that she was actually a hidden examiner, which made her even more domineering among the girls.

'What is it with the mindset of people like this?'

Nicole was reminded of Isabelle and felt increasingly disgusted.

Besides, Marlin was too loud, and Nicole didn't want her to disturb her peace anymore.

Marlin even clung to Nicole after that day and pretended to be friendly. Of course, that didn't mean she was being nice.

A few days later, Nicole quietly commented.

"Marlin, you know what? The best spies are scouted out."

"Scouted?"

"You don't know who it is that brings us here and trains us, so until we pass, we have to think about who our master is. Don't you see? How could I have someone in high places behind my back?"

"Master...?"

"Yes. In fact, I think..... there is a great opportunity for you, too."

Nicole thought back to how Marlin had been disposed of in her previous life.

Marlin's owner was Mrs. Forina. Who was Mrs. Forina.....

'The woman who bore the Grand Duke's illegitimate child.'

The former Grand Duke was said to have been similar to Raul.

A workaholic, arrogant perfectionist. He was elite in the best sense of the word and inhuman in the worst sense of the word.

Somehow, he managed to have a few affairs with a widowed woman from a fallen aristocracy whose identity is unclear.

The woman was lucky enough to become pregnant with the child of the noble Grand Duke of Valentine.

Of course, when the child was born, the Grand Duke did not approve.

The Empire did not accept illegitimate children. It was not easy for a bastard to be recognized as an enemy.

However, there are exceptions.

'If the child is descended from a family of power, and the power is manifested.'

Raul's much older half-brother.

His name was Julian. Julian had shown some abilities at a very young age.

Because of this, Lady Forina was recognized as a proper mistress.

The Grand Duke did not take her into his home. He graciously gave her the title of Viscountess, bought her a mansion, and allowed her to live off the family treasury.

The Viscountess Forina was usually called Lady Forina.

She was eager to push her son into the Grand Duchy.

Unfortunately, as the child she bore, a boy named Julian, grew up, it was discovered that he was not intelligent. Lady Forina was driven mad, scrambling to hide the fact.

She rarely took her son out and kept him at home.

‘She..... hated me.’

In the midst of all this, she began to have an absurd thought.

She believed that she had to interfere in Raul’s marriage in order for her to be recognized as the *Grand Duchess, the laughing stock.*

It was due to the vain ambitions of the capital’s nobility who had a daughter.

After all, Raul was a high nobleman with power and beauty, and a young Lord.

The marriage of such a person would normally be organized by the older members of the household, especially the ladies.

But Raul knew only a few women of influence.

Among them were the nobles, who came to Madame Forina grasping at straws.

"Please take this and arrange a meeting between the Grand Duke and our daughter."

These were the ones who made the most ridiculous requests. Usually, Lady Forina would say that she was in and out of the Grand Duke's house on a regular basis, and the uninformed would be fooled.

'If they have a beautiful daughter, they would want to try. My ex-husband, Raul.'

Nicole smiled bitterly at the thought.

'Anyway, he did take me back and marry me.'

But no one really thought Nicole was the Grand Duchess. She could be dethroned at any moment, she thought.

A year or two passed, and Raul still hadn't divorced Nicole.

Then Lady Forina began to believe that she could preside over Raul's remarriage only if Nicole, who was in the way, disappeared.

Some of the nobles even promised to help Julian become a grand duke in earnest if he married their daughter.

'Eventually, several of them, including Marlin, were bought off by Madame Forina.....'

When this was discovered, Marlin was removed.

It was later revealed that Lady Forina had even planned to assassinate Nicole.

It ended with her being exiled to a faraway country with Julian.

'I thought at the time that Raul had used me to get rid of Mrs. Forina.'

Looking back, she doesn't know why she thought that.

'I wonder if Marlin was bought off by Mrs. Forina at some point?'

What would happen?

Nicole decided to try a little experiment.

"Marlin, listen to me. If you go to 6th Avenue in the 13th arrondissement of the capital, there's a luxurious house with a cobalt-blue roof. If you go to the backyard of that house, there will be white roses in bloom. If you go there and spill a little bit of the story about this training center, that you're

being trained as an agent in a secret place, they'll ask you,  
'Would you do anything for me?'"

Nicole smirked.

"After that, it's your choice."

Marlin looked thoughtful.

'If you're not suited to this job, you should quit sooner rather than later.'

There's nothing worse than an agent with no loyalty.

Nicole took a rotten apple from Raul's basket.

'Stupid, immature Mrs. Forina.'

But she had one thing going for her: greed.

When she hears the story of this institution, Mrs. Forina will immediately recognize that it belongs to the Grand Duke.

And she would use Marlin against him.

'Someone who needs an excuse to influence the Grand Duchess, and a disloyal mole who needs a master.'

A perfect match. Nicole awaited the outcome with interest.

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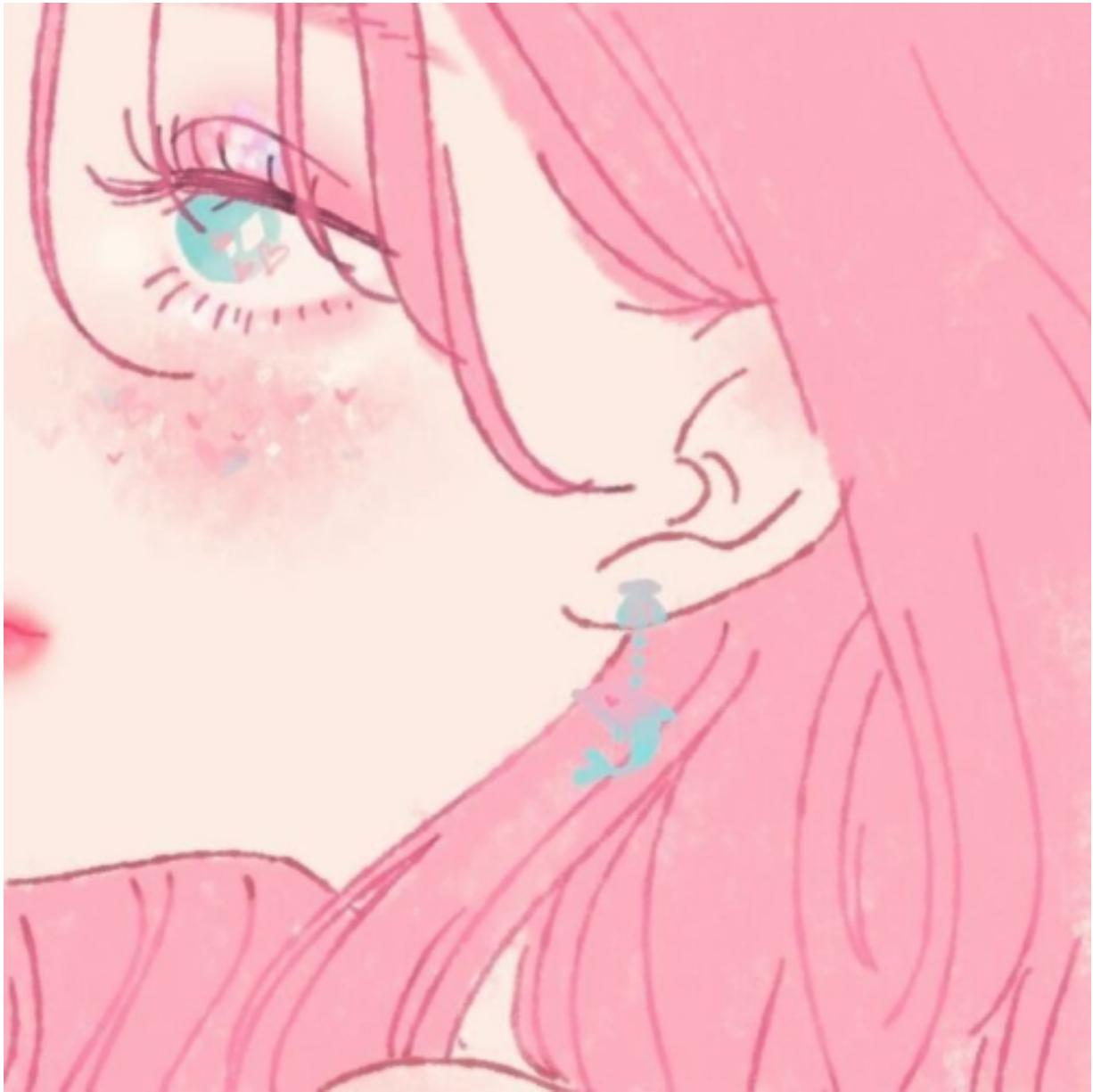
Marlin went to visit the cobalt-blue-roofed house that very day. That night, Marlin walked out the back door of the mansion with a deep pocket.

Very stealthily, to be sure.

The next day, Marlin began to fly in and out of Mrs. Forina's mansion like a sparrow to the mill.

Nicole's experiment was a success.

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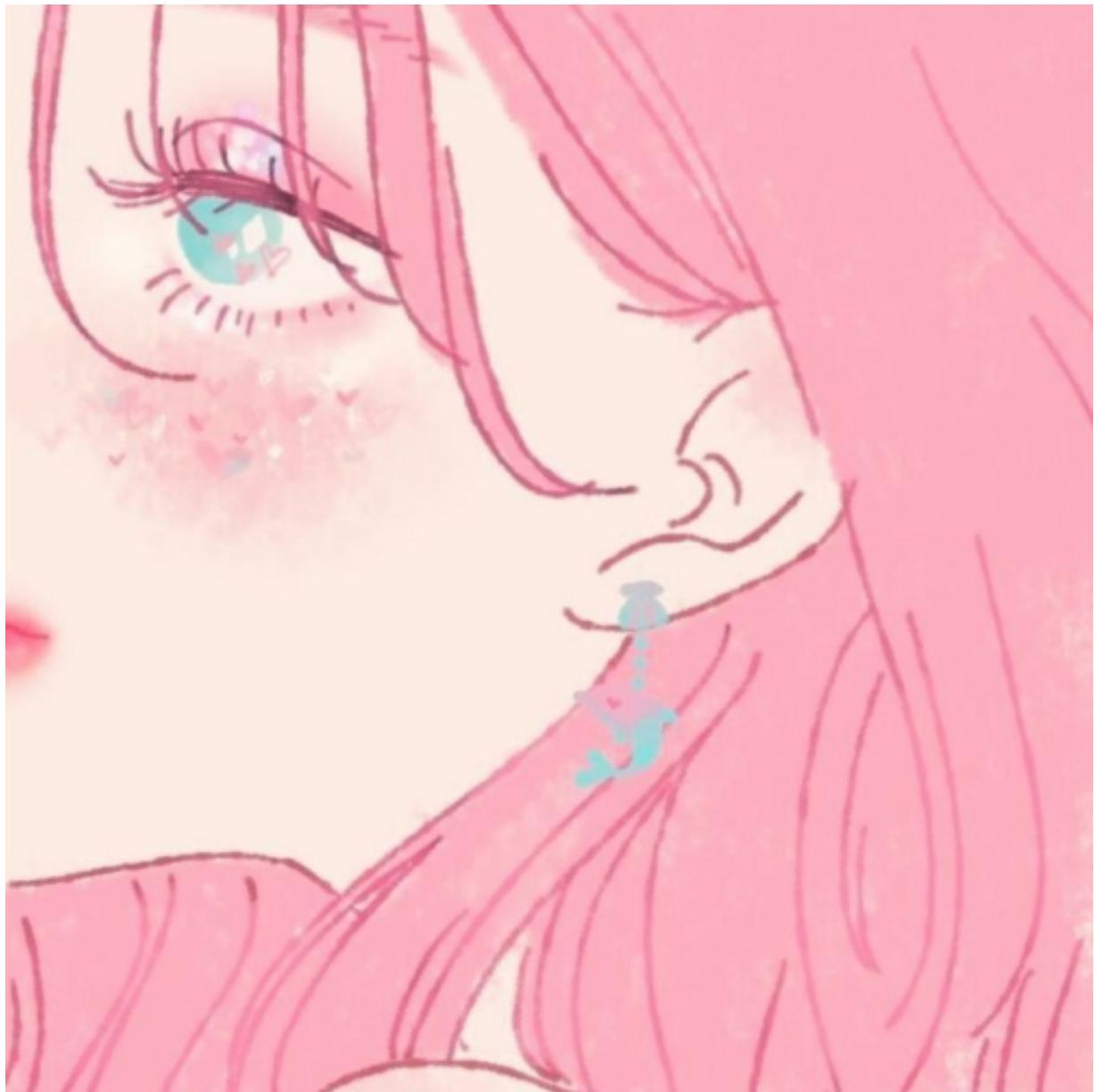


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# Chapter 37

The last day of class was approaching.

There were only six girls left. Nicole woke up early and had breakfast with Grace.

〈Good job. I don't think you're going to get into too much trouble with Raul for this.〉

Grace said with satisfaction.

〈But where did all the people who suddenly disappeared go? The examiners aren't giving me any answers.〉

Candidates like Nicole were getting restless. The women in her class had been disappearing one by one overnight.

〈First, the 'class' weeds people out in three stages. The first to be weeded out are, as they say, drugged to erase

their memories. The candidates who are dismissed at this stage are not talented or qualified.)

⟨..... I see.⟩

⟨And then there are those who are capable of doing the job, but whose use is limited. They're sorted out, tested for loyalty, and then put to work. They're the ones who won't make it, so to speak, and will fall into the way of the mediocre.⟩

Grace added to Nicole. Those who make it through stage two will mostly live like 'normal people' and will be asked for information on the streets.

Like maids, shop clerks, waitresses, etc.....

But they would be a sort of standing army, collecting information from the streets for the Grand Duke, and digging for more information if necessary.

Most ruling families had one or two of these people, even if they weren't as organized as the Grand Duke's.

⟨And the rest?⟩

⟨Children like you. Talented, clever, and capable of being sent on important missions.

⟨.....⟩

⟨In short, those who could become Shadows, the Grand Duke's private knights, who are more closely vetted and saved for last.⟩

⟨I don't think they're looking for character.⟩

Of the candidates, Marlin's domineering behavior was getting worse. Nicole frowned at the thought of her.

⟨If you hadn't made it this far, the Grand Duke would have tried to kill you by any means necessary.⟩

Grace had referred to Nicole as her pupil to hide her identity.

'There's no way a pupil of Grace's could be anything less than excellent.'

That was Raul's logic. In other words, he doubted Grace's words.

Nicole nervously put down the teaspoon she was holding.

*(But don't worry. With your skills, I'm sure you'll pass.)*

*(I'll do my best.)*

It was the only way to avoid giving Grace any trouble.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Nicole headed to the training center early.

When she arrived at the training center, the first thing she did was go into the room called the classroom.

Today, the furniture in the room was different from usual.

All the clutter in the classroom was cleared away, and the chairs were arranged in a semicircle, as if surrounding something.

“What’s going on today?”

“It’s the final exam.”

The six women chattered among themselves.

Then, without warning, they all sat down in chairs.

Just then, the door burst open.

“Hi everyone!”

Nicole turned to see an unexpected figure standing there. It was Estok, looking like he was happy to be alive every day.

‘Why is he here?’

Nicole was stunned to see him. Wasn’t it a secret that these “interviews” were for selecting spies for the Grand Duke’s family?

Estok even showed up wearing the famous Grand Duke’s livery.

The Grand Duke, the treasure of the Empire. A war hero, a member of the House of Valentine, and a swordsman.

The black uniform of the Sith was a symbol of sorts.

‘You’re wearing your uniform in public like this?’

Moreover, all six of the last people left in this interview had eyes, so they recognized him immediately.

“As you’ve all noticed, you’re interviewing to become a member of the secret corps of the Grand Duke’s family,

wielders of immense power. For those of you who are astute, you already know that.”

“.....”

Even if they did, none of them could say yes. Ignoring the silent candidates, Estok continued.

“Anyway, if any of you are eliminated at this stage, you’ll be given a pill that will erase your memories for a month or two, and that pill has a 5-10% chance of having a side effect called mania, so let’s see who survives to become my coworker or turns insane!”

Estok said in such a hopeful tone that Nicole didn’t even have the energy to be ridiculous this time.

“What is this.....?”

“I didn’t hear about any side effects like that!”

“You signed a waiver, it’s part of the deal.”

Only Dahlia was calmer. But her face was dark as she thought about her daughter.

Then Nicole asked calmly.

“Since you’re here, does that mean you’re our final interviewer?”

“Uhhh..... this lady.”

Estok’s eyes widened at the sight of Nicole.

“You’re still cute and pretty, so has our Grand Duke taken notice?”

“What?”

Nicole jerked back involuntarily.

Estok was a character she could never get used to, even in her second life.

“Anyway, you’re right, I’m the one administering this final test. Everyone, follow me.”

Estok said, taking the lead.

“Oh, and before we do that, you should probably change your clothes.”

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Afterward, they were taken to a floor they had never been to before, where there were dresses of all sizes and makeup supplies.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll see you soon.”

Estok said cheerfully.

“I’d like to see what you’ve learned about makeup. It’s part of the test.”

Nicole was genuinely curious about Estok's gender. If she was a woman, wouldn't she have to duck out of the way?

"What are you going to wear?"

The woman, who had only spoken a few words to Nicole, asked in a small voice. It didn't take Nicole long to find an off-white dress.

The material was high quality, so she could blend in anywhere. At the same time, it was inconspicuous.

"Hands off, you're last in line. No one wants to wear something that's been touched by a private life slut like you."

As Dahlia tried to pick out a dress without thinking, Marlin shoved her angrily.

'I wish I could stop seeing her.'

Marlin was..... too loud. Enough to make Nicole, who had been hiding quietly in the mountains, feel murderous.

Dahlia turned away from Marlin, her face dark and wordless.

“Why the hell are you putting up with that?”

Nicole asked Dahlia quietly.

“You don’t know. Marlin’s a crazy bitch. That kind of girl, you never know what she might do.”

“Did you catch any weaknesses?”

“There’s a house where I leave my daughter, and Marlin knows where it is, and she’s the kind of woman who would do something to my daughter if she got into trouble with me.”

“Children are a huge weakness for a secret agent. How are you going to do this if someone finds out who you are and takes your daughter hostage?”

Naturally, Nicole’s voice was filled with concern.

"I want to pass the final exam to protect my daughter. The man who scouted me here said that if I survive to the end and can take on this job, he will send my daughter to a very safe place. A nice, temple-like place where she can grow up like a noble child and I can make a lot of money and provide for my family."

Everyone was thinking the same thing. Nicole was thinking the same thing: she wanted to make a lot of money and have a stable position so she could take care of her younger brother.

One side of the room was partitioned off into a powder room, where she could change clothes and apply makeup with the tools at hand.

Marlin casually opened the door and stepped over the partition.

Soon, two of her followers entered and helped her get dressed.

"Do you need help getting dressed?"

“No, I’m fine.”

Dahlia said. She slipped quietly into one of the cubicles and didn’t come out again for a while. She was probably nervous.

\*\*\*

“Wow, you’re really pretty.”

Estok clapped his hands as the women came out. But his eyes remained fixed on Nicole.

Marlin was the most gorgeous. Dahlia was also a beautiful woman with a certain allure, but Nicole was truly aristocratic and effortless.

Even in her simple dress, she exuded an air of neatness and softness that would make anyone walk into a mansion right now and think she was the honored daughter of the family.

“So, where are we going now?”

Marlin finally asked Estok, unable to contain herself.

“How do we get to and from here?”

“Blindfolded..... we'll ride in a designated carriage.”

Marlin replied quickly, eager to be seen.

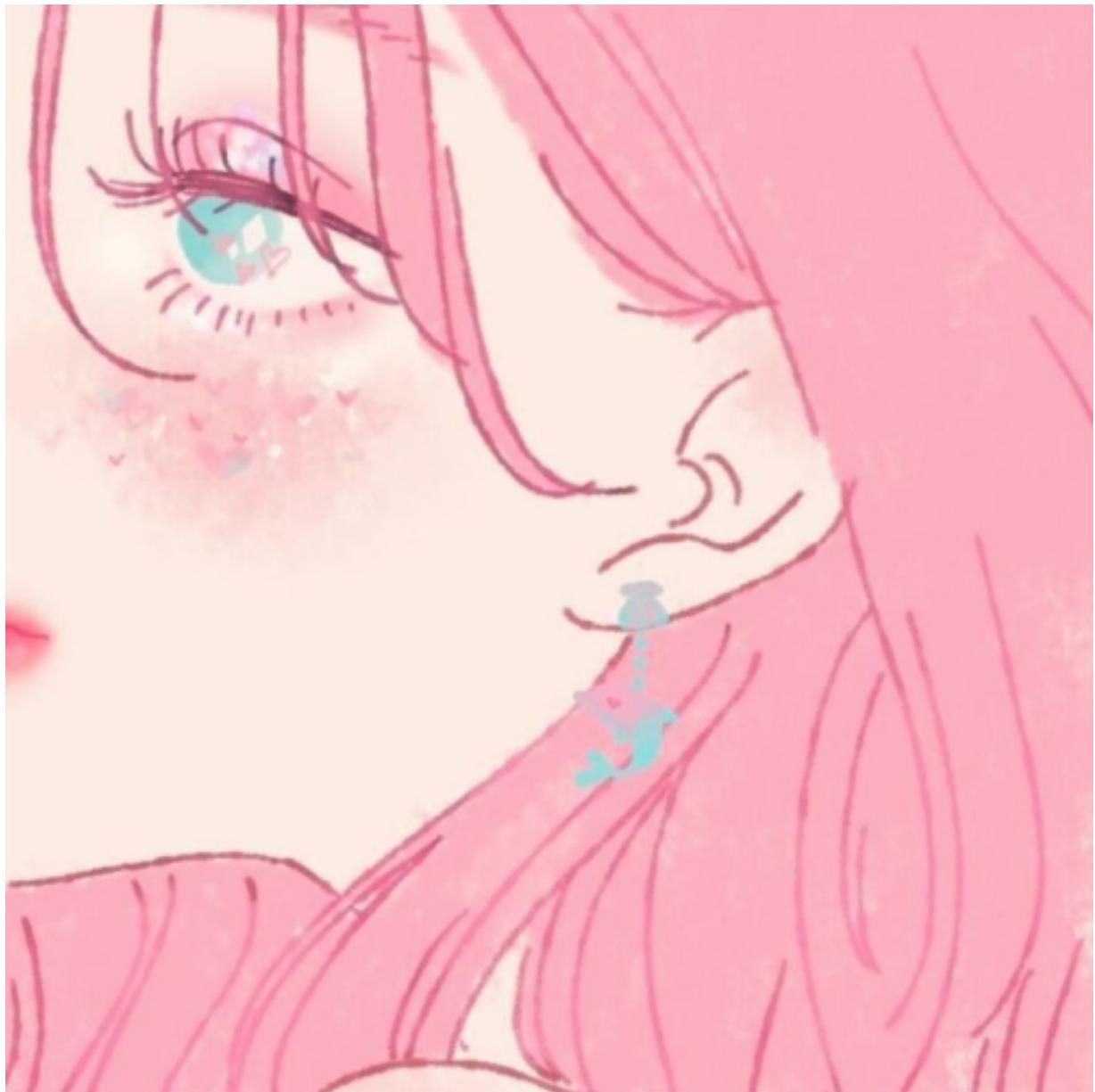
“Very well then. Why do you have to be blindfolded if you can tell where we're going so easily? Of course it's a secret where you're going. This knight has a nice face but a bad head.”

At last Marlin blushed and said nothing.

‘I wonder if the master and the subordinate are the same.’

Nicole thought.

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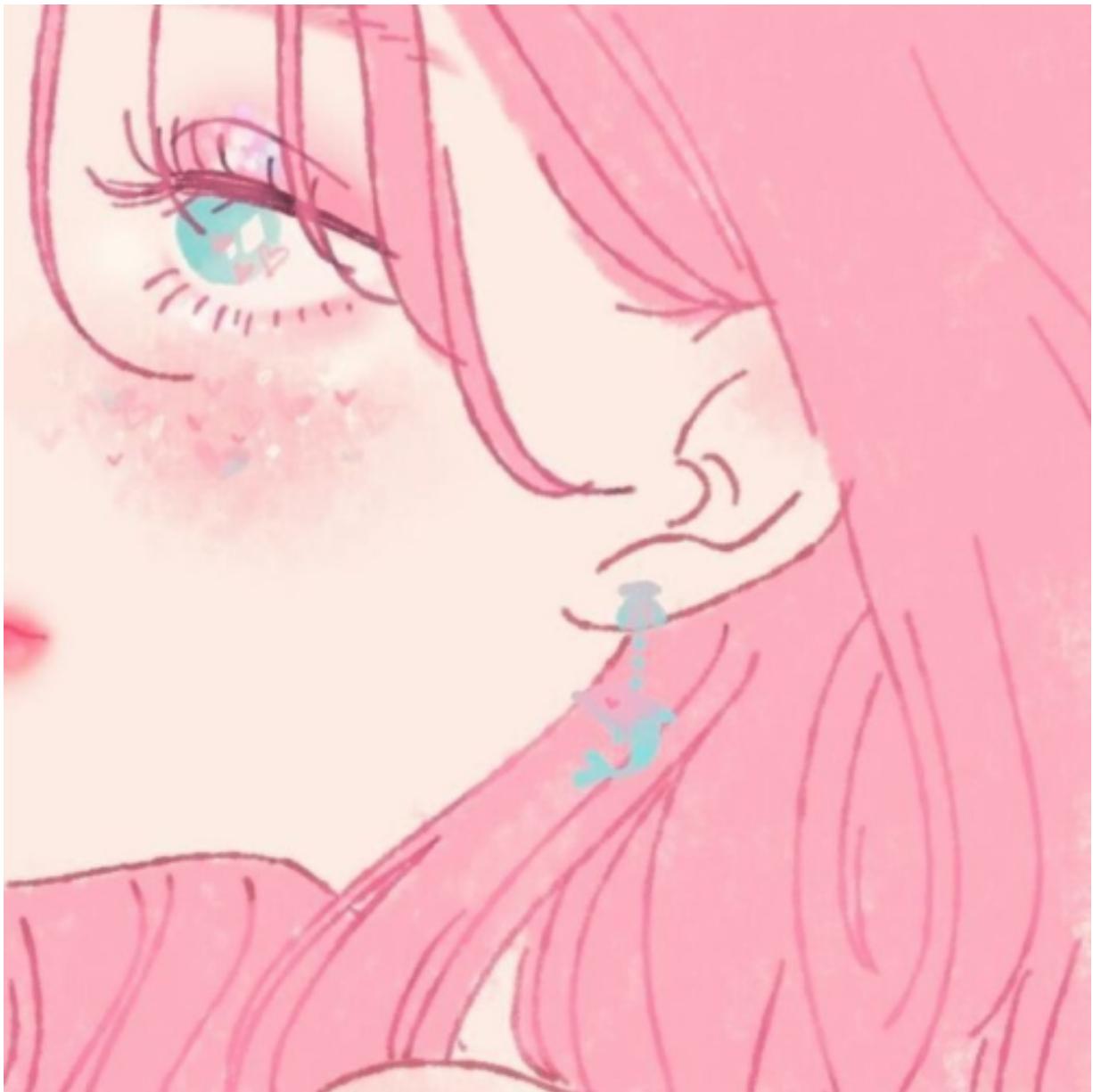


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# Chapter 38

\*\*\*

“Where the hell are we?”

“This is an aristocratic club called the Artus Club. The first floor is a social hall where anyone can come and go, and the second floor is a social club where members are thoroughly vetted. It’s quite famous, I hear.”

They arrived in the backyard of a mansion. It was quiet, except for the occasional distant sound of laughter and music.

“Can we come in here?”

One of the candidates said in a low voice.

“Yes, of course, it belongs to the Grand Duke, after all.”

At the mention of the Grand Duke's family, the eyes of the candidates gathered here fluttered.

Hearing the name of someone so powerful, they didn't know if this was a dream or reality.

Estok took no more questions and led them out the back door.

In the crowded dance hall, everyone's eyes widened, oblivious to the situation. Estok then led them to a small room on the second floor.

"The task you will be given today is the most critical skill of an agent. That is surveillance. This will be your chance to prove whether or not you are a competent spy."

".....Who are you assigning me to surveil?"

Nicole asked.

"Good question. That's part of the test. Right now, you're going to go up to the second floor and start 'exploring.' And you're going to pick one person to be your target, and you have two hours to figure out their name. There's only one condition: 'The person is in this building at this time, at this moment."

It's a tough assignment, but it's not impossible. There are ways to do this, including asking probing questions, peeking at guest lists, and eavesdropping.

Knowing what they were thinking, Estok clicked his tongue.

"You think that's too easy, then let's get down to business."

Estok nodded vigorously and said.

"For the next three days, you will spy on a target of your own choosing— that's your first test— and write a report on their movements. The moment you're spotted or arrested, you're out, so....."

"....."

“Try not to get caught by your targets, or get yourself into trouble. No one will help you if you get caught and tortured at the hands of the great people here, and you’ll be treated like a lunatic if you reveal that you’re under surveillance by order of the Grand Duke, so don’t worry about us.”

In reality, they have no official ties to the Grand Duchy. After all, who would buy into the myth of a secret academy training spies in the first place?

Besides, if you’re in the right circles, the Grand Duke is involved.

If you sold his name, you’d be treated as a madwoman or a robber and beaten to death. They bit their lips, knowing they were quick on the uptake.

“I’m assuming there’s a criteria? What’s the score?”

Nicole asked calmly.

“It’s based on how detailed and useful information you ask for. So hurry up.”

Estok said, looking a little deflated.

Apparently, this kind of work is a tedious task that Estok gets tired of quickly.

'With a personality like this, and mood swings?'

Nicole was beginning to wonder what kind of person Estok really was.

"Well, I'll leave you to it, but please submit your report in three days. If you're waiting for me at your place after three days, a carriage will come for you."

Estok waved his hand dismissively. He left the room without saying another word. The candidates looked at each other.

Marlin ripped off all the lace and jewelry from her dress.

Once she was in plain, shabby clothes, she straightened her posture and smiled softly.

“What are you doing, Marlin?”

“Fool, pretending to be a maid and approaching gentlemen. It’s weird when a maid wears fancy clothes. Hey, get out of the way.”

With that, Marlin shoved Dahlia out of the way and stormed out of the room.

The others looked at each other, then quickly followed Marlin out of the room. Nicole and Dahlia were the only ones left.

“What are we going to do?”

Dahlia asked in a low voice.

“First, I need to pick a target and find out who he is. From the looks of it, the second floor is full of people, so I’ll have to go to the first floor.”

Dahlia’s ears perked up at Nicole’s words. Why would they need to go to the first floor to find their target?

“Why do we have to go to the first floor?”

“Everyone else went to the second floor. You said it was a forbidden area, so we’d have to disguise ourselves as maids to get inside. Isn’t it strange that so many maids suddenly appear?”

Dahlia was silent for a moment at that.

“Estok..... That examiner said to go up to the second floor and ‘explore’, he didn’t say the objective was on the second floor, and the condition was ‘be a person in this building right now’. Use your imagination. There might be a lot more interesting targets on the first floor.”

Nicole said calmly.

“You.....”

Surprise flashed across Dahlia’s face.

Estok had actually qualified their targets with a clever phrase.

He kept emphasizing the “social club on the second floor”. He also encouraged them to spy on someone “high up” and write a report.

Naturally, you would think that there would be more people with high status on the second floor, which is a special place, than on the first floor, where anyone can come and go.

“So you’re going to go down to the first floor? What kind of people are you going to target?”

Dahlia said, sounding a little nervous.

“Why would I bother?”

“.....?”

“Estok told me to get a name, but he didn’t tell me not to spy on someone whose name I already know. Estok doesn’t like to be bored, so I’m going for a surprise.”

“.....”

Dahlia fell silent.

“You’re so special, so smart, Karen.”

Dahlia said in a small voice.

“But..... I’m not good at this, and I know you’ve been sneaky and helped me out whenever Marlin has been picking on me here. I wish I had your guts.”

Tall and thin, Dahlia was a beautiful woman who exuded a strangely sad charm. Nicole felt a little weak inside.

“Dahlia, what if there was a way to beat Marlin for picking on you?”

“What do you mean, beat ....., not get revenge?”

“What’s revenge but knocking Marlin off her feet by getting a higher grade than her?”

Dahlia’s brow furrowed slightly. Her stomach fluttered a little at the mere mention of it, and her gaze shifted to Nicole.

“You know how?”

“I told you, if you spy on someone you already know, you don’t have to worry about picking a target.”

Nicole raised her magpie and whispered in Dahlia’s ear.

“Spy on Marlin.”

“.....what?”

“Well, she’s ‘in this building at this moment,’ and she’s an experienced agent candidate who trained with us. What if we could spy on her without being seen?”

Dahlia pondered. It was a tempting proposition.

“If I succeeded, Marlin would be unqualified because she didn’t even notice my surveillance.”

“Yeah. Besides..... It would be better to spy on Marlin than on a nobleman you don’t know. She likes bars and back alleys, places that are less heavily guarded than nobleman’s mansions, and you already know quite a bit about her. It’s much easier to spy on someone you already know.”

Dahlia’s eyes narrowed.

“Marlin used my daughter to blackmail me, chased me down as a prank, found out where she lived, and called me unspeakable names.”

“That’s because you’re superior. A squire like Marlin doesn’t touch anyone who isn’t a real threat.”

Nicole said.

“You can’t perform to the best of your abilities if Marlin is in the way anyway, since you’re afraid of her.”

A smile slowly formed on Dahlia's lips.

"Karen, I'll say it again, you're amazing, and—"

"....."

"Sounds like this test is going to be fun."

\*\*\*

Marlin and the other candidates were running around in a frenzy that day, but Nicole and Dahlia were relaxed.

Before she left the building after Marlin, Dahlia asked quietly.

"I've been wondering, Nicole, why have you always helped me?"

"Because I think you'd be a good mom."

“.....Why is that?”

“I don’t have a mom, so.....it is a big reason for me.”

Dahlia looked at Nicole and leaned in. Then she whispered. A sweet scent tickled her nose.

“Thank you, Karen.”

In that moment, Dahlia looked so beautiful and vulnerable.

Nicole wondered if a beauty like Dahlia would be a good fit for the role of the “legendary mistress” Grace was talking about.

“So, Nicole, who is your target?”

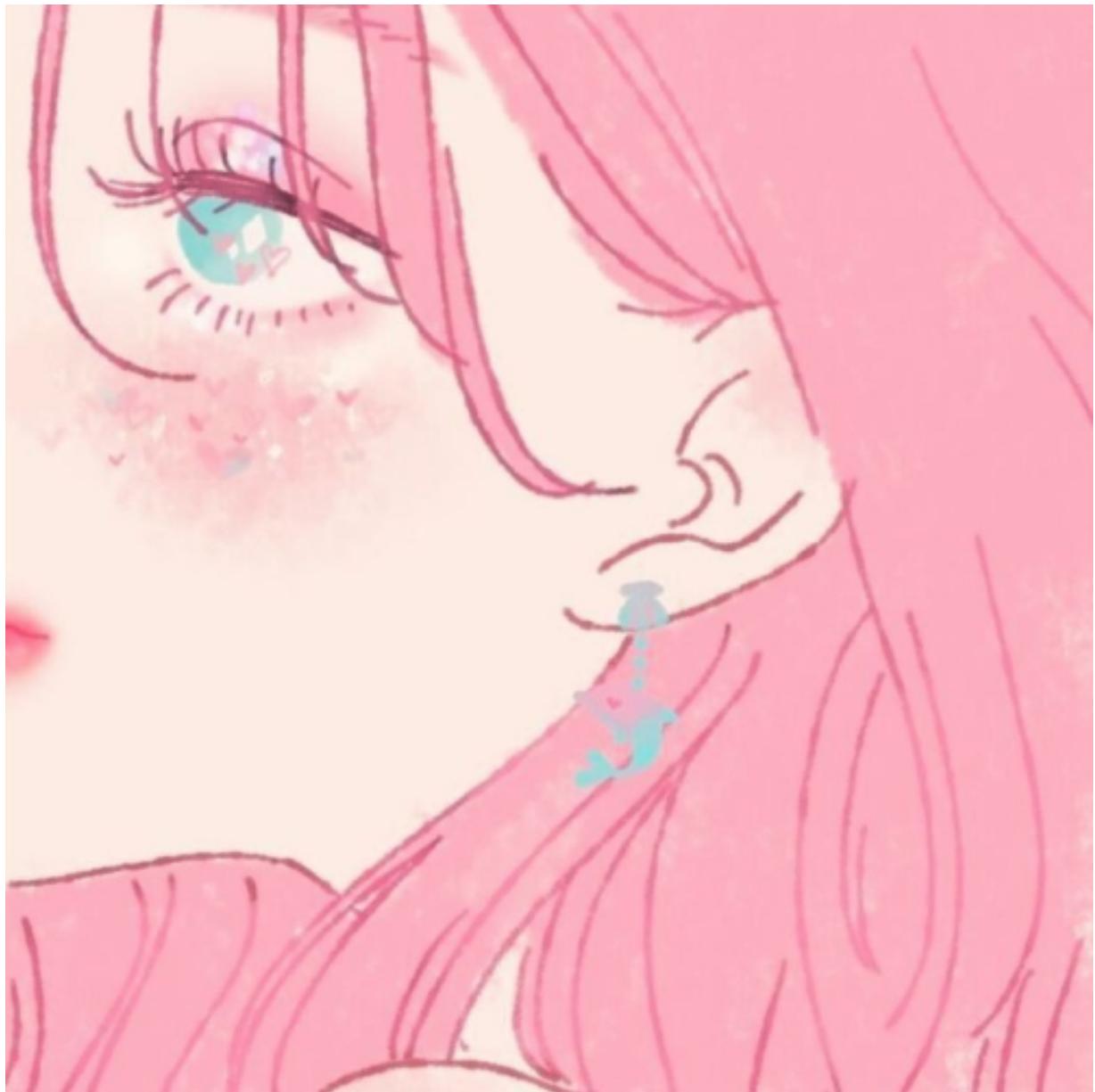
Nicole just smiled and looked at Dahlia.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

Nicole decided to target Estok.

(T/N: hmm I am genuinely confused why Dahlia calls Nicole both 'Karen' and 'Nicole'. Did I miss anything? I'm too lazy to read back ග\_ජ)

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# Chapter 39

\*\*\*

Sith agents are given new names when they join the organization. It wasn't really their name.

It's more of a nickname. Raul's entourage, Bastard, was Bastard as in the Bastard Sword.

Estok was..... literally Estok the Three Swords.

She walked slowly after him. Weaving in and out of crowds, ducking into alleys and stopping at a distance.

'It's important to know people.'

As far as Nicole knew, Estok was an orphan.

He had no one to call a friend. At first, people didn't even know if he was a boy or a girl.

All he liked to do was run around all day, get into fights, and be lazy.

'The neighborhood cat, that one.'

Nicole clicked her tongue; after all, she'd been following Estok all this time and hadn't been caught.

'I'm good at this, this job.'

It took her two lifetimes to find her aptitude. Nicole owes her ability to track from her childhood experience.

Nicole grew up in the mountains, where people were rare. It wasn't that she didn't run into people.

In fact, drifters like Karen and Jen had taken up residence in a cabin near an abandoned mine.

*(When you walk through the woods, always stay in the shade, and keep your footsteps quiet. You must not let anyone see you except your family.)*

Her parents taught their children to walk without making a sound.

They also taught them to hide in the shade of trees and to hold their breath, so they could escape the occasional animal encounter.

‘It was the only thing I was skilled at in the family.’

Children are terrible at staying still. They are constantly squirming, moving, and whimpering.

Nicole wasn’t like Isabelle or Jay. She could hold her breath and wait patiently for very long periods of time. She could blend into the landscape like a ghost.

‘My father was a unique man. He knew how to disappear. It wasn’t difficult for me to learn.’

In any case, spying on Estok's day wasn't as difficult as Nicole thought.

He climbed up on the roof of the Grand Duchy, took a long nap, and looked for someone to duel.

Nicole quickly picked out a "big name target" who was bigger than any of the candidates.

Nicole then proceeded to document his every move.

\*\*\*

'It's been three days.'

'It's been three days now. I just need to make it through the day.'

For two days, Estok barely moved and spent his time inside the palace.

On the third day, he finally ventured out.

‘What is he doing here?’

The river where steamboats ply, west of the capital.

There’s an area near it that few people go to.

Grace had warned her not to wander around the area because it wasn’t safe.

Nicole walked slowly after Estok, keeping her face covered. They arrived at a large, unmarked port window.

“Come in.”

The gatekeeper let Estok in without a word. Nicole hurried in after him.

“No freaking out in here, so get yourself together. And you’ll be mistaken for a thief if you cover your face in here.”

The gatekeeper glared at Nicole and warned her. Reluctantly, Nicole slowly lowered the veil that covered her face.

Instead, she pulled her hood up and began walking with her head down.

Once inside, the room was brightly lit. The windows were covered, and fresh air streamed in through a hole in the ceiling.

The ceilings were very high for a large warehouse, and even though it was broad daylight, there were bright lights everywhere.

Waaaaah! Loud noises erupted from all directions.

“Ho-ho-ho-ho!”

In the large room, men and women were mingling, laughing, and whispering to each other.

In the center of the stage, there was a dance that wasn't a waltz, but a shuffle, and as she ducked and weaved her way

through it, she found herself in the innermost room.

'What the hell is this place?'

Nicole stood against the wall. The men's shouts grew louder, and she could hear the words clearly.

"One gold coin to one!"

"I'm all in!"

Nicole's brow furrowed.

'Betting ring?'

Nicole looked up at the ring.

Puck-puck-puck.

Bare-chested men in shirts and pants locked their fists in the ring.

Nicole could see their sweat dripping into the air.

“Kill them, kill them all!”

Around them, men shouted, waving slips of paper with their bets on them like flags.

Estok smiled from the front, his legs crossed lazily.

‘That’s Estok.’

Nicole thought calmly, organizing the information in her head.

Target, around 3 p.m. Spotted in the VIP section of an illegal fight club. No stakes appear to have been placed. ....

It was at that moment. Estok lifted his eyes to the front and looked at Nicole. Nicole ducked down.

Estok looked around, then toward Nicole as if he'd spotted someone he knew.

'Have I been spotted?'

Nicole felt a chill run down her spine. She walked quickly, heading for the first hall.

A dizzying array of women in colorful dresses flashed before her eyes.

Vibrant greens and bright reds. It was a feast of colors that might seem a tad cheap.

At the same time, men approached Nicole and said something friendly. They seemed to be asking her to dance.

Nicole glanced behind her and roughly grabbed one of the hands extended to her.

Parak—

The hood around Nicole's head was pulled back a little.

"Hold on."

A quick dance began.

She could feel Estok's gaze still burning into her. Unable to help herself, Nicole ducked into the man's arms, almost face down.

'He's a very tall man.'

A strange man to meet in a place like this. I honestly wasn't expecting a pleasant smell. But instead of the stench of cigarettes stinging her nose, she smelled.....

'A pleasant smell.'

Nicole looked up, surprised. The hand squeezing hers was too big.

And black leather gloves. The first thing she saw was a thick, forward-pitched, muscled chest, with a manly Adam's apple above it.

And above it was.....

"Hello. Long time no see."

Raul took both of Nicole's hands in his and looked down at her in an amused way.

Nicole's first thought was why is he here, but then she remembered.

'Watching ring fights was one of his few hobbies as a workaholic.'

But she hadn't expected to run into him here, really. Nicole's mind went blank.

"The least you could do is say, 'I'm glad to see you.' I'd feel bad if I was the only one happy to see you."

He pulled Nicole's body tightly against his.

It was a flawless waltz as they spun around to avoid the person next to them.

Next, Nicole was naturally pushed against the wall. As they broke away from the dancers, a vacuum-like silence enveloped them.

One piece of information she had learned about him in her second life.

She doesn't know why, but this man hates her. If she may say so, given his high status.....

'Maybe he despises me. To this man, a woman like Karen is.....'

At the same time, her head was spinning. Standing in front of this person, her tongue stiffened. As if she had become a fool.

"I didn't expect to see you in a place like this."

Nicole said, hoping Raul wouldn't notice why she was here.

"Hmm. Still impressive. I can't believe you've been following Estok around and spying on him. I heard he had a fun final project."

Well, this man always had a way of ruining the smallest of expectations. Nicole stopped trying to keep a straight face.

"Am I out of the running now, since you found out?"

"You've got a good shot."

Raul said leisurely. He'd always seen her as an eyesore. He might want to give her a failing grade and dispose of her this time.

"What do you think?"

"You're the examiner, Estok, and it would be..... unfair for the Grand Duke to intervene."

“To you?”

“To ..... Mr. Estock.”

Raul laughed in disbelief. Then his smile faded and he said,

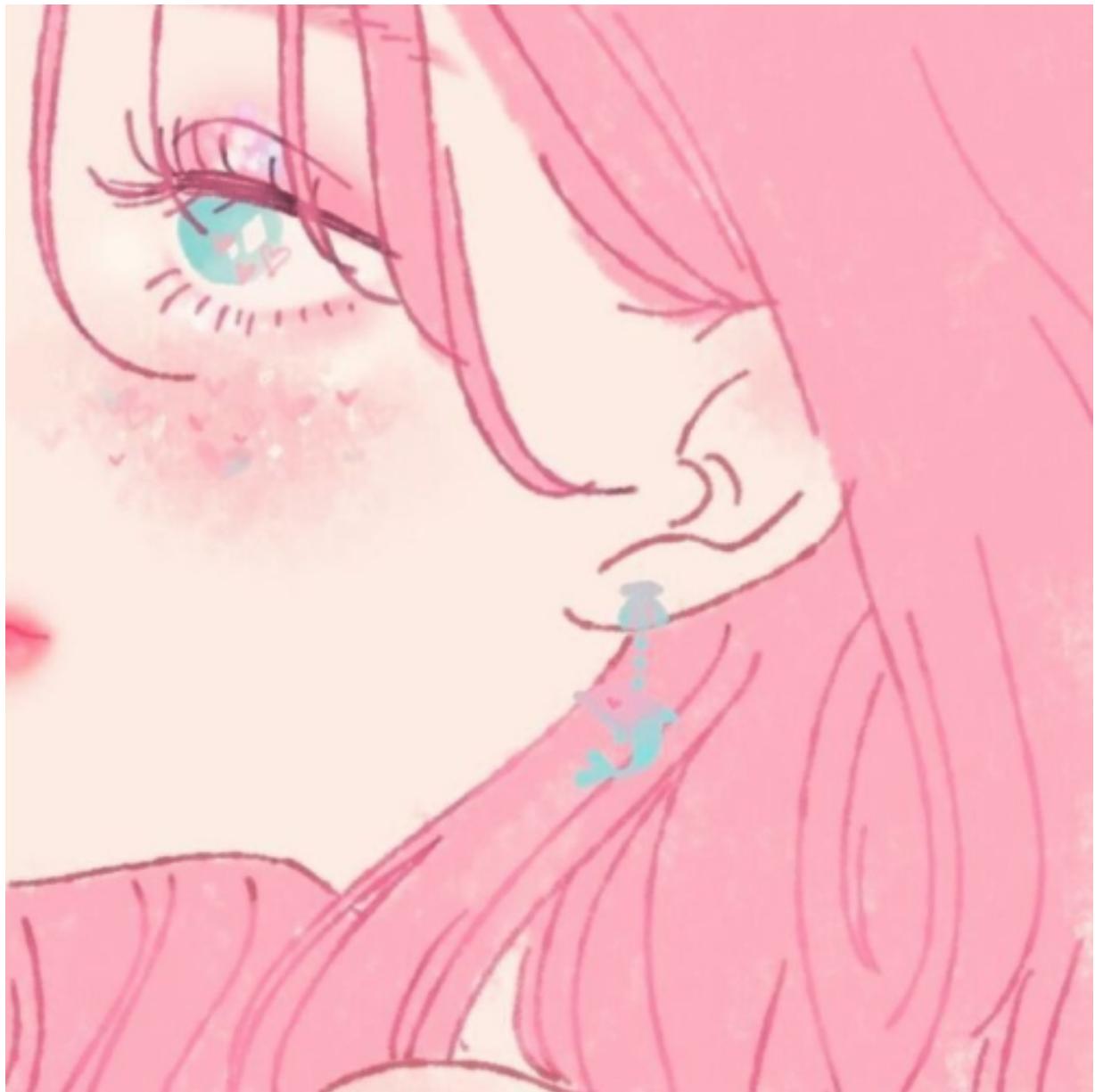
“It’s like a mouse thinking of a cat.”

The cat, of course, was Estok. And the mouse would be herself.

That's when Nicole noticed. Raul's gloved hand kept brushing against hers. Just a moment ago, his hand squeezed hers.

(T/N: Uhm, finally an interaction??? But the tension is (\*/\* \ \*))

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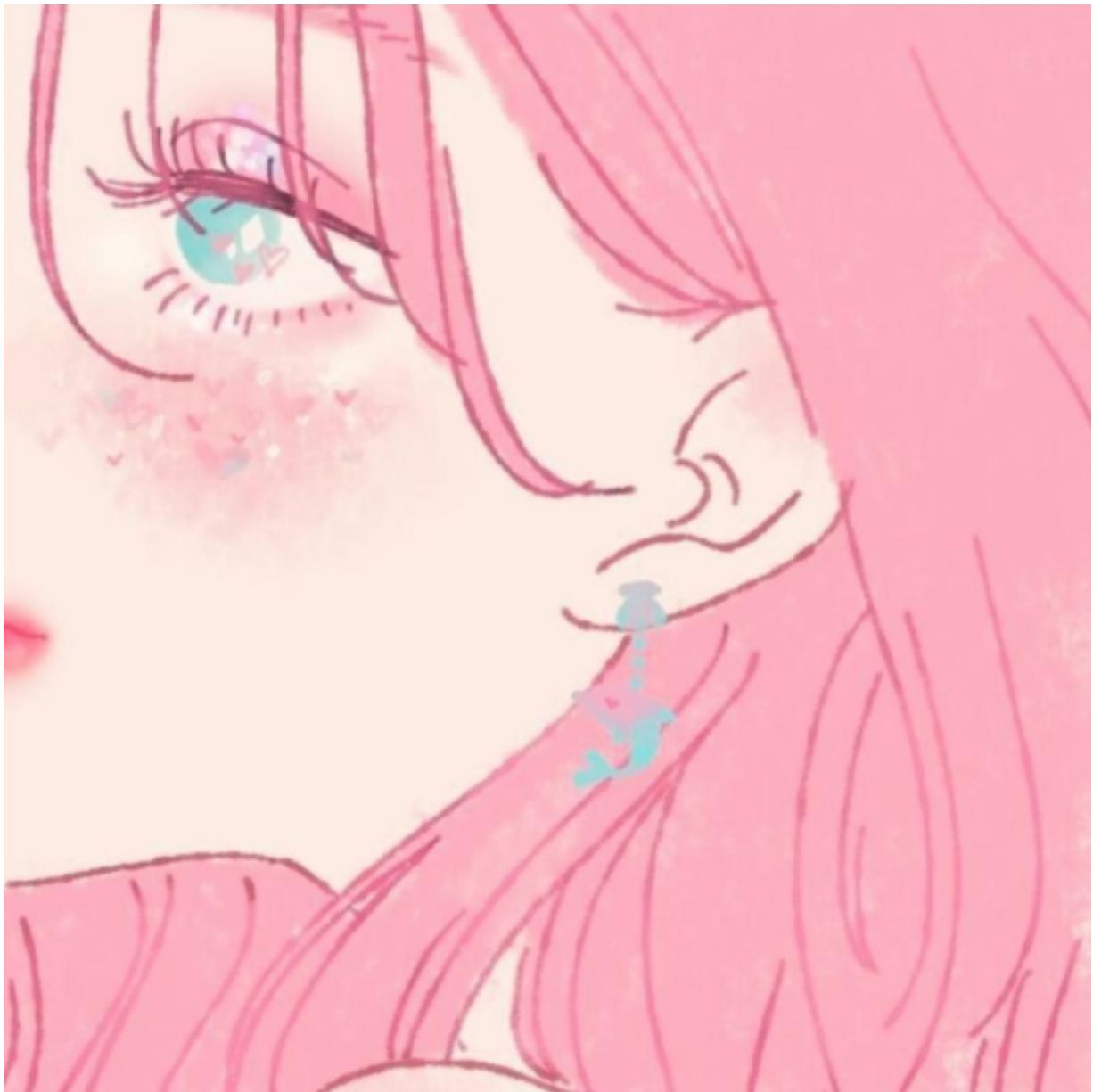


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# Chapter 40

A memory flashed through her mind like fire. She remembered sleeping with Raul in her past life.

⟨Heut, now, stop.....⟩

⟨You said this is what you wanted.⟩

Nicole was lying on the bed, clutching the sheets, sobbing. Nicole's pussy was swollen and tingling from taking his huge cock twice in their first intercourse.

He pushed his tongue in and sucked slowly, looking up at her.

⟨What should I do? I'm enjoying this quite a bit. Enough to think that dying right now wouldn't be so bad.⟩

⟨.....⟩

⟨I'm glad our five years of marriage came to such a wonderful conclusion, don't you think so?⟩

He bit Nicole's shoulder and drank another gulp of blood.

Her whole body shuddered and her stomach cramped. At the same time, his fingers made a squeaky noise and slid down.....

'What am I thinking?'

The thought seemed inescapable.

Why had her mother taught her how to control her emotions, but not how to control her mind?

No, in front of this man, it was impossible to keep her emotions in check.

In the midst of her confusion, Nicole's face was rapidly losing color and she felt dizzy.

"Don't faint. I have no patience for such escapades."

Nicole could barely look into his eyes.

"I'll do my best on the rest of the assignment, but just this once, please pretend not to notice."

"Okay. The assignment. You're doing well, and I'm not planning to punish you for it. I'm going to punish Estok for not even noticing when an amateur like you keeps following him, right?"

Raul said crisply.

".....Thanks for the compliment."

Nicole ran through what she knew about him in her head.

This man likes his answers to be businesslike and dry. Maybe he would even categorize his family as work.....

Waaaaah!

That's when cheers began to erupt in the ring once again.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Estok was in the ring and was on a rampage. He was moving around with a

lot of vigor, as if he was deliberately avoiding them.

“Ugh!”

Estok took a punch, and the people who had bet on him let out a bizarre scream as if they’d been hit themselves.

Nicole had no choice but to stay in Raul’s shadow, head down, for fear that Estok would spot her.

Raul didn’t even glance in Estok’s direction.

“You’ll have to do your best, because I meant what I said to Grace.”

“You mean you’ll dispose of me if I don’t pass with top marks?”

“No. I’m saying I’ll take you away from Grace. I don’t believe in coincidences.”

Nicole agreed. The experience of returning to the past. Without this mysterious experience, Nicole wouldn’t be standing here today.

“Why are you so wary of me, Grace..... I know she’s weak with young girls, but it’s because she misses Sienna, and she’s not that stupid.”

“You’re too much like Sienna, and there’s always a shady backstory when something as striking and shiny as you comes rolling in from out of nowhere.”

He whispered.

Raul is adept at being suspicious. He trusts no one. So..... she shouldn’t try to embellish and hide. Nicole judged.

"I don't have any money, and I don't come from a well-off family, and one of the few ways I can get ahead is by siding with the powerful."

"Sure. Too bad one silver coin is all you have."

He muttered.

Nicole's face quickly flushed.

When she'd first been captured by Raul at Grace's mansion, she'd mumbled something about being a neighboring farmer.

Now Nicole's lips were pursed tightly, and Raul glared at her in amusement.

"Do you mind if I go? Mr. Estok might spot you when he comes down from the ring."

Raul stepped aside for her.

"I suppose the outcome of the assignment will determine how we meet next. I look forward to it."

"What options do I have?"

Nicole said in a low voice.

"Freedom or imprisonment, I suppose."

"Does freedom include .....death?"

"I know the philosophy, of course."

Nicole knew then that Raul was teasing her. Nicole mustered up the last of her courage to glare at him, and then scurried away.

'I think that's enough surveillance for today.'

Nicole's task for the day was to write a surveillance report on Estok.

It was supposed to include everything from the fact that Estok had participated in the betting boxing match to the outcome of the match.

But there was nothing to see here.

The result was, of course, another victory for the Grand Duke of Valentine's sharpest sword.

\*\*\*

Nicole entered Grace's house through the back door as usual.

It was already dark outside when she arrived.

The maids had retired to bed early and there was no one around. Nicole sprinted into her room, her footsteps muffled.

Shutting the door behind her, she leaned back against it and barely managed to breathe out ruggedly.

'I never thought I'd see Raul in a place like that.'

Nervousness, fear. A strange feeling.....

Every time she saw Raul, it was as if her mind was painted with black paint. At the same time, she had a fever in her head.

'That man..... is dangerous.'

Someone who was her husband in her past life. Someone she should never see again.

But in this life, she must use him to survive. And.....

'The man who sacrificed himself for me and I never understood why, and I was never able to fully repay the favor.'

Nicole squeezed her eyes shut. That night, she dreamed of spending the night with Raul again.

⟨I've wanted this from the beginning, you and I.⟩

Raul was looking at her, dressed in the livery of the Templars. They were at the safe house where she was being educated.

In the classroom, she looked at him in confusion.

He came over and sat her down in a chair, then knelt down and looked at her, smiling with his eyes.

⟨You don't have to look at me like that. I'm going to suck you as much as you want and then we'll get started.⟩

The sound of his voice sent goosebumps all over her body. Her nipples hardened and her thighs relaxed.

Nicole slowly spread her legs apart. He slipped his hand under her skirt and ripped off her garter-belt stockings in one swift motion.

⟨We'll take our time, no rush this time.⟩

\*\*\*

“Heok!”

Nicole opened her eyes. Her whole body felt hot. It was dawn.

‘I can’t believe I’m dreaming of something like this.’

Unconsciously, she touched her thigh where his hand had been in her dream. She buried her face in her pillow.

Raul was lethal to her in any life; the man moved through her emotions like poison.

\*\*\*

Eventually, Nicole left her room in the morning. Grace, pacing in the living room, greeted her.

“Good morning, Grace.”

Nicole greeted her. Grace nodded.

“I was worried about you coming in so late last night. Even if the capital is well-protected, it’s not safe for a lady to wander around alone.”

“I’ll be in a lot more danger if I take on the Grand Duke’s job in the future, so I am being careful.”

“You don’t seem well.”

“Actually..... I met Grand Duke Valentine yesterday during an assignment.”

Nicole confided that Raul had subtly hinted that he would deal with her if she didn’t do well on the assignment.

"I don't think Raul is really intending to kill you, but if he does, I'll do something about it. He owes me his life as a child, so he can't refuse my word."

"Don't worry, I'm sure I can handle it."

Nicole said.

"And Grand Duke Valentine..... only said that because he's worried about you, his Master, and he's suspicious of me, but really, he couldn't care less about me. I'm just Karen, a wanderer from the countryside."

But Nicole had only said that to comfort Grace; she knew his temper best.

Was he the kind of person who could easily look the other way once he saw an outsider?

\*\*\*

"That woman."

"What?"

Estok said cheerfully. They faced each other in the swaying carriage.

"The girl you have your eye on."

"Alas, the pretty girl, I mean Karen!"

"Pretty?"

Raul made a puzzled face.

"What the hell are your tastes? Do you even like people?"

“I’m a knight in shining armor who loves himself first and foremost.”

Raul decided that he didn’t need to have a long conversation with this idiot and began to ask questions.

“Do you really know nothing?”

“About what?”

“..... What have you been up to these days?”

“I’m so busy being an examiner, I just hang out.”

Seriously, Estok didn’t realize she was following him around.

Raul clicked his tongue. He was going to have to give this guy a proper spanking when this was over.

“Yes. That’s what I assigned you to do.”

There was a reason Raul had put the crazy Estok in charge.

The person who created the foundation of Sith and its training procedures. It was Grace who built Sith from the ground up.

And the woman. Karen is no match for Grace.

So Raul had to give her a test that she couldn’t predict, and..... put Estok, who bounced around everywhere, to the test.

“Any candidates that stand out?”

“Only Karen, who I was referring to earlier.”

Raul couldn’t figure out why.

Every time she looked at him, Karen would freak out and look at him as if she'd seen a ghost.

Her emotions seemed unstable, and she easily got scared. She also seemed uneasy.

In any case, a woman like Karen was a common troublemaker, not a threat.

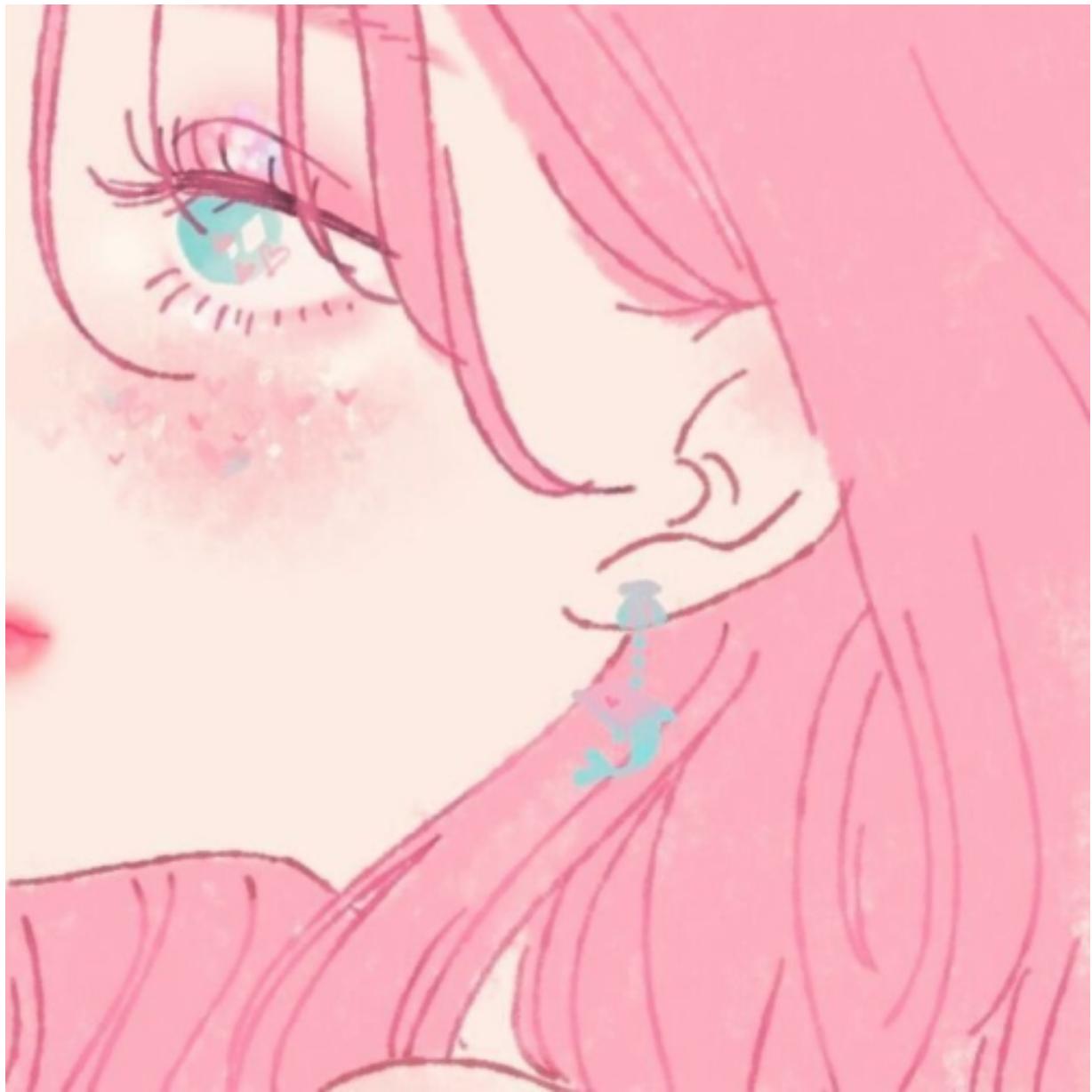
She was in and out of jail for petty misdemeanors, roaming the streets in dirty clothes, fighting with passersby.

Women who instinctively duck and cover at the sight of a cop.

And they were all afraid of Raul. Perhaps it's because of his status as a soldier in the service of the Empire.

Raul's suspicion of Nicole, and his dismissal of her as nothing more than a "wandering Karen," is rooted in her history of instability.

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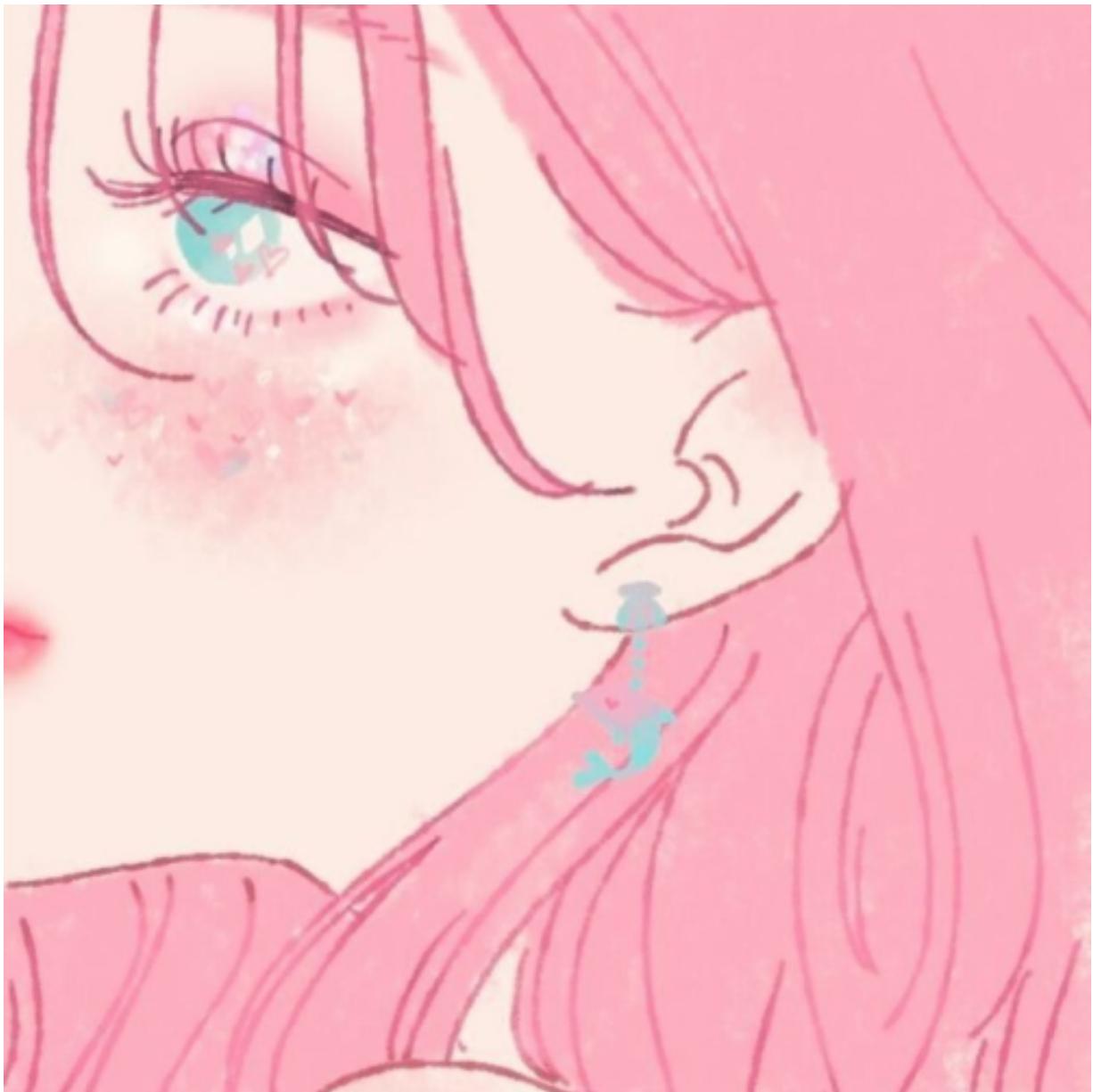


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# Chapter 41

“I heard she got an excellent score on her midterm before the final exam.”

“She’s very talented. Calm, almost inexpressive, very articulate, very well-spoken. She’ll be of great use in any job. She’s not the kind of person you’d want to use as a dirty informant on the streets.”

But that was exactly why Raul had doubts.

The Karen from the report, and the Karen from what people around her described, were a very different person than the Karen he’d seen in person.

“Is she calm and collected?”

“As if she’d be sewing quietly if there was a fire next door.”

“It’s either she’s a master at acting like a fool, or she’s a real fool.”

Raul thought this was a bad sign.

This is the kind of woman who shouldn’t be a major influence on his life. He and she live in different worlds.

Neither is right or wrong. Raul and that woman must have been living in different muddy waters.

She was beautiful. And she kept catching Raul’s eye.

‘Annoying.’

Raul needed only one kind of woman.

A woman who could be his future grand duchess, a woman who would keep his emotions in check, who would do her job, and who would be his trump card in preventing an imperial marriage.

‘It had to be a daughter of House YvesChapel.’

His fiancée, whom he never got to see, died a miserable death in a fire. Perhaps it was the easier way out.

Raul’s heart turned dry at the thought of his fiancée.

“You need to learn be aware of people, Estoc. Keep your stupid behavior in check.”

“What?”

“.....What’s the point?”

“Aha, right. You should know, I was just about to ask for five minutes of your time since you’re so busy.”

“Well, to be precise, you jumped into my carriage.”

“Yeah. Well, whatever. It’s big news.”

Estoc leans in. Estoc presented the final reports from the candidates.

“These are the final reports from the candidates that just arrived this morning, and there are two very interesting parts.”

As Raul skimmed the report, his eyes took on a strange look.

\*\*\*

“What will happen to us?”

Early in the morning, another instructor, not Estoc, entered the room.

He walked over their final reports, their final exams, and told them to wait here.

By then, three hours had already passed.

“Did we all fail?”

“No way. But we already know that this institution was built by Grand Duke Valentine.”

“If we fail, will we die?”

“I think they were intending to give us a drug that would erase our memories. They’re not planning to kill us.”

The candidates whispered.

The only ones sitting calmly were poor Dahlia and stoic Nicole.

“You’re all so loud.”

That’s when Marlin jumped out of her seat.

“You, what do you know? Tell me. You got a backer.”

Marlin poked Nicole in the side. Tsk, tsk. Her constant touching of Nicole was unpleasant.

“What do I know? I don’t have a backer from the Grand Duke’s people.”

“Ha, you’re quite a talker, bitch.”

Marlin said.

“That’s enough, Marlin. We don’t know what’s going to happen, so don’t make a scene. Everyone’s on edge right now.”

Dahlia said in a low voice.

“What? She’s not going to understand no matter how many times I tell her. I told you to take care of her, okay?”

Marlin threw up her hands.

It was then.

Bang. The door swung open with a loud bang. And in walked Estoc.

Estoc stood there, a look of excitement on his face.

He had his sword drawn. Behind him stood a group of men in plain clothes.

“Bind the two people I will call.”

Estoc spoke, ignoring the frightened women.

“Karen, Marlin, there is something wrong with your report. You will be interrogated separately.”

Estoc said.

“Wahaha, looks like we’ll be meeting in the interrogation room after all, young lady.”

And Estoc grinned at Nicole, his teeth bared wide.

Nicole stood up from her seat, her face filled with embarrassment.

Unfortunately, Nicole was well aware that Estoc was an expert in confessions.

\*\*\*

“I told you ..... the most interesting ones go to our Grand Duke, who interrogates them himself.”

Nicole was dragged upstairs by the knights, bound and gagged. Marlin swallowed her fear.

“Wait, I did a good job, I even managed to seduce my target, I even found out the name of my target’s hidden child, wait!”

Estoc gagged Marlin’s blabbering mouth.

Surrounded by knights, they reached the top floor and found themselves in a large room.

There was a window on the roof, and it was open.

The windows in this building were all boarded up, so it was rare to see sunlight. Nicole’s eyes stung.

And through the sunlight, a man stood lazily. It was Raul, wearing a long coat.

He slowly sat down in a chair.

“Go ahead.”

“Yes.”

“Eup, eup!”

The knights knelt Marlin down. Marlin looked at them in bewilderment.

“What is this?”

“Dahlia’s report.”

“.....”

Nicole pursed her lips.

“According to this report, Dahlia’s assignment target was Marlin, a candidate like herself, and after each day’s follow-up, once her ‘target’ had gone home, she would secretly head to a different location.”

Marlin’s destination was a blue-roofed mansion on 6th Avenue in the capital’s 13th district.

It was the home of Mrs. Porina, the mistress of the famous First Grand Duke.

The official name of 6th Avenue was 6 Roela Street, and it was a wealthy neighborhood, usually home to the newly rich or middle class. This was because Raul wouldn’t allow her to live in an aristocratic neighborhood.

Mrs. Porina was not happy about this because she thought she was a real noblewoman.

*(Can you believe I live in a place like this with a bunch of commoners?)*

Foolishly, Lady Porina lavishly decorated the mansion to show that she was the mistress of the First Grand Duke.

The most elaborate of these was the cobalt blue roof. No one in the Imperial aristocracy was unaware of the blue-roofed house on Roela Street.

“Marlin was said to have been in and out of that house, and there are testimonies that she was seen in contact with Lady Porina.”

“You’ve got quick hands. How did Mrs. Porina know about my personal agent training center and think of creating a double agent first?”

Raul said, sounding bored.

“Ugh!”

Marlin’s mouth dropped open, bloodshot eyes.

“What do you think?”

Raul looked at Nicole.

“I don’t know why the previous Grand Duke’s mistress is interested in this training center. It’s none of my business, and frankly, I’m not sure why I should be arrested for this.”

Nicole replied in a small voice.

“Because Dahlia was being pretty straightforward. She answered questions about why she was spying on Marlin. Karen, you encouraged her to target Marlin, didn’t you?”

“I was just giving her advice. The choice was hers. And if she found the traitor beforehand, that’s her credit, isn’t it?”

"In a way, yes, but not everyone involved in this is an idiot."

Nicole found herself shaking with fear as she stood before Raul once again. But there was no time to cower now. Nicole gathered her courage and spoke calmly.

"I didn't know anything, and even if I had, I'm not the one who created another master."

"Hmph— pretty calm, huh?"

Estoc's eyes twinkled. Estoc then removed Marlin's gag.

"Now, it's time for your last statement - how do you feel about this?"

"I was tricked!"

Marlin exclaimed.

"That bitch set me up; she dropped hints; she implied that it was the Grand Duke's people who were teaching and testing us; and she said there's a woman who would pay me if I go to the blue-roofed house!"

When Marlin took Nicole's advice and visited Mrs. Porina's house.

Marlin recognized the mansion as the home of the famous Grand Duke's mistress. And Marlin realized who had established the center. Then she realized that her training was all related to the Grand Ducal family.

Mrs. Porina heard about the training center and immediately recognized that it was an institution created by Raul.

She was always eager to meddle in the affairs of the Grand Duke.

When Marlin told her, she was so pleased that she offered a large sum of money to make her her handmaiden.

"So, this is the back story?"

In Marlin's eyes, Madame Porina was not a very trustworthy master.

But she didn't think the key players in the Grand Duchy would need her anyway.

For now, she figured she could take her money and move on when a more worthy master came along.

After all, Lady Porina was part of the Grand Ducal family.

Mrs. Porina was a fool, and she knew that if she wanted Marlin to be her servant, she would have to pay her often.

Marlin was blinded by the immediacy of Mrs. Porina's offer and sneaked in and out of her house.

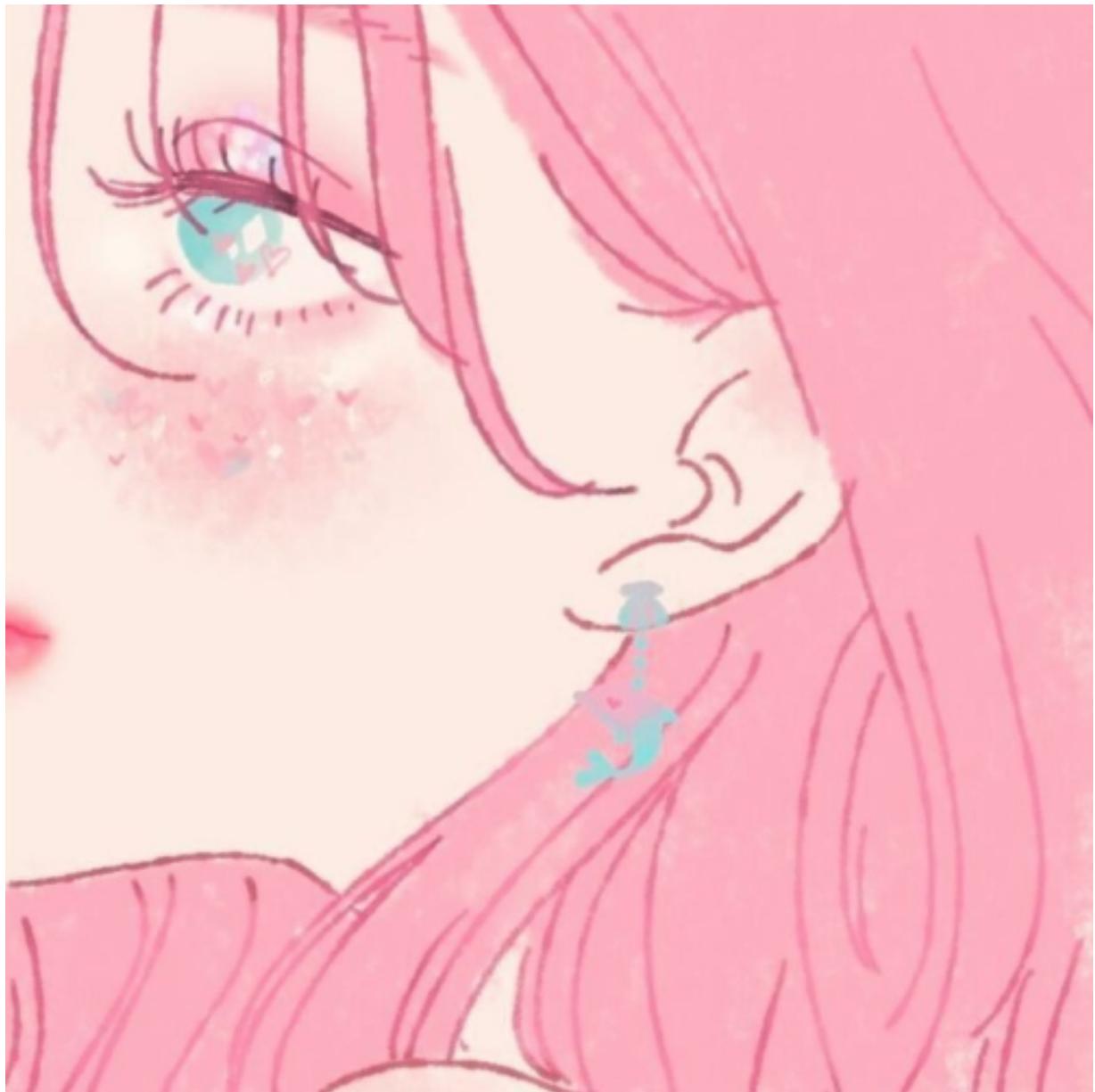
"One of them can't deal with people, so she just throws cash at them, and the other one can't think of anything else, like a dog at the sight of food."

Nicole didn't have to listen closely to know how they would have behaved.

(T/N: Note that Estok and Estoc are the same people. Since I forgot the spelling of their name, I just wanted to note it.

Sorry about that ☹\_☹)

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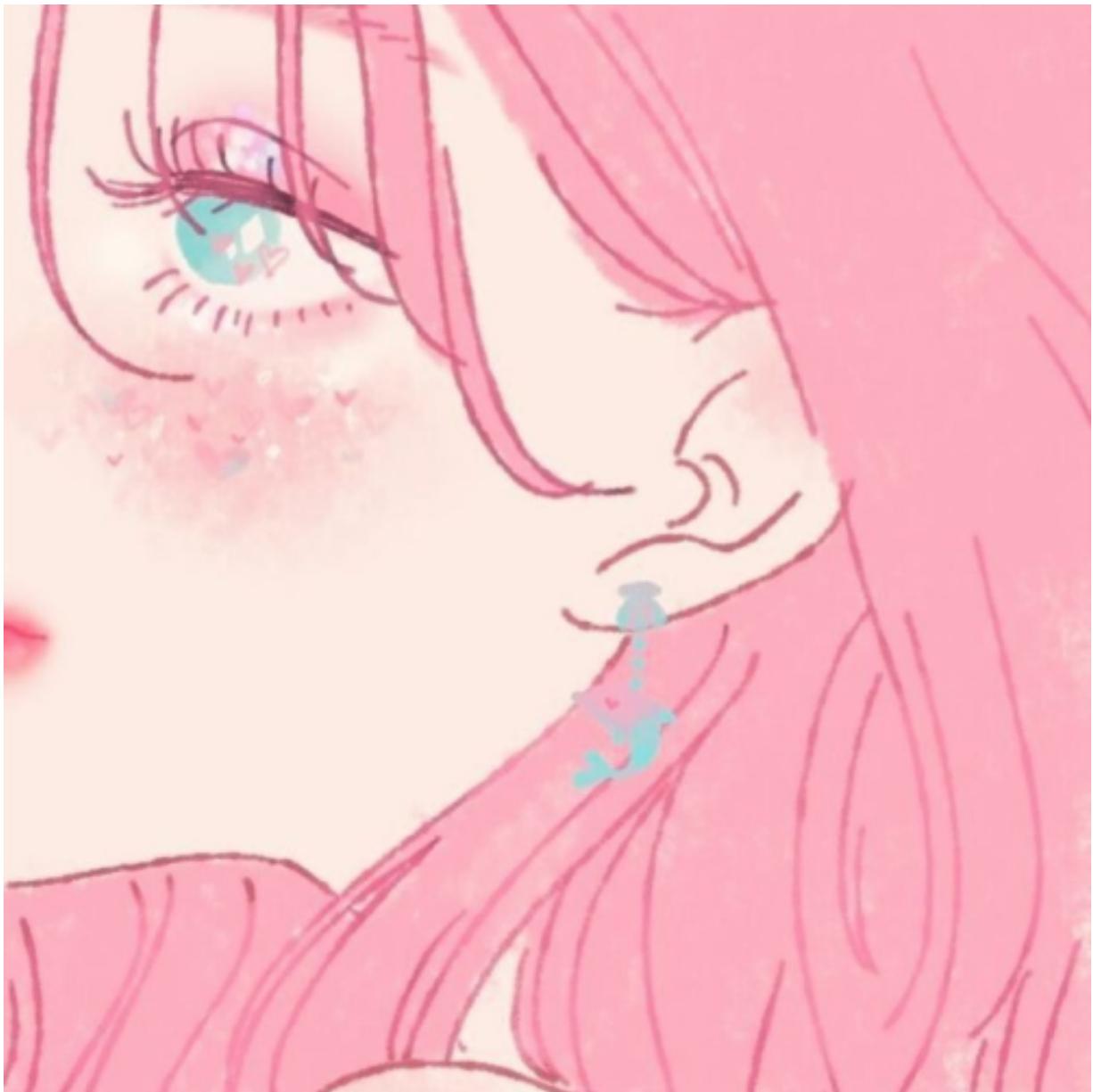


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# Chapter 42

“Marlin always said I get special treatment because I have a backer, so I advised her to get one if she wanted one. That was an angry, accidental remark, and the last time I met someone who cared about me was before I came here. I didn’t get any help from her during my exams. She’s blowing it out of proportion over something I said in passing. What kind of talent do I have to encourage Mrs. Porina and Marlin to have a connection?”

Nicole had a point.

Mrs. Porina was an old mistress at best, and no one would have thought she would do something so bold.

“You have a point.”

Estoc scratched his head. Raul stared at Nicole in amusement.

“What are we going to do? I don’t think Marlin needs any more interrogation.”

“Dispose of her now.”

“Yes!”

Estoc gestured, and the men dragging Marlin dragged her into the next room.

“Do you want to come with me to the next room?”

Raul said, as if they were going to look at flowers.

"No."

Nicole quickly shook her head. But she couldn't cover her ears.

-Save me, no!

What started out as a shout soon turned into a whimper.

-Ugh, ugh, ugh, ugh!

Nicole stood there, white as a sheet, silent.

Wudang. Thud. Thud. Finally, the other side of the wall fell silent.

“‘Quiet as if it’s dead’, that’s what you call it, right?”

Estoc whistled.

Raul furrowed his brow as he turned to Nicole, intrigued.

Estoc felt the stare and slid away from Nicole.

“Okay, enough about Marlin. Your report. What’s this?”

An ebony desk sat in the corner of the room.

Raul picked up a sheet of paper from it.

It was the first page of Nicole’s assignment, detailing Estoc’s daily routine.

For example, Estoc wandered around the backyard of the Grand Duke’s house.

His nap on the roof. The snacks he ate for lunch. There was even mention of Estoc's fondness for a cat with a heart on its forehead, who lived on the Grand Duke's property.

Raul realized as soon as he read the report.

This woman..... had trespassed on the Valentine estate and observed Estoc.

"I was just turning in an assignment, like you asked."

"Right, the assignment!"

Estoc's eyes widened, and he sank back into his stance.

"You're using me as a target for an assignment, on top of that!"

"Shut up. Estoc."

Raul said.

"How did you infiltrate the Grand Duke's household?"

"I took advantage of the servants' shift change and pretended to be delivering food. I actually only made it as far as the backyard, and then I spied the examiner sleeping on the roof with a telescope."

Nicole said in a small voice.

For a long time, only one store had delivered food to the Grand Duke's house.

This was because the Sith required special ingredients every day to satisfy their demanding palates.

In her past life, she had seen the Grand Duchess's books, albeit in a cursory way. So she knew the name of the store.

"Why did you stop there when you could have gone deeper?"

Estoc said.

"I'm going to be a servant of the Grand Duke, and even if I knew how, I wouldn't dare sneak into the depths of the Grand Duke's house. It's not polite, so I stopped at the proper line."

"Courtesy? Then you shouldn't have spied on me in the first place!"

Estoc looked like he was dying of amusement at the cute little fact that he was being watched.

"That's because I have to prove I'm capable of....."

Nicole said, staring into Estoc's eyes. It was a completely different demeanor than the one she'd used in front of Raul earlier.

"That's the best way I can see to interpret the assignment, and you want someone with the balls to break in anywhere and do anything, don't you?"

And it was something Raul had said to Estoc a few times in his past life.

Estoc was easily bored and lost interest in anything other than swordsmanship. Raul had scolded him, telling him not to start unless it was something he would do with his life.

To Raul, every member of his order, the Sith, was precious, but Estoc was always on his radar.

“Was that the reason?”

“There’s another reason: Mr. Estoc, the examiner, seemed bored.”

“He’s .....?”

“I wanted to keep him interested by picking a clever target, because getting on his nerves is a good way to get a good grade, and you can’t keep an examiner like Mr. Estock’s attention with obvious answers, can you?”

Estoc narrowed his eyes.

“But what if someone other than me was the examiner?”

“Then I would have surprised you in a ‘different way’ that would have worked for that person, but it’s pretty clear to me that Mr. Estock is the kind of person who gets excited when he sees something interesting, not the kind of person who gets pissed off.”

Estoc looked completely smitten with Nicole’s answer. Estoc chuckled and looked at Raul for agreement.

“Now that I think about it, this young lady is exactly our Grand Duke’s type, isn’t she?”

“I’m afraid so. I can’t even give this one a bad grade.”

Raul clicked his tongue, regretting that he couldn’t take this opportunity to torture Nicole.

“.....Thank you.”

Nicole turned weak and looked away as soon as she met Raul's gaze, a subtle change that only Raul noticed this time.

'I wonder what she's really like.'

And so the question grew in Raul's mind, and Nicole's presence grew.

"Anyway, you did a great job on the assignment. This is the best one yet."

Estoc said.

"So if I were to give you a grade—"

Knock—

Just then there was a small knock on the door. It was a different door than the one Dahlia had been dragged to, and soon one of Raul's men entered the room.

"That's.....

She was a dark-skinned woman with short cropped hair and a healthy-looking complexion.

She was short and slender, with a fair face and a beautiful body. Like Estoc, she was dressed in the full regalia of a knight.

'Scimitar.'

Nicole remembered her name. She was one of Raul's entourage, a rare exile even in Sith.

"We're here."

Raul nodded coolly.

"Come with me, Karen. You need to see the consequences of what you've done."

Raul stood and opened the door. Nicole's eyes narrowed.

'I don't really want to see the body.'

The door led to the room where Marlin had just died.

Squeak—

Thankfully, Marlin's body was nowhere to be found in the room, but that didn't make Nicole feel any better.

There's someone else in there that wasn't Marlin's body.

A woman, her mouth and eyes covered, was tied to a wooden chair in the center of the room.

"Ugh!"

Raul snapped his fingers. It was an arrogant, languid gesture. Even in her past life, Nicole had sometimes seen him order his men like this.

"You'd better cover your face, you're a valuable cadet. First-class agents are supposed to be stingy about exposing their faces."

Estoc kindly held out a soft cloth. Nicole felt an odd sensation as she realized it was the same material that covered the face of the person in the chair.

Anyway, Nicole covered her face with a thin cloth, leaving only her eyes exposed. At the same time, Estoc pulled the cloth over the bound woman's face.

'As expected.'

The figure in the chair was, as Nicole had expected, Mrs. Porina. The clownish outfit was unmistakably hers.

"What, what are you doing, Grand Duke? I'm the Grand Duke's....."

"You are the previous Grand Duke's problem, his stigma, his mistake, his trash."

Raul said kindly. Lady Porina's face turned even redder.

"I know you've never treated me like a person, but to kidnap a person like this— don't you know the least bit of decency?"

"If you had any intelligence at all, you'd think: Did I or didn't I do something to deserve to be dragged away like this?"

Mrs. Porrina's face turned white at Raul's words. Her involvement with Marlin had stung.

"I, I'm very unhappy, even though the world has criticized me for coming from a lowly family..... but I've lived my life with integrity....."

"Well, at least you know that. That you are lowly. It's not just a matter of status, it's all of you, including your lowness in drugging my father into bed."

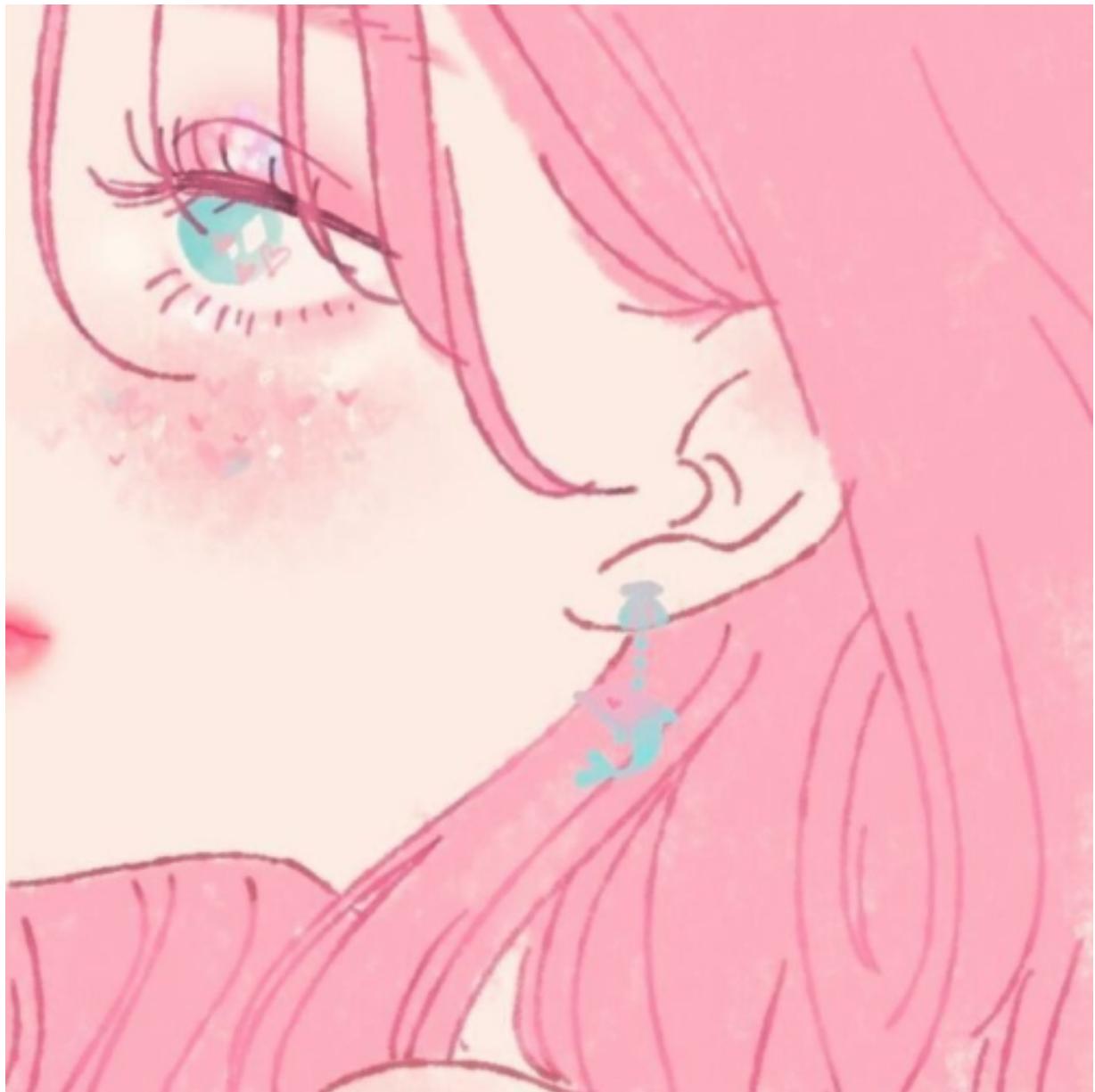
Raul said contemptuously.

"And under normal circumstances, a mistress and I would never speak to each other, which means—"

Nicole wondered if Raul was going to hit Lady Porina. She was his father's mistress, after all.

Then again, Raul was a man of his word.

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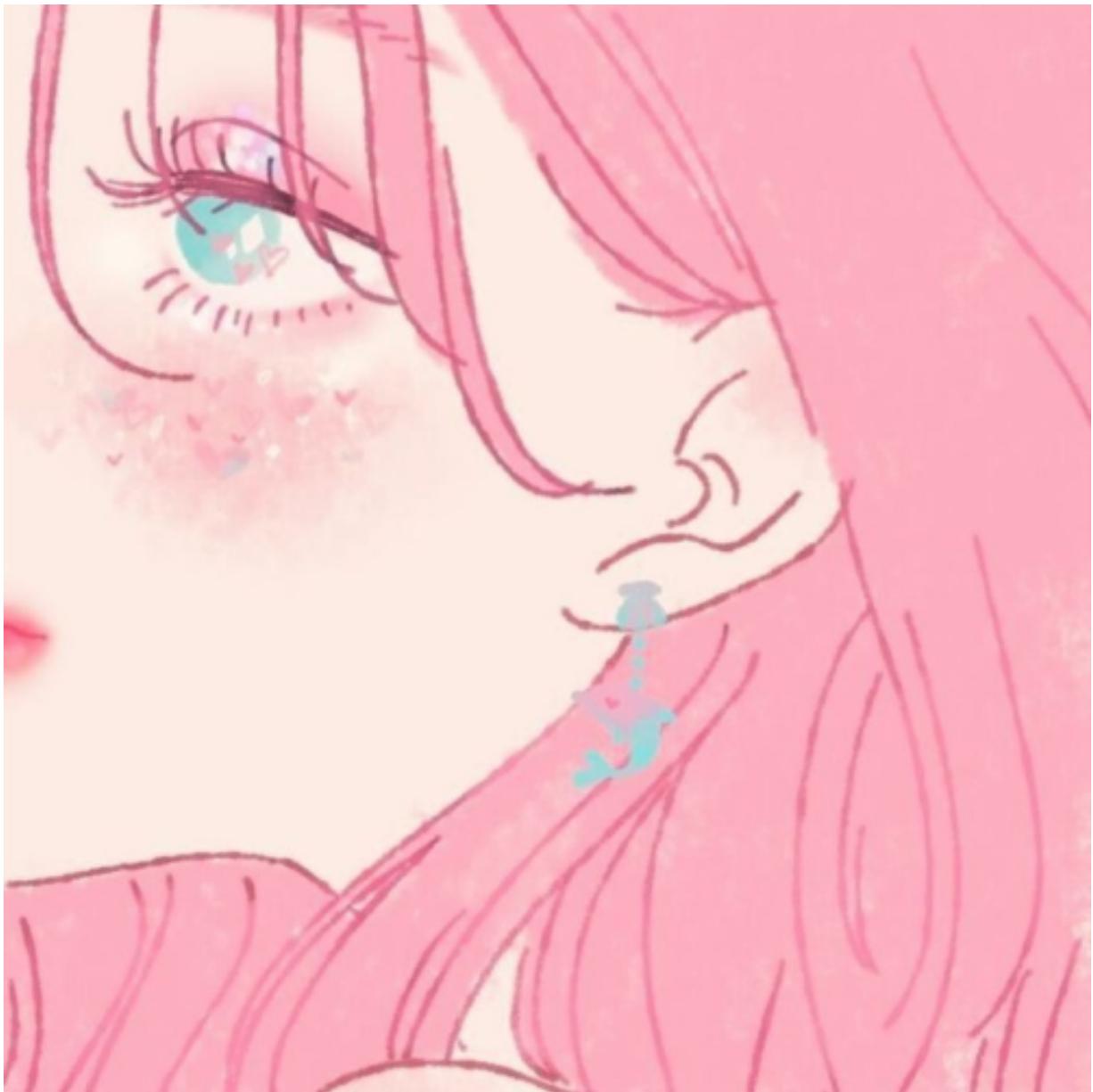


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# Chapter 43

(unedited)

Thud—

“Kya, Kyaaaak!”

Of course, he didn’t do it himself.

It was Scimitar who took the blow to Lady Porina’s cheek.

“Easy there, Scimitar, you’ve got a foot in the Grand Duke’s family tree.”

Estoc said cheerfully. Nicole felt like she was going to lose her mind if she listened any longer.

“Again.”

Raul said.

Slap, slap! Scimitar slapped Mrs. Porina’s cheek like a machine. She looked like a very docile cat.

The slap echoed so loudly that Nicole’s cheeks ached.

“I did wrong..... Forgive me.”

Mrs. Porina didn’t last more than a few lines. She pleaded, tears streaming down her face.

"I only thought I was doing the Grand Duke a favor. You seem like such a capable person, I only wanted to be your patron."

Slap!

Scimitar gave her a final slap on the cheek.

"Stop. She seems to be coming to her senses."

Raul said lazily.

"I guess getting beaten up makes her a little more intelligent."

Estoc said, clicking his tongue. Mrs. Porina was shaking from the insult.

"It would be easy to kill you now."

Raul said.

"But I'll spare you, because there's plenty of room for you."

To Nicole, his words sounded like "I prepared plenty of room for you."

Terror flashed across Mrs. Porina's sobbing face at the words.

"If you want to prolong your days from now on, remember. Give up your vain dreams of pushing your son into this house, and just spend your money and have fun and be stupid."

Raul said. He gestured to Scimitar. Scimitar thrusted Mrs. Porina's face to him.

"You understand? Please don't give our Grand Duke any reason to speak to someone like you. We look forward to your cooperation in the future." (Scimitar)

"Hic, yes. Yes!" (Mrs. Porina)

Mrs. Porina replied, confused. Finally, Scimitar covered Mrs. Porina's mouth again.

"Are you sure you want to send her back alive?" (Scimitar)

"I need an ugly card, and there's a place for her." (Raul)

"Yes." (Scimitar)

Scimitar nodded mechanically.

"The 'lost item' you speak of is in Mrs. Porina's carriage." (Scimitar)

"If it was in the carriage, did you kidnap Mrs. Porina in a carriage?" (Estoc)

Estoc asked cheerfully.

"Because one must come to one's destination in one's own carriage."

Scimitar replied nonchalantly.

'Lost item?'

No way. No way.....

Estoc seemed to know what the 'lost and found' was. Nicole's face twisted into a strange expression. Estoc saw it and said kindly.

"Ah, of course you know the lost item, the mole that Mrs. Porina has been using!"

It was too much kindness. Nicole did not want to know.

"You have Marlin's body in Mrs. Porina's carriage?

Scimitar spoke up.

"So, do you want me to send Mrs. Porina home right away?"

"I think she needs time to clear her head, so give her some time."

Raul replied.

"I'll send the carriage with Mrs. Porina in it to a secluded place and confine her for a day, then send her home."

Mrs. Porina, about to spend the night in confinement with Marlin's body. Nicole pictured it.

'She'll be lucky if she doesn't go crazy tonight.'

Nicole felt a cold sweat run down her spine as Scimitar spoke each word.

'I knew they were scary people, but.....'

In her past life, Nicole had always thought of Raul as the devil, so she couldn't have liked his entourage.

But when she saw what they were doing, it was hard to hate them.

'They're even scarier up close.'

And Nicole was about to walk among them.

Nicole stood still as Mrs. Porina was dragged away by Scimitar.

“Are you frozen?”

Estoc stepped forward and waved his hand in front of Nicole’s face.

“What about Dahlia?”

“Are you worried about her being interrogated?”

“If this is the reward for my accusation, can I keep it to myself?”

Nicole said calmly. But her tone said otherwise. She was asking if Dahlia was okay.

“Haha, it’s just that—”

“Estoc. Don’t talk nonsense, just give her the result.”

“Result?”

Estoc looked up at Raul’s words.

“Aren’t you the examiner? You’re supposed to tell her if she passes or fails.”

“Oh, of course you get a perfect score. No, 103 points!”

“The maximum mark you can give is 100. Have you forgotten your numbers?”

Raul said as if he’s pathetic.

“How can she finish with a 100, look at what this young lady has done in such a short time.”

"Let's just call it a pass, I don't know why, but the other examiner besides you gave her a perfect score too."

"That's very impressive. A double perfect score. That sounds like a record that will never be broken."

"Too bad, Karen. I could have sent you to a prison for felons up north, or a workhouse full of plague victims as a spy."

Raul said gently. The color drained from Nicole's face in an instant.

"Thank you for your fair judgment."

Nicole said, spacing out. She knew he would do as he said.

"I'm just kidding, relax, you're doing a great job, and I don't want you to get scared."

Raul chuckled, because it was a joke.

"Anyway, congratulations, Karen. For being my shadow agent."

At that, Nicole finally relaxed.

'Well, at least I did it.'

Most of all, she was glad she hadn't caused Grace any trouble.

She was also glad she hadn't caused any trouble for Grace. .... Though she wasn't thrilled to be congratulated while chained up.

"Ah, we should untie you."

Estoc stepped up to Nicole and drew his knife, cutting the ropes that bound her in one swift motion.

"I'd love for you to get out of here as soon as you want, but I'm sure you're going to have some pretty intense stuff to deal with, so this is a fitting introduction."

"....."

"Congratulations on the hell that will bring you money and fame."

At Estoc's words, Nicole frowned and flicked her wrist once. Strangely, it wasn't her wrist that was stiffening, but her mind.

\*\*\*

"You can go now, the carriage will be here soon."

Raul said nonchalantly. Nicole headed out the door and downstairs instead of catching the carriage. Her steps quickened as she walked.

It was very quiet in this large building. As if there were no living creatures in it.

"What happened to the other candidates who trained with me?

Until now, she had never moved in this building except in designated areas. But today, there was no one to stop her.

'Did they all fail?'

She wasn't that close to the others, but seeing as how Marlin had just died a miserable death, she was worried about Dahlia's safety.

'No one's here.'

The building was empty. Most of the doors were locked.

Only this morning, they had gathered in the big classroom as usual.....

It felt like she'd had a long dream.

Bam.

Nicole opened the classroom door. A woman stood by the window.

A tall, slender woman. It was Dahlia.

"Dahlia, you're safe."

Nicole's heart skipped a beat. She walked over to Dahlia.

"Are you okay? Did they say anything to you, like you passed, or.....?"

Dahlia looked at Nicole wordlessly.

"I'm the same as you."

"So you're a shadow agent of the Sith, too."

Nicole was relieved.

"I want to ask you something, Karen."

"Tell me."

"Why did you help me?"

Nicole's body stiffened.

"You knew from the beginning, didn't you? That Marlin was a spy for someone else. Marlin was mean and nasty, but she was the best at what she did. This job doesn't really require character, you just have to be good at your job."

".....Yes. I'm sure Marlin would have gotten the job."

In her last life, Marlin had been a shadow agent for the Grand Duke, which meant she was in charge of Nicole's maids.

But she was going to defect anyway. Nicole had only encouraged it to happen a little faster.

"You helped me whenever Marlin bullied me. Did you think she was a bad person and deserved to be punished?"

"She was just being loud."

She meant it. The commotion Marlin caused was too much for Nicole, who grew up in a quiet place.

"I don't trust a loud person like Marlin, she's a lightweight, and she might sell her coworker one day, and that 'sold coworker' might be me, so I helped myself."

Nicole said simply. Dahlia looked at Nicole in surprise, then gave a small laugh.

"Is that really it?"

Nicole hesitated for a moment, then said.

"Actually, I saw you by the side of the road once, when I was riding in a carriage....."

Since coming to the capital, Grace had taken Nicole out a few times. These were discreet outings to carefully chosen

locations so as not to arouse the suspicions of the Grand Duke.

On one such outing, she saw a child holding a balloon in a square.

The doll-like child was holding the hand of a hooded woman.

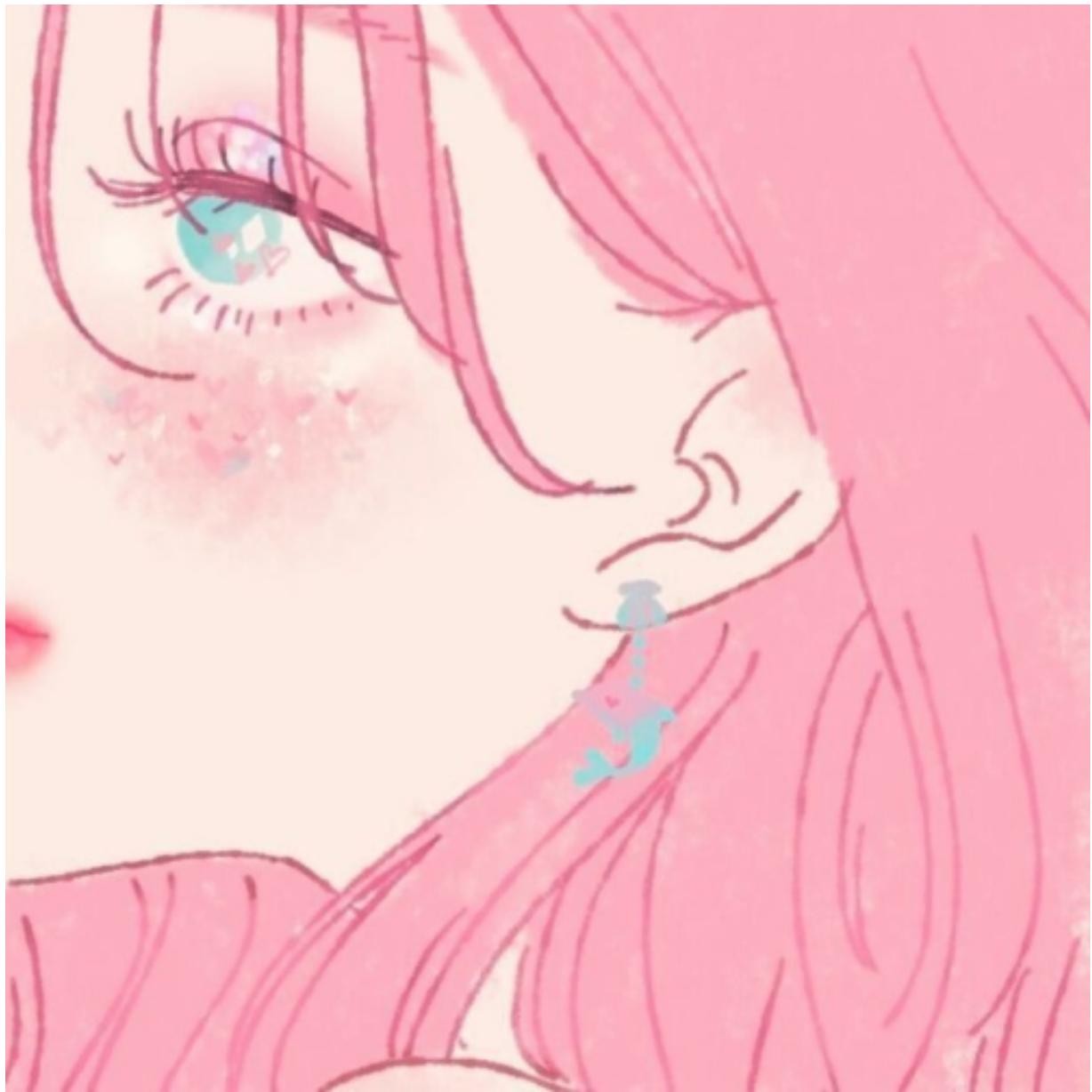
The woman stroked the child's hair as if she loved her so much. It was an affectionate gesture.

She didn't realize it at the time, but later, when she met Dahlia in class, she realized.

She thought to herself, "She must be telling the truth when she says she has a daughter, because I saw it with my own eyes."

After that, she felt strangely attached to her.

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# Chapter 44

“I don’t have a mother, so I just..... wanted to help you.”

Karen was an orphan, and so was Nicole. It wasn’t strange for a woman without a mother to long for one.

“You seem like a kind person, Karen. You’re not cut out for this.”

Dahlia said in a low voice.

Nicole felt a strange sensation at that moment. Somehow, Dahlia’s tone had changed. Her voice had gotten a little huskier.

Nicole looked at her questioningly.

“If you could quit this job right now, would you?”

“No, I’m not running away.”

Nicole said.

“At least you’re a citizen of this country. I don’t have any real status, and if someone like me is going to survive, I’m going to have to do it this way. Like you, I have someone I want to protect.”

Nicole thought of Jay.

"Besides, a power like the Grand Duke doesn't let anyone in on their secrets, and if I've come this far, it's too late to get out. Besides, I'm not like Marlin. I don't change my master once I have one, I can swear to that."

Seeing the look in Nicole's eyes, Dahlia tilted her head. A boyish grin tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"Are you serious?"

".....I mean it, but, Dahlia, what the hell have you been through—"

"It means you passed the final exam."

Dahlia responded with a low laugh. The sound of Dahlia's voice was a perfectly androgynous beauty.

".....Dahlia?"

"Impressive, Miss Karen. After all, our Grand Duke doesn't just let anyone in, so why not watch them more closely than others and keep a cool head?"

Just then, she heard a sound outside. It sounded like a clear bell.

"Just in time. Shall we go?"

Dahlia— no, the one who was Dahlia— said.

"Wait."

Before Nicole could say anything, Dahlia took off at a brisk walk. Nicole followed her out the door.

A carriage was waiting at the door. Nicole had never seen a black carriage before. Dahlia boldly opened the door.

“Are you getting in?”

Nicole had no choice but to climb into the carriage.

Unlike the carriages she was used to riding in when she was escorted here, this one had fluffy silk seats.

“My name is Dahlia.”

The carriage started to move. Nicole watched the view of the capital flicker through the curtains.

“I already know that, but—”

“I’m also Dagger. I was given that name when I became a regular in the Shadows.”

Dagger.

It was a type of weapon. Nicole recalled the sight of a fluttering dahlia, and a dagger with a sharpened edge. It didn’t match the clunky dagger.

“So ... you were a secret examiner.”

‘Raul said I got a perfect score from all the examiners. Estoc and another examiner, probably..... Dagger.’

Dagger smiled with her eyes. But there was mischief in her smile.

“Did you like my performance as Dahlia, your future best friend?”

“I can’t believe you’ve been hiding your identity.”

Nicole showed a rare, unfiltered expression. She looked impressed.

At the same time, she corrected her tone. If she was a full knight of the Sith, she needed to be addressed formally.

"From now on, I will be your colleague and direct superior."

"Where did you start with your fake identity?"

"Um..... from where? Most of it?"

Dagger smirked.

"Oh, right. I may be your immediate superior, but that's just a matter of convenience; all Shadow agents are equal in status, and while I'm your boss when I'm acting as a Sith Knight, you can call me whatever you want. Please call me Dagger from now on."

".....Okay, Dagger."

Nicole nodded.

"What did you mean by passing earlier?"

"Let's just say it's like an aptitude test. I have a way of recognizing when someone is lying."

"Did I ..... seem sincere in what I said?"

"You seem sincere."

Nicole gave a small nod. Apparently, Karen was firmly in Raul's pocket, because he was preparing a special test just for her.

"First, when you become a Shadow Agent, you are given the name of a flower. Originally, our agency was a very old one, passed down from generation to generation. It was

disbanded during the time of the previous Grand Duke, but our Grand Duke revived it.”

Dagger explained briefly.

Flower and Sword was the original name of the institution under the Grand Duke.

Raul chose not to use that archaic name and called them the Sith.

“Then why do you give them the name of Flowers?”

“First, it’s just tradition, and second, it makes it difficult to tell who you are. Names are information, after all. Royalty has archaic names, and a girl like Karen..... well, it’s a unique name for where she comes from, and besides, Shadow agents are often commoners, so no one has a real name.”

Nicole nodded.

“On the one hand, it is to limit the number of our most influential elite agents.”

The formal knights all had limited names. They could only take the name of a specific sword, like Bastard, Dagger, Estoc, or Scimitar.

But a Shadow Agent could use the name of any flower in the world, an infinite number of them.

“We’re here.”

“Already?”

Nicole looked out the window again. They were now near Grace’s house.

'So they've been driving us to the training center in circles on purpose so we wouldn't know where we were all this time.'

Nicole realized at the same time that she had been tricked.

The carriage had just stopped.

"By the way, Noona. I'm a 'he', and I'm three years younger than you, so I will just call you that."

"....."

Nicole felt like she'd been punched in the head.

"So that was all a lie."

"To tell a lie, all you have to do is see where someone is weak and appeal to that, and then mix truth with lies. It's what our Grand Duke teaches."

"..... That sounds like him."

Now that she thinks about it, the name Dahlia was a hint.

"Since you don't react to the name Dahlia, I'm guessing Grace didn't teach you about Flowers and Swords?"

"You were also testing me on how much I know."

"Yes. Because if Ms. Grace gets too involved in the test, that will be a factor in eliminating you."

"So the whole fake daughter thing was a play, too?"

Nicole had indeed seen Dahlia walking with a young child on the sidewalk. It was a very pretty child who looked just like Dahlia.

"I told you, every lie is based on some truth."

Dagger smiled with a Dahlia-like expression.

"Who says I don't have a daughter? She's my treasure."

"....."

At what age did he get a daughter?

Nicole couldn't bring herself to ask.

"Well, now get some rest. You can tell Ms. Grace about what you've been through today."

".....At least I will be able to get my Master's congratulations on becoming a Shadow Agent."

"Yes. Please wait for new orders."

The carriage disappeared before her eyes. Nicole pressed against her hood.

It had felt like a dream earlier, and now she felt like she was waking up from a dream.

\*\*\*

Dahlia.

No, the first thing Dagger saw when he stepped into the Grand Duke's office was Estoc on his knees.

"....."

Dagger stood in front of the desk, looking at Estoc with wide eyes. He didn't ask what was wrong.

Raul, who had been looking at the papers with an impassive face, slowly looked up.

“I just read your report.”

〈Following, learning, and coping skills are all top notch. Worthy of being used for simple infiltration or intelligence gathering, and worthy of being given a fake identity and made into a socialite.

Her high intelligence is offset by her calmness and boldness.....

Has emotional weaknesses.

Generous to children and the underdogs, has an implied sense of justice, and a strong sense of self-respect.)

“Do you think this report is correct?”

“You said you wanted to ..... put her away, but on the other hand, you told me to evaluate her coldly.”

Raul laughed bitterly.

“You too, kneel beside Estoc.”

“.....?”

Dagger's eyes widened. Estoc rolled his eyes. Then, as Dagger knelt down beside him, his eyes twinkled with delight.

“Head down.”

Raul said, looking at the papers. Dagger and Estoc kept their eyes fixed on their laps, looking puzzled.

“Neither of you have an answer.”

“What..... are you talking about?”

Dagger asked.

“A girl who can’t even fight followed you yet you didn’t even realize it. You’ve been tricked and used, and you don’t know it. Perhaps I gave you the name Dagger too soon. You should have rolled with Dahlia for a few more years.”

At that moment, Estoc and Dagger forgot their orders and looked at each other in disbelief.

“You can’t be.....”

Dagger spoke up.

“That woman, Karen, must have known who you were all along.”

Raul said nonchalantly.

“And when she realized something about Marlin, she tried to expose her through you.”

Raul could see through her. A cadet who wasn’t even an agent had used them to reveal a traitor, and Dagger gave her a perfect score without even realizing it. Besides, she would have earned Dagger’s favor at the same time.

Meanwhile, Karen had boldly targeted Estoc for surveillance.

〈Follow an important person in the same building on the day of the test〉 .

That was the final test. Everyone in the Artus Club that day was within Raul’s reach anyway.

On a board that was set up from start to finish, she reached for the only one that wasn't set up. Estoc was the answer.

With a net on either side of her, there was no excuse for Raul to fail her, no matter how much he hated her.

'Besides, she knows my personality.'

Raul was proud and arrogant, which meant that being grossly unfair was not in his nature.

Eventually, she pushed him over the edge. A cowardly woman with a weird personality who blushed when she was confronted by him. She taunted him.

It was a thrilling experience.

Raul was starting to get annoyed with her again, in a strange way.

"Your case is worse than Estoc's. Get a grip, Dagger."

"How did you notice?"

Dagger asked cautiously.

"How do I notice? Just look at the reports. You've all been so possessed by her that you've been writing about her in glowing terms."

"Well, it's funny how being possessed doesn't make me feel bad."

Estoc said. Estoc was still giddy with pleasure at having been hit in the back by Nicole.

Raul was ecstatic.

"A pay cut, and training from the start."

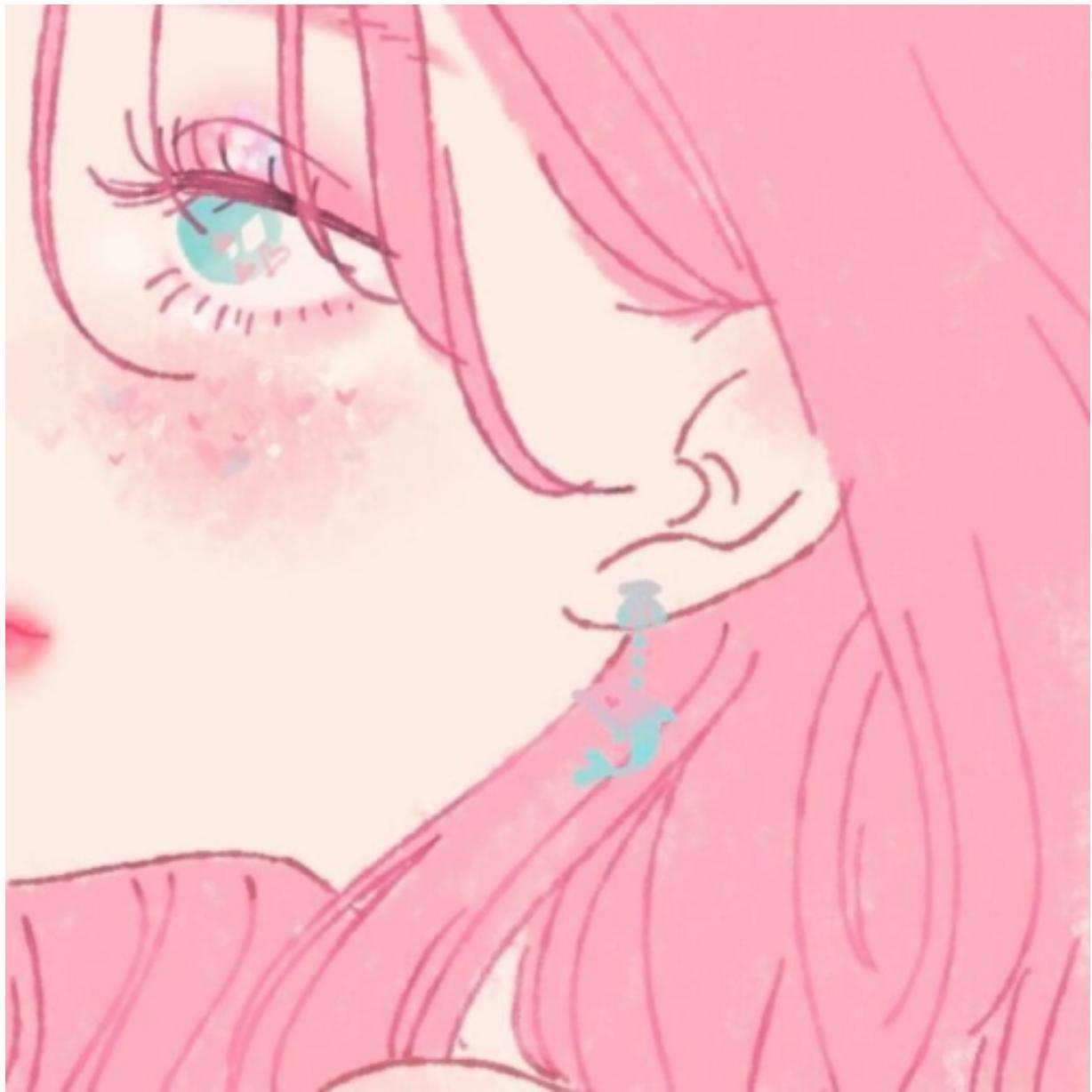
Dagger's face flashed with age-old despair.

"You're both going to have to get your heads out of your asses this time."

Raul was especially harsh with his younger knights.

(T/N: WHAT? Is this true? I didn't realize that, wow! Nicole is so much smarter than I imagined. Maybe that's why in this chapter, Nicole asked Dagger: "Did I seem sincere?" I was confused when I read that sentence, but now it makes sense 😳 And Dagger is a guy??? Wow, reverse-harem is not in the genre, right??? LMAO if this is, i wouldn't mind 😂)

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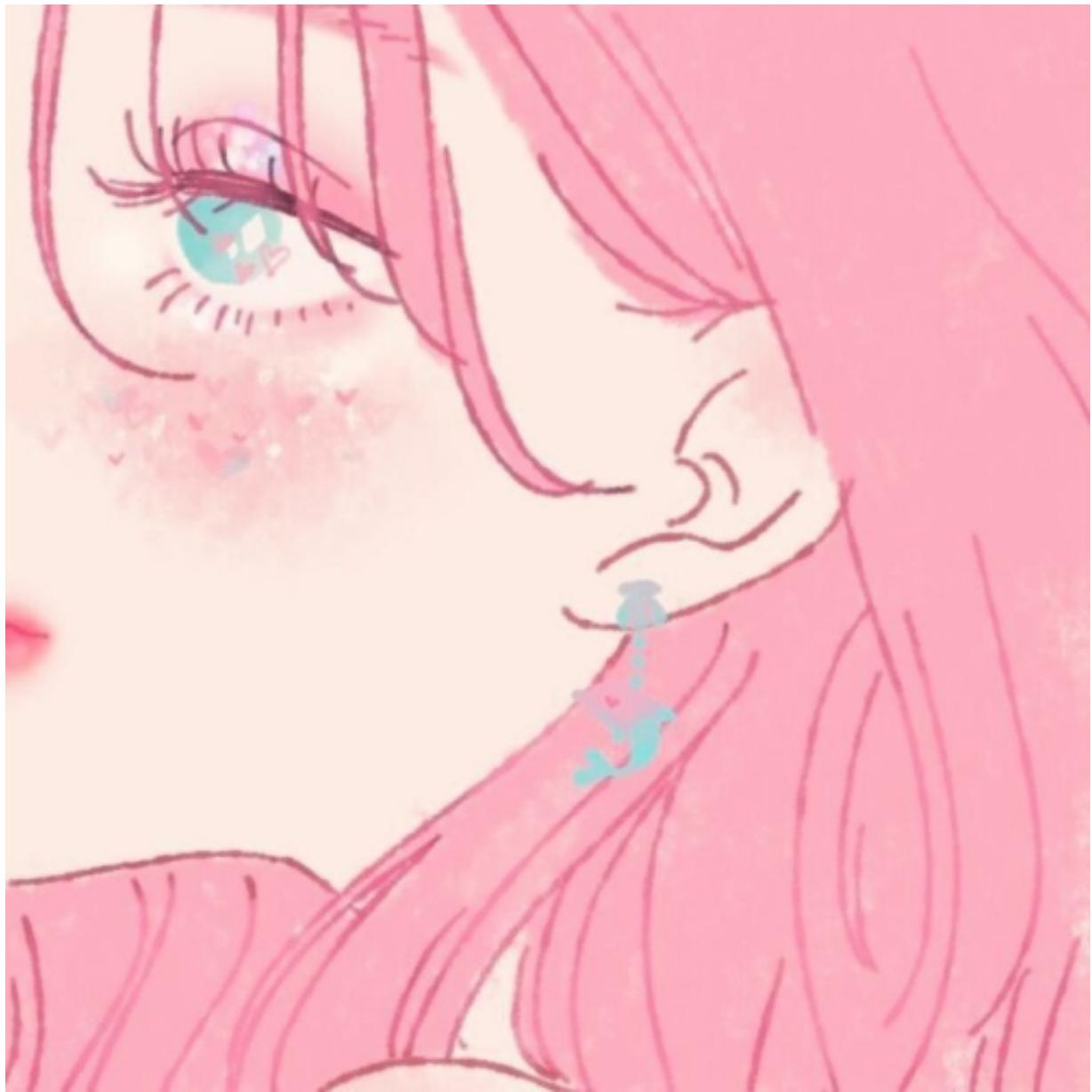


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# **Chapter 45**

(unedited)

\*\*\*

When the carriage carrying Nicole pulled up, Grace jumped out.

“You made it back safely.”

“Were you waiting for me?”

“Not much..... I wasn’t worried.”

“It sounds like you were ..... worried?”

Nicole’s heart sank at the sight of Grace. This stern-looking woman had a kinder side than she thought.

“.....I see you’re back safely, so things must have gone well. I was just nervous that Raul was going to fail you, he’s got a mean streak in him.”

“Thank you, Grace.”

Nicole said in a small voice.

“I really appreciate it.”

Nicole knew Grace was only seeing Sienna’s shadow through her.

That didn't mean she wasn't sincere. Nicole blushed unnecessarily.

"This is not the time. Let's go inside and get something to eat. I've got it ready."

Grace had reheated the food several times today as she waited for Nicole.

Nicole finally ate and relaxed.

\*\*\*

That evening, Grace dropped Nicole off personally. Nicole drank her tea with Grace, looking out the window.

"So.....you've become a shadow agent for the Sith?"

"Yes."

Nicole gave a small nod.

"And you're going to get a name?"

"Yes..... They said I'd get the name of a flower. Dagger..... Dahlia has both names."

Grace sighed.

"You already knew all about the structure of the Sith, didn't you Grace?"

"Of course. I built the system from the ground up, but I purposely didn't tell you. It's not easy to pretend you don't know what you know."

Nicole could see why Grace had done that. Raul was tricky, and if Grace had given Nicole the information ahead of time,

he could have used it as an excuse to fail her.

Worried about that, Grace hadn't given her any information in the first place.

"I don't want you to join the Sith. I told you, to not get too involved. You'll learn too much, and you won't be able to escape like I did."

"I know."

Nicole replied calmly, and the look on her face made Grace realize.

"So.....that's what you've been planning all along."

"Yeah. My goal wasn't just to barely survive. I was aiming to join the Sith from the start."

"Why? Do you not realize that your original identity was the fiancee of the Grand Duke? Being the daughter of a surviving member of House YvesChapelle is a more useful card than you might think. If he ever finds out who you really are, you'll be....."

"I will never be a Grand Duchess, and that marriage is one that must be broken and lost."

She doesn't hate Raul. But she knew full well that the position of Grand Duchess was a grave.

'I've already spent my whole life running away and avoiding reality.'

Her family was powerless, and they all met a miserable end. Even in this life, she couldn't prevent her mother's sad death.

The world of the past life was like a broken guillotine for Nicole.

A guillotine that, if she closed her eyes and held it to her neck, would one day fall on her head. There were too many people who wanted her dead.

“The way for me not to become the Grand Duchess isn’t to run away, it’s to be the kind of woman who can never be the Grand Duchess. But I can’t be like that now. I have to know a lot, and I have to have power, and I have to have money, and I have to have a lot of accomplices who can hide me if my identity is ever revealed. No, I need to create a situation where it’s like, ‘My identity cannot be revealed.’”

An entourage that knows many of Raul’s secrets. A woman of a different class who could never marry him.

Nicole was going to be that person.

Who would think that Raul’s confidante would be Nicole, the eldest daughter of YvesChapel? No one who hears it would believe it.

Not even the imperial family, who thought she was an eyesore and would kill me as soon as they found her.

Nicole decided to catch them off guard.

“I’m going to hide in their closest places, and I’m going to change the reality around me, and that starts with moving up in Sith.”

In that sense, Nicole liked Karen’s current status.

Starting at the bottom, with room to move up.

Besides, as far as she knew, Raul was a powerful man who valued his entourage. In her past life, she hadn't wanted to recognize his merit, but now she did.

'He was still a nobleman, a nobleman who cared about his entourage.'

The Grand Duke is loved by all the people of the capital; they call him the protector of the capital, and he is even a victorious general. His accomplishments are even sublime.

At least he tries to protect his people. As if he were their lord.

"I don't know what the hell is going on in your head, but you're not wrong. It makes sense....."

Grace was both impressed and convinced by Nicole's plan. Nicole recounted the details of the test.

".....How did you know that Dahlia was the hidden examiner?"

"I wasn't completely convinced that she was the examiner, but..... She seemed a little different from the other candidates, so I thought maybe she was at least acting as a go-between, feeding information to the examiner, or something like that."

Nicole chimed in.

"Dahlia used to get beaten up a lot by Marlin, and when I looked at her arm, I realized that she'd made a fake wound, and when I touched her hand to check it, her temperature wasn't high, because someone with a big cut like that on their arm would have a high temperature. Plus, Dahlia is a very smart and clever person, so it doesn't make sense that

she would just let Marlin take advantage of her, but..... I was confused until the end because I thought she was telling the truth when she said she had a daughter. I didn't even realize that Dahlia or Dagger was a man, he was very clever with his disguise."

"You..... seem to be more talented than I thought."

Grace said in disbelief.

"Thank you for the compliment, Grace..... And for your genuine concern for me."

Nicole said. It was the unvarnished truth.

Grace coughed in disbelief.

"Nicole. You have to know what kind of man Raul is. He would never forgive you if he knew you had deceived him. He'll retaliate in the most horrible ways."

"But even if my true identity is revealed, I won't be able to marry him, because using me as a servant would be treason to the imperial family."

"I may as well have excommunicated Raul, but if you're thinking of harming him,....."

"No, Grace, that's not it either, I'm not....."

Nicole said in a small voice.

"I'm going to protect the man who's supposed to be my master."

Because Nicole owed him.

A debt she'd given nothing but an imperfect sacrifice in her last life. Such a debt.

"I'm going to do my job as an agent to the best of my ability, and maybe that's the only way we can help each other."

"I'll do my best to protect you, too."

Those were the last words Grace said that night.

Nicole nodded small, deeply emotional.

\*\*\*

After her final exams, Nicole became a Shadow Agent of the Sith.

At first, she was ready to do anything. But despite her determination, Nicole continued to stay at Grace's house.

'No word from him today.'

She wondered if Raul really hated her.

Contrary to Dagger's assurances that he would call for her at any moment, Nicole remained on standby, which was peaceful and a little boring.

Nicole was not allowed to live openly in Grace's house, so she mostly stayed in her room, study, and basement.

It wasn't that she had nothing to do, but there was a sense of impatience, of waiting for something.

Nicole's only solace was her letters to and from Jay. Jay was now studying in the academy of a distant temple, courtesy of Grace.

Maybe one day, when she's settled in the capital, she can live with her brother.

'I must be a strong protector for my brother.'

In her two lives, the only person who hadn't betrayed her was her brother. Her parents had left her too soon.

'And..... father.....'

For Nicole, her father was a thorn in her hand. Just thinking about him made her heart ache.

'I hope he didn't think we were really dead and made a bad choice somewhere. Maybe he's weaker than he looks and has fallen ill.....'

But she couldn't check on him often enough. If she were to be caught checking the mailbox, it might bring some sort of blemish to her.

'Be careful, the slightest thing you do can catch up with you, and the House is watching you.'

So it wasn't until a month after her final exams that Nicole nervously made her way to the Great Hall.

The day was overcast. There were few people on the streets.

In some parts of the Empire, including the capital, transparent floating objects would appear in the air on days like this.

This was an ancient legacy called the Flame. From what she's heard, the land of the capital was once a place overrun by demons and rampant with magic.

It was uninhabitable, but it was fertile and warmer than any other land.

The Flame has existed since then. People regarded it as an ancient legacy.

No one knows why it appears or how to make it go away.

In the capital, the Flame was nothing more than a rainbow that appeared on a whim.

But people were superstitious and avoided going out on days when the flame appeared.

In other words, it was the perfect day for Nicole to go out.

'My father knows about the secret mailbox in the temple. If he was alive and received my letter, he would have checked the mailbox on the other side of .....,'

Her mother's and father's emergency contacts were simple. They rented two secret mailboxes directly from the main temple.

One in a city near the edge of the empire where Nicole lived.

One in the capital, the center of the empire.

The two mailboxes share the same number, and anything dropped in one is immediately moved to the other.

In other words, you could send and receive letters to a fictitious address.

The High Priest's secret mailbox was located in a small prayer room, just outside the apprentice priests' quarters, where no one went.

It was a place where few people came to pray.

Nicole headed to the prayer room as she had the previous time.

She said the number and password for her mailbox, and the priest directed her to a secret mailbox.

Beep. The mailbox opened. Nicole's eyes widened as she peered inside.

'There's something in the mailbox.'

Nicole fumbled and pulled out an envelope. She opened the envelope, which was about the size of her two palms combined.

"Ah....."

Inside were dried forsythia petals and a ribbon. The satin ribbon was a deep purple.

'I remember this ribbon.'

Nicole's eyes nearly filled with tears.

'It must be the one my mother tied the flowers with the day my father left!'

He'd tucked the petals and this ribbon into his arms before he left for his business. And then there was something else, a playing card in an envelope.

'A card of spades?'

The card was common throughout the Empire. Nicole furrowed her brow.

'In trump cards, the spade card is.....'

Her father had said it once in passing. It means priest.

'Does that mean he's staying in a temple?'

Nicole pondered. The temple provided all sorts of shelter for people who had nowhere else to go.

Since her father had nowhere else to stay, it did make sense that he would turn to them.

There was a small checkmark in the spade.

'Anyway, I'm glad I heard from him.'

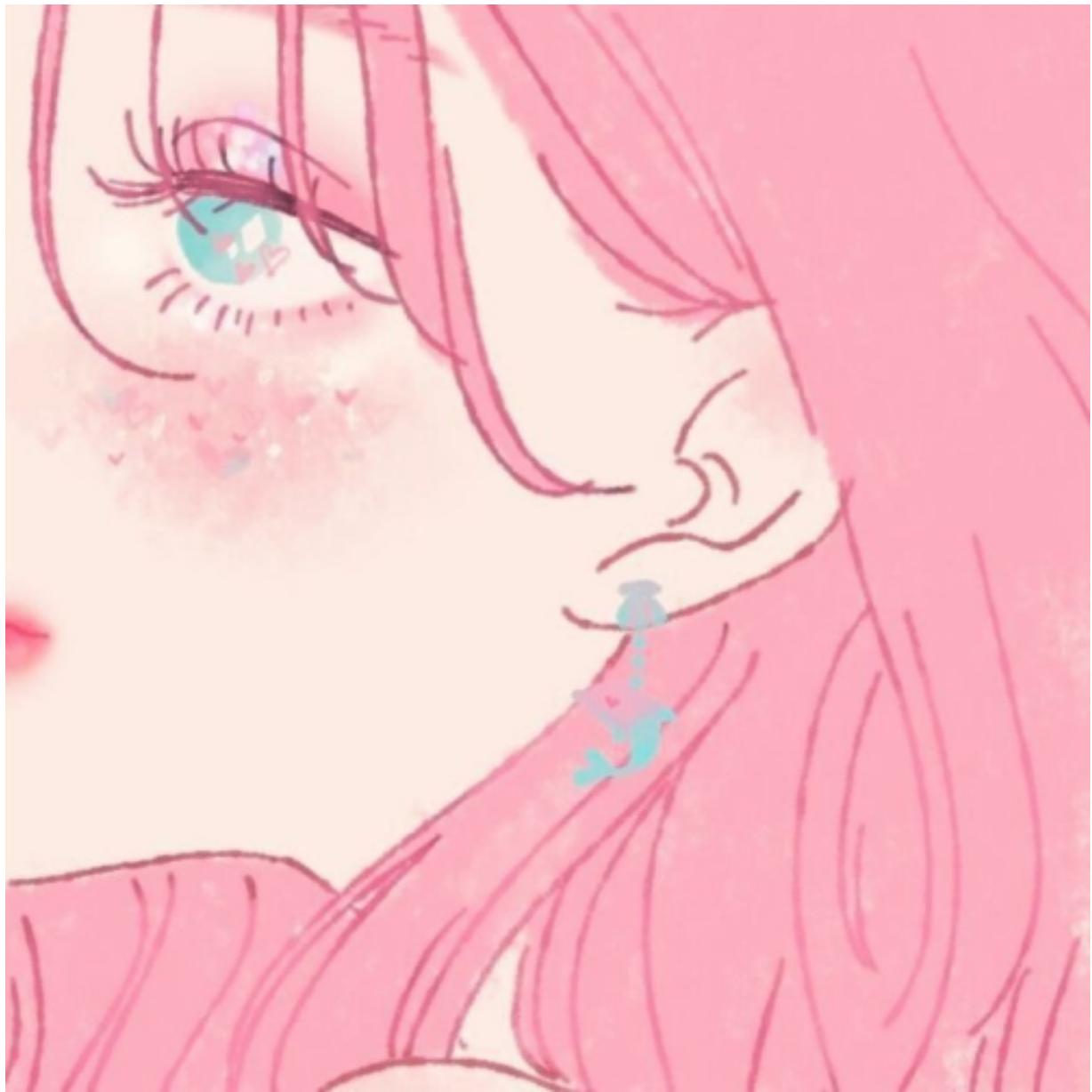
A coded message known only to family members. He understood Nicole's warning to be careful and never call first.

Still, it was the first time she'd heard from her father in far too long. Nicole was so happy she thought she might cry.

'As long as my family is safe, I can handle anything.'

With that thought in mind, Nicole left.

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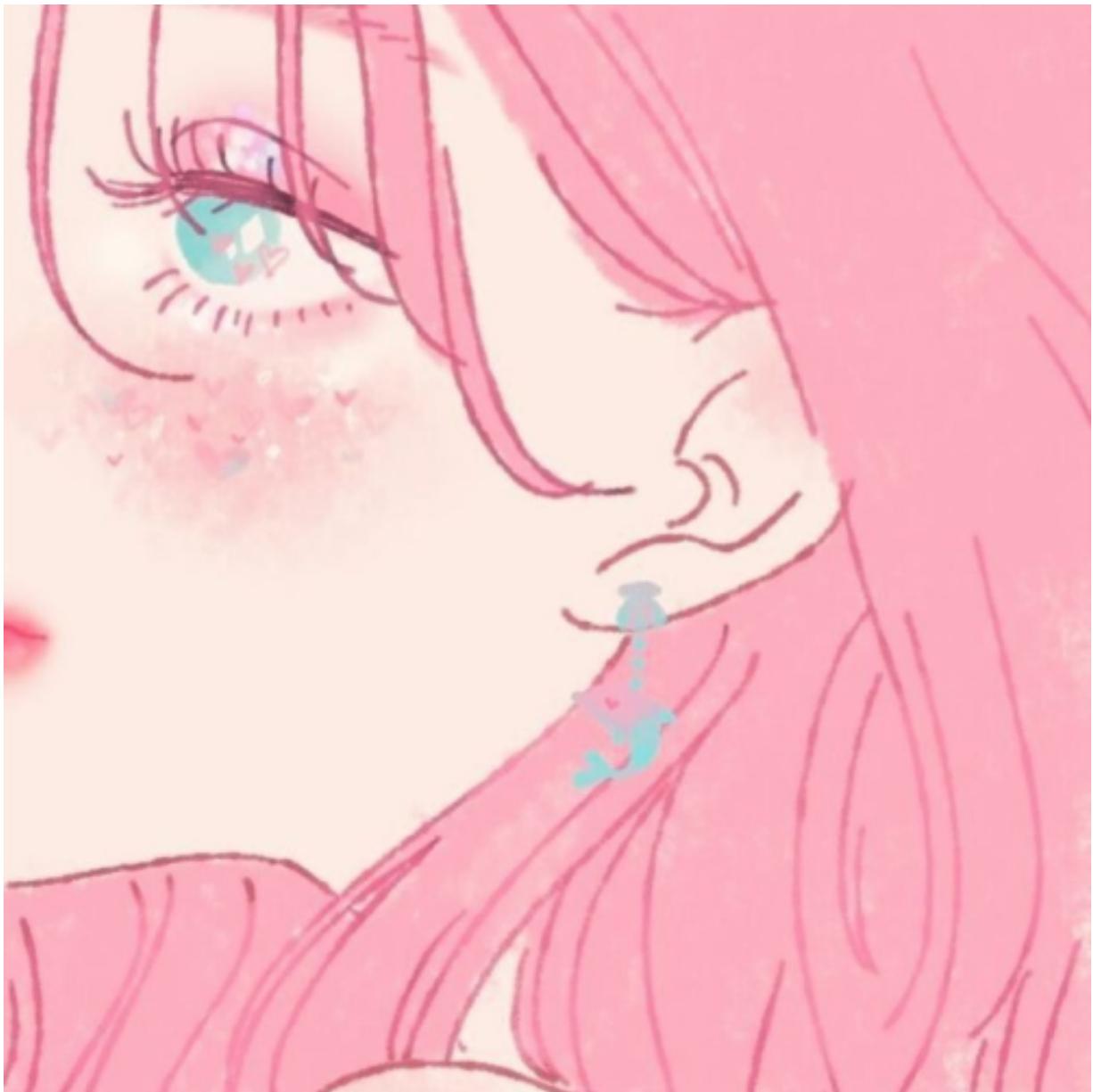


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# Chapter 46

\*\*\*

Four months before Nicole received the ribbon and card in the temple's mailbox.

At Shurim, an estate on the edge of the Empire. It was a small, poor and unremarkable estate.

But at the edge of Shurim, there was a large mansion. Called the House of Blanc, the inhabitants were known as a family of retired merchants.

They were not true nobles, but the townspeople respected them and called them "the Lord" or "the Lord's family".

Whenever there was a job to be done, big or small, the Blancs would call the villagers to their home to do it, and they would pay them generously.

If anyone was sick or injured, they would send money or food.

They had a good reputation in the neighborhood.

Although there has been an influx of people from the western part of the capital to this village, the locals are reputed to be mostly virtuous.

The village on the edge of the mountains had unusually fertile land and a warm climate.

Every day was the same for the well-to-do families in the region. It was peaceful, but also monotonous.

However, a very small change occurred in the house. It was due to an unexpected visitor.

"So, she's the young lady that the Young Master found while out for a walk, right? For some reason, our weak young master was out of town? Did the madam leave him alone?"

"Until when will Madam keep him confined to the house? He wants to go out."

The good landlord and his wife, who seemed to have nothing to worry about, had one problem. Their only child, their only son.

He had been told since childhood that he would not live long, and he still suffered from the flu whenever the weather turned cold.

The only time he went out was in the summer. He rode his horse to a nearby valley in the mountains, and when he returned, he was not alone.

He had brought a little girl with him, wrapped preciously in his coat.

"She sleeps as if she were dead, but the master has called in a doctor to examine her and treat her."

"Really? Who is she?"

"I don't know. How can an unconscious person say her name, but....."

The maid whispered in her fellow maid's ear.

"That girl, she's incredibly beautiful. I can't tell if she's a sleeping person or a goddess."

The maid felt a chill run down her spine as she thought of the girl she'd caught a glimpse of earlier in the day.

A small, snowy face, a prominent nose that was exactly the right size for her face, full lips that were bloodless but seemed to come alive when she opened her eyes. Eyes with long, dense lashes.

And how long, slender, and perfect her limbs are when she's lying down.

It was almost a shock to see such beauty in the countryside.

"She must have been picked up because she's beautiful."

\*\*\*

Isabel slowly opened her eyes. She looked around slowly.

'Where am I?'

Her head hurt like it was going to crack. But what she saw was the scene of her dreams.

A sumptuous room with red wallpaper and bedding that looked like it belonged to a nobleman.

'A nobleman's room?'

But she lived in a shabby hut. Surely..... that was the last room she'd ever slept in.

"You're awake!"

Just then, someone shouted. Isabel turned and looked at the person.

A skinny boy stood there, his eyebrows raised. He was well-dressed, like a young master from a noble family. His speech was well-mannered, as if he had been taught well. However, his green eyes and auburn hair gave him a distinctive and strange look.

For a moment, Isabel's mind raced. She remembered the moment before she'd fainted. She must have fallen off a cliff while running away from Grace.....

'Did this man save me?'

And he looked rich. Isabel quickly composed herself and let out a groan.

"I'm..... Why am I here, and who are you?"

"My name is Leos, and you were lying near the valley at the foot of the mountain."

"I see. I'm sorry..... Can you help me get up?"

Isabel held out her hand weakly. Leos took her hand, unable to help himself.

"You're my lifesaver, thank you."

Inwardly, Isabel smiled a smile of relief.

She had been so lucky, so fortunate. To come out into the world and find someone so kind!

All of a sudden.

Just then, the door opened. A gentle-looking elderly couple entered the room.

Both have brown hair and brown eyes. They were boringly featureless. They looked nothing like Leos.

“Our guest is awake?”

“Yes, Father.”

Leos answered. Isabel was still in her pajamas, which they must have changed.

She feigned a momentary cry of surprise as they entered and hastily covered herself with a sheet. She looked like a noble girl embarrassed to be seen by a man in her scanty attire.

Her expression and behavior alone made them think, ‘This young lady is not of ordinary status.’

“Ah.....”

“You’re still not feeling well. I’ll have someone bring you some painkillers. Whatever hit you, you’ve got a pretty big gash on your shoulder. It’s a good thing you can move your arm.”

“Well, I see.....”

Isabel said sheepishly. Then she lifted her clear eyes to look at them.

“These are my parents.”

“Pleased to meet you, young lady. I’m Heather, but people here usually call me Madam.”

"Pleased to meet you, too. Mrs. Heather."

Isabel bowed again, this time with her head. If she was a commoner or a lower-class person, she would have called Heather Madam. But as the hostess, she called Heather by her first name.

People of equal status but younger than her were usually addressed as "Madam." or "Sir." Heather had lived in the city before and knew it, so her eyes lit up.

"Can you tell me your name, and how you ended up lying there?"

Isabel gritted her teeth at the words.

'Why? Because of Nicole, that damned bitch!'

Isabel fell off the cliff and into the deep, rushing waters of the ravine.

Then she was swept downstream to this manor. It took her only a few seconds to realize the situation she was in.

She also knew that this was the moment to lie.

"I don't remember..... properly, but people called my parents Lords, and I remember the house I grew up in, with lots of maids, and they all called me Lady....."

Isabel stammered. She described the view of the mansion realistically. Commoners didn't usually get to see the houses of the nobility.

'I remember what Grace's house was like.'

So Isabel's description of Grace's house, where she often went to play, was believable.

“What’s your name?”

Leos asked.

“Do you remember your name?”

“Everybody..... called me Isabel..... Lady Isabel.”

Leos admired Isabel’s pitiful appearance. She was beautiful, but almost too beautiful.

“So you were a young lady from a noble family after all, but you don’t remember the slightest thing about how you came to be here?”

“I do remember one thing, a very terrible and sad memory: my family tried to force me into marriage.”

Isabel came up with a plausible lie in a matter of seconds, and told only fragments of the story to keep them guessing.

Isabel was a young lady from a small viscounty in the capital.

But when her parents died, her mean relatives tried to force her to marry a rich, older man.

So she ran away with the help of her people and took up residence in a distant monastery, a month’s journey from home.

While running from them, Isabel had an accident and lost her footing in the mountains.

“Where is that monastery?”

“I don’t know..... I don’t know, I don’t remember anything about it.”

Whenever Isabel tried to probe for details, she would always say she couldn't remember.

"Maybe it's a place that doesn't have a name. I've heard that there are many small monasteries that virtuous people set up in the mountains to get away from the world, and those places don't even make it onto the temple rolls."

Leos said dully.

Heather was no fool and quickly recognized the flaw in Isabel's words.

"Agh, my head--"

Picking up on the hint, Isabel pretends to have a headache.

"Maybe it's because my parents died and my relatives tormented me so harshly, and my head hurts just thinking about it....."

"How pitiful, Mother and Father. We must help her."

Leos already looked deeply sympathetic toward Isabel. Heather thought for a moment.

'Yes, well, she's just a poor girl.'

The local people called them 'The Lord'. The townspeople didn't recognize nobility.

They were just people from the city with money, not real nobility.

There was no shame or embarrassment in that.

The problem was their only son.

Leos was coming of age, and they never dreamed of finding him a bride. There was no social life in this rural village, and Leos had never met anyone.

Even if there was a social circle, it was rumored that he was weak, so no one of high status would give him their daughter.

But Isabel, the girl he brought home, was beautiful and the same age as his son.

'Maybe she's a real noblewoman.....'

If she looked into her and she's a real noblewoman, he could make her his wife.

If she had met with an accident in the mountains, her family might think she was dead and stop looking for her.

Even if they did, it wouldn't be easy to forcibly take a child who was already married.

It wasn't as if they needed a bride with a lot of money, as they had no shortage of it. They lived a very simple life in the countryside, with no luxuries.

So it wouldn't be a big deal to have Isabel with them.

Despite her reputation, Heather was not an entirely good person; she was a moderately snobbish, moderately calculating, moderately aristocratic person.

Even if they were unable to marry, it was usually the woman who was ruined in these cases, not the man. The Imperial countryside is a much more conservative culture for women.

Besides, they're helping a girl who appears to be a noble in trouble. Their family had a justification.

'It won't hurt.'

Heather made a quick, calculated judgment.

Then she spoke softly.

"Perhaps it would be better for you to take it slow and try to recall your memories, with our help. You can stay as our guest for as long as you like, is that all right, my dear?"

"Of course. Make her feel at home."

Isabel looked at them, surprised by the words, and then blinked.

"To have such nice people find me, it's like a dream, thank you. I'll get myself together as quickly as I can so I don't cause any inconvenience."

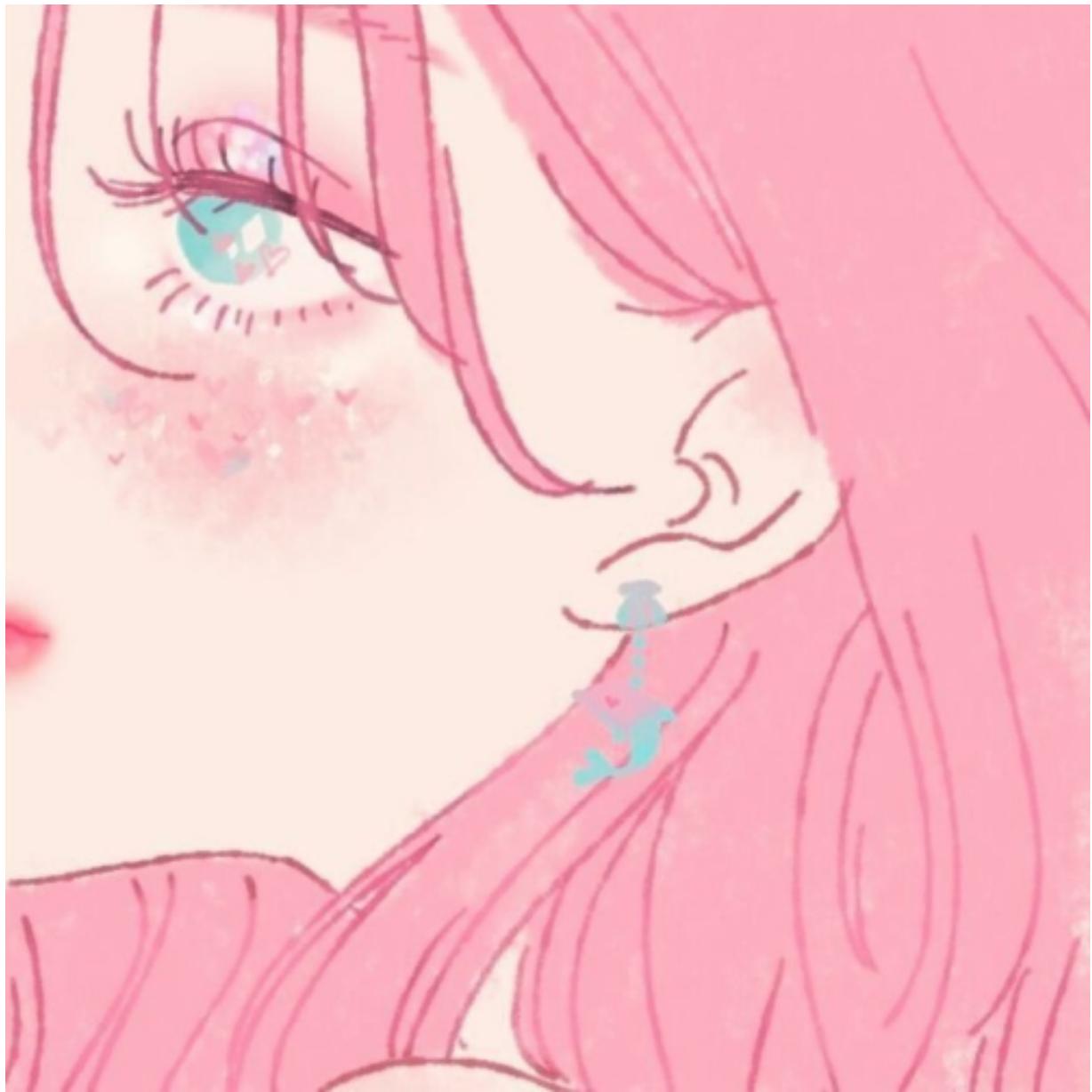
Isabel's lips quirked upward as she said that.

'You opened the door for me first.'

She muttered to herself.

'You never know, maybe the guest won't be a guest?'

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# Chapter 47

\*\*\*

Afterward, Heather called in a doctor to examine Isabel.

⟨The wound on your shoulder should heal with good care. Thankfully, it's not deep.⟩

It was a stroke of luck. She'd fallen into the water with an untreated wound from Grace's shotgun.

Luckily, it only grazed her shoulder and didn't seem to hurt much.

Isabel ate for the first time in days. Part of her wanted to gorge herself, but she managed to control herself and ate slowly.

These people believed she was of nobility, so she had to act like it.

Every time Leos made eye contact with Isabel, he was at a loss for words. He told her he had the servants clean up the best guest room.

'Hmm, it's usable.'

Isabel's spirits lifted when she saw the room ready.

It was quite luxurious compared to her previous hut room. There was even a small terrace just for her.

Isabel went out onto the terrace. As she gazed up at the night sky, she smiled.

'The world is on my side, and I'm still alive!'

But at the same time, Isabel was feeling down. She'd lost Jen and Karen, who she'd tried to use as her hands and feet, and she'd nearly burned her family to death.

'The truth is..... I didn't want to kill them that horribly, I just wanted to be free, but Nicole pushed me to do it.'

It was all Nicole's fault. She'd been so patient with that stupid thing all this time, and then she betrayed me!

'But the worst part is..... that Isabel lost to Nicole, that stupid bitch with no healing powers!'

As far as Isabel was concerned, Nicole was the most unnecessary member of the family, like a maid.

Born to the same parents, but far inferior to her.

Isabel spent the rest of the night trying to figure out why she had been taken advantage of by Nicole, and she came to a conclusion.

'I was too nice.'

She could have taken care of her family. There were plenty of opportunities to kill Nicole.

But Isabel had the grace to abandon them and run away.

But Nicole took advantage of Isabel's goodness.

'I have to succeed. I was born to do it. People are born that way, and until I get where I deserve to be, I'm going to have

to give up all recognition and goodness.'

Isabel giggled.

"Yes, I can start over here. I'm quite fond of my new home, though it's not the fancy mansion in the imperial capital I wanted....."

Isabel closed the terrace door.

"Well, we'll just have to change that, and I suppose I can make this new home my own."

For that to happen, she must first—

She has to own this house. With a new goal in mind, Isabel hummed to herself and looked in the mirror.

She was already very happy with hope for tomorrow.

\*\*\*

Three weeks later, when Isabel was able to get around, she asked the Blancs for a favor.

*(Now that I've met these benefactors that saved my life, I want to go to the south and give thanks. There's a huge temple for the Lord around here, isn't there?)*

The village was very small, but a couple of hours' carriage ride away was the Southern Great Temple.

It was the largest temple in southern Gydia, and there were only five such temples in the entire empire.

Leos discouraged her, but she persuaded him.

⟨I'm a very religious person, and how could I not give thanks to the gods when I've been saved by such kind people? It's a miracle of the highest order!⟩

In the end, Leos let her.

Isabel, of course, had other ideas.

'If it's as my father says, then the southern temple must be Mother and Father's emergency means of contact.'

The Southern Great Temple has a special means of communication that few people know about.

Each provincial temple has a mailbox that allows for secret communication.

No one else could see what was being sent or received, and it was a secret known only to the highest echelons of the temple.

Isabel heard about it from her father, when she was very young.

⟨Father, what if you don't come back?⟩

⟨I'll tell you a secret, Isabel. Mommy and I have a secret line of communication through our old mailbox, so we won't be separated forever. If anything happens, tell your siblings, too.⟩

Her father was particularly weak with his children.

Nicole and Jay grew up too early to bother their parents with little things, but Isabel was always asking him for things.

Isabel was especially good at asking her father for the things she wanted. If he couldn't afford it, he would feel terribly sorry for her.

Isabel would then probe relentlessly, as if she had caught a weakness. That's what she'd heard, too.

'I'm sure Nicole, since she's a wimp, cares about Father.'

Once she heard it, she never forgot it.

She also remembered the mailbox access and password her father had given her, which was easy enough to memorize. It was a combination of the first letters of Nicole's, Isabel's, and Jay's names.

Isabel opened the mailbox door with ease.

'Oh my God, what's in there?'

Isabel's eyes widened. There it was, a rambling letter from Nicole.

'I'm staying in the capital. I'll be looking for a chance to see you soon, so hide yourself somewhere safe, and I will send some money to .....,'

Isabel wanted to giggle now that she knew.

'So the wretch has gone to the capital to stick to Grace? Grace, I knew her status was high despite being stuck in the countryside, and I was right!'

Naturally, Isabel snatched the letter away.

'Alas, I am so glad to know. But what can I do? This letter will never get into my father's hands.'

Isabel pondered.

'There has to be a way to mess with Nicole.'

As she pondered, she remembered the forsythia and ribbon Freya had given her father on the day he left.

〈Have a safe trip, and when you come back with some money, let's not be apart until fall.〉

Isabel went to a general store near the shrine.

There she was lucky enough to find a ribbon that looked exactly like it.

All the satin ribbons sold in the general store were there.

Isabel paid for the ribbon with emergency money Leos had given her. She also bought a deck of playing cards.

'Ah, Nicole. I know what's going on in your head, and I want you to look at these cards and try to figure it out.'

Isabel was excited. How crazy Nicole would be when she realized it was her and not her father who had sent this reply?

"I can't wait to get to the capital, so I can get back at that bitch.

And it was Isabel's dream to go to the capital anyway.

She thought about how she would take advantage of her new host family.

No matter how she thought about it, the Blanc family wouldn't be hard to roast.

\*\*\*

It's been two and a half months since Nicole became a Shadow Agent, and she's rarely left Grace's house.

But it hasn't been all fun and games; she's learned a lot about the capital's politics and powers through her conversations with Grace. Most importantly, she learned about.....

"Nicole, are you in the basement again?"

Nicole looked up from her crouch.

She was in the basement of Grace's house now. She was wearing muddy gloves and an apron.

"Grace."

"It's looking pretty good now. I can't believe there's a plant that grows underground."

"They've been in the YvesChapel family for generations. ....They thrive better where there's no sunlight."

Nicole grew pots of herbs in her newly decorated basement. Some of the dozens of pots had already sprouted, while others were still growing.

"What a legacy. I can't believe the YvesChapel family kept these seeds hidden."

"These plants are all ancient heritage, almost extinct now."

Nicole asked Grace to take the seeds and the YvesChapel books she had hidden in a secret place, knowing their hidden value.

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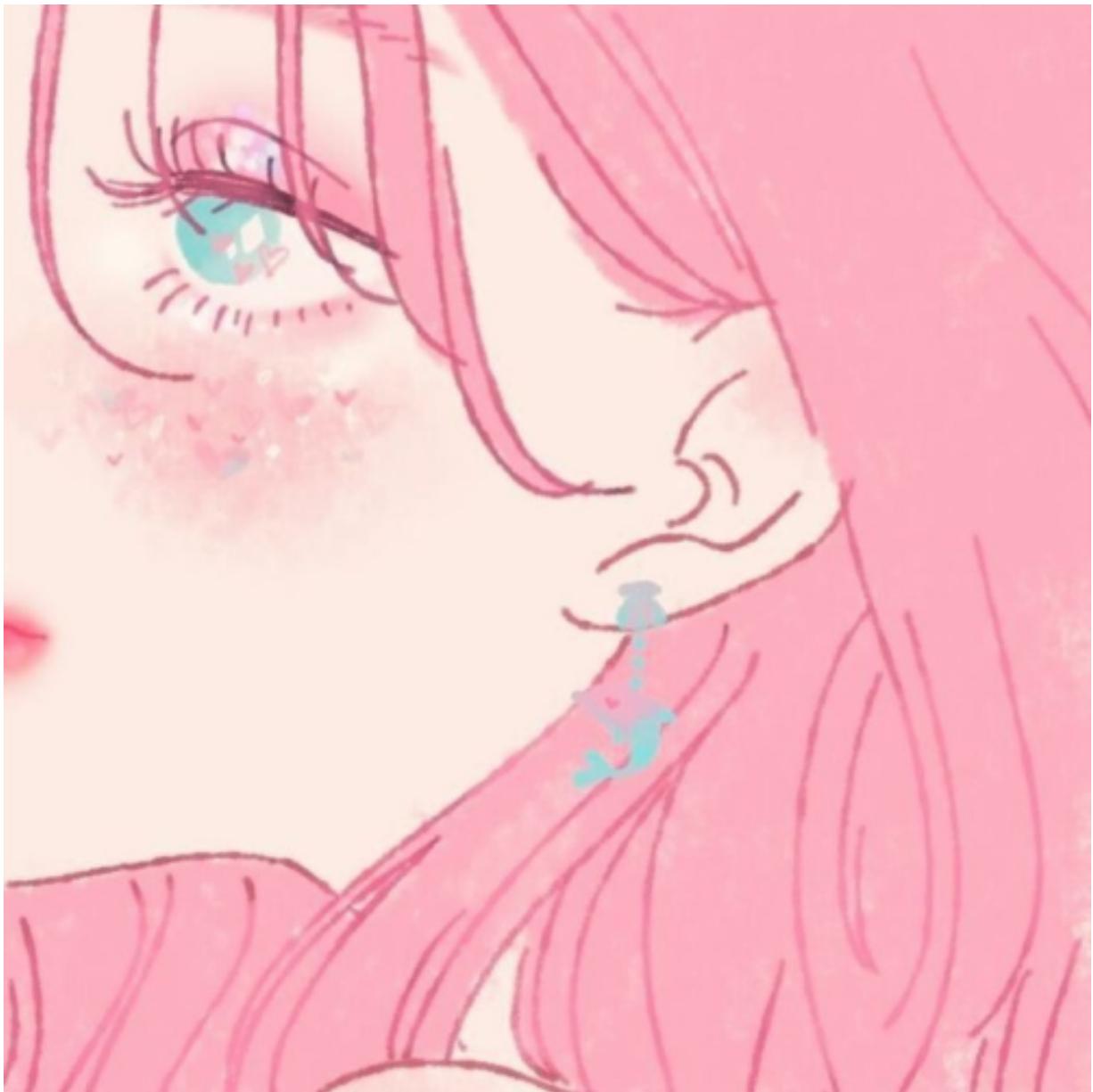


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# Chapter 48

Grace cooperated with Nicole due to the urgent situation.

She knew only that it belonged to the YvesChapel family, but she didn't realize how important it was.

But later, when she realized the value of the seeds she had brought with her, she shuddered.

"The YvesChapel family is known for their healing powers, but now that I've met you, I realize that's not their most important ability. That's not what matters most."

".....I didn't know the meaning of my ability either, I just thought I was good at growing plants."

"Would you like to show me?"

Nicole gave a small nod to Grace's words. She walked over to one of the pots of herbs and stroked it.

A faint glow erupted, almost too faint to see unless you looked very closely, and the plant grew even more vibrant and poked its head up.

"My mother called it the Healing Hand, the ability to grow ancient herbs, specialty plants that no one else in my family could grow."

In this life, before Freya's death, Nicole pushed Isabel away and nursed Freya herself.

*(Nicole, I'll tell you everything I know about the people of my clan.)*

Freya told Nicole as much as she could. Even the family's secret plants that her brothers and sisters were never allowed access to, and how to grow them.

*'It was Isabelle who cared for my mother almost to her death in her last life, so she must have passed on this knowledge to her.'*

Nicole was sure. But not in this life.

Even if she didn't mean to, Nicole had gained more information than Isabelle.

"What are the effects of these plants?"

"They vary widely. Some are narcotic, others induce mania that drives a person insane, some stop the heart for a day or so, and some reduce the function of certain organs."

"Your healing powers alone brought the boundaries of the Imperial family, but if these abilities were known, you would have been purged long ago."

Grace laughed bitterly.

"And you're the only one who can grow these plants?"

"Just me and Isabel, to be precise. Jay doesn't have the Healing Hands ability."

"Is that because Jay is a boy?"

"Perhaps, but the YvesChapel family has an unusual maternal inheritance of the ability."

Even if Jay marries and has children, none of them will have powers.

On the other hand, even a daughter doesn't always produce a child with these abilities.

Even if they do, they don't know how much power they'll have or how they'll manifest it.

This was common to all seven families.

In any case, thanks to the peculiarities of maternal inheritance, House YvesChapel had always been a matriarchal system, with the most powerful offspring among the daughters carrying on the family name.

"You said you had no healing powers?"

"No. I'm not manifested."

Instead, Nicole had the most powerful ability of all. The ability to bring someone back from the dead, just once.

But Nicole considered it a secret to be kept until death, and she hoped she would never have to use it in this lifetime.

"What about Isabel? How far can she go?"

"Isabel could grow plants, but her healing powers were only marginal. She could staunch and heal minor wounds, but not enough to save someone dying from an injury."

"Hmm, I don't understand. The abilities that are usually strong in girls manifested in Jay."

"That's what my mom said right before she died."

A quick glance at the YvesChapel family recipes would have you believe that any apothecary could have mimicked them.

But they're wrong. They might be able to make medicine from ingredients they already have on hand, but they can't.....

'But only the YvesChapels are capable of growing the herbs needed to make them.'

Healing Hands like Nicole's and Isabel's.

Jay has only healing powers, and Isabel's life is still uncertain.

Nicole was the only one who could germinate and nurture these seeds.

Grace had been looking at the pots of herbs for a while.

Nicole picked some of the healing herbs to make Grace's headache medicine.

\*\*\*

That night, Nicole was informed that she would start work tomorrow. She would find out her first assignment in the morning.

"They probably won't put you on a dangerous mission right off the bat. You don't even have a name yet."

It was a long wait, but Nicole was surprisingly calm.

If anything, she was more concerned about Grace. She still seemed suspicious of Raul.

"I wonder if Raul hates you for being my student....."

“He’s not like that.”

Nicole said in a small voice.

“You sometimes speak as if you know Raul.”

The words made Nicole twinge. She changed the subject.

“I’ve been at Grace’s house for over two months now, and if I wait any longer, he’ll forget I ever existed.”

“Well, since it’s come to this, you’d better get a name, because the Sith will give you a fortune and a house.”

“Will they?”

Nicole paused.

“Then..... we won’t be able to stay here much longer.”

On second thought, she couldn’t be a guest forever. Nicole couldn’t help but feel disappointed, and Grace seemed to feel the same way.

“You’re on active duty, I’m retired, so it’s not a good look for us to be living together, plus I’m a bit of a celebrity in the capital.”

Over the years, Nicole had grown close to Grace. Feeling genuine sadness, Nicole gave a small nod.

“I’ll try to visit you as often as I can, though I’ll have to stay out of prying eyes.....”

Fortunately, visiting Grace’s house wasn’t forbidden. Nicole had to stop by every few days to tend to her herb pots.

Once the herbs had sprouted, basic care could be handled by someone else. Nicole gave Grace a list of plants that needed to be watered regularly.

"I'll water them like it's a chore."

Over the years, Grace grew to like Nicole.

All of Grace's hired help was part of her entourage, and the house was off-limits to even Raul.

This made it easy for Grace to feel comfortable with Nicole in the house. Just like when Sienna was alive..... Grace stopped herself from getting sentimental.

"Come to think of it, I didn't get to congratulate you on becoming a Shadow Agent of the Sith."

Grace sent a maid to fetch a jewelry box.

It was filled with jewelry that had been passed down through Grace's family, nothing like what she had in her country home.

"I have no one who could inherit these things, so if you like them, take them."

"Grace..... You've already done me more favors than I can ever repay in this life, so I can't accept anything like this."

"Then you shouldn't turn down a gift from a benefactor. Don't you know that people like me aren't used to being turned down?"

The words were blunt, but Nicole knew that Grace had been as fiercely protective of her as her own mother during their time together.

She said it deliberately to hide her disappointment.

“I don’t care what it is, just pick one.”

“.....Grace. These are too precious. They come down through your family.”

“I won’t be able to wear it anyway, so just pick the one that looks the most valuable. Agents like you have to keep your identity hidden, so you can’t just accessorize.”

“Then I don’t need it.”

“So pick something that will serve as proof, and you’ll have to keep it in the house anyway.”

As Nicole listened, she had a point. Even if she did accept the jewelry from Grace, she would have to leave it back at the house. It was like taking it yet not receiving it.

‘If I were to die in the line of duty, Grace would have the jewelry as a memento. It will remind her of me, and that’s not a bad thing.’

Nicole examined the jewelry carefully.

Then she spotted a familiar ring. It was the ring that symbolized Grace’s family crest.

‘I see. I knew that Grace’s family was one of the seven noble families of the Empire, just like YvesChapel.....’

Nicole felt a strange sensation when she saw the ring. Nicole had a strong connection to this ring.

‘In my last life, before he died, Raul gave me his family ring, with the truth about Raul written on it.’

The ring was silver, sturdy and thickly rimmed.

The inside of the ring was engraved with an intricate pattern of diamonds. If you didn't look inside, you'd think it was just a plain ring.

It was identical to Raul's ring in every way, but the difference was in the center of the ring's outer surface.

It bore Grace's family emblem, a raven and a small cog.

"House of Sotia. That's what it says, isn't it?"

"Yes. Sotia, one of the seven great families. That's my family."

".....I hear you're from a famous family."

"Famous, yes. My family, like yours, has been down on its luck since my grandfather."

Grace was wealthy and well-connected, but Count Sotia had long since fallen from grace.

"You told me about your family once before. There was an accident decades ago....."

In Grace's grandfather's reign, the Sotia family made fine horsemanship tools. However, a young prince was killed with one of their tools.

It was a simple accident, and fortunately, the family itself was not harmed. However, the grandfather of the Sotia family was banned from the capital for life. As a result, the family's reputation plummeted.

The patriarch of Sotia spent the rest of his life in a distant temple. It was a de facto banishment.

Grace's parents, the Head of Sotia, lived in scandal for the rest of their lives, even dying young.

The Imperial family took her in and raised her themselves, claiming she was innocent.

Grace was raised to be precious, but she was also burdened. The pressure was on to rebuild the family name.

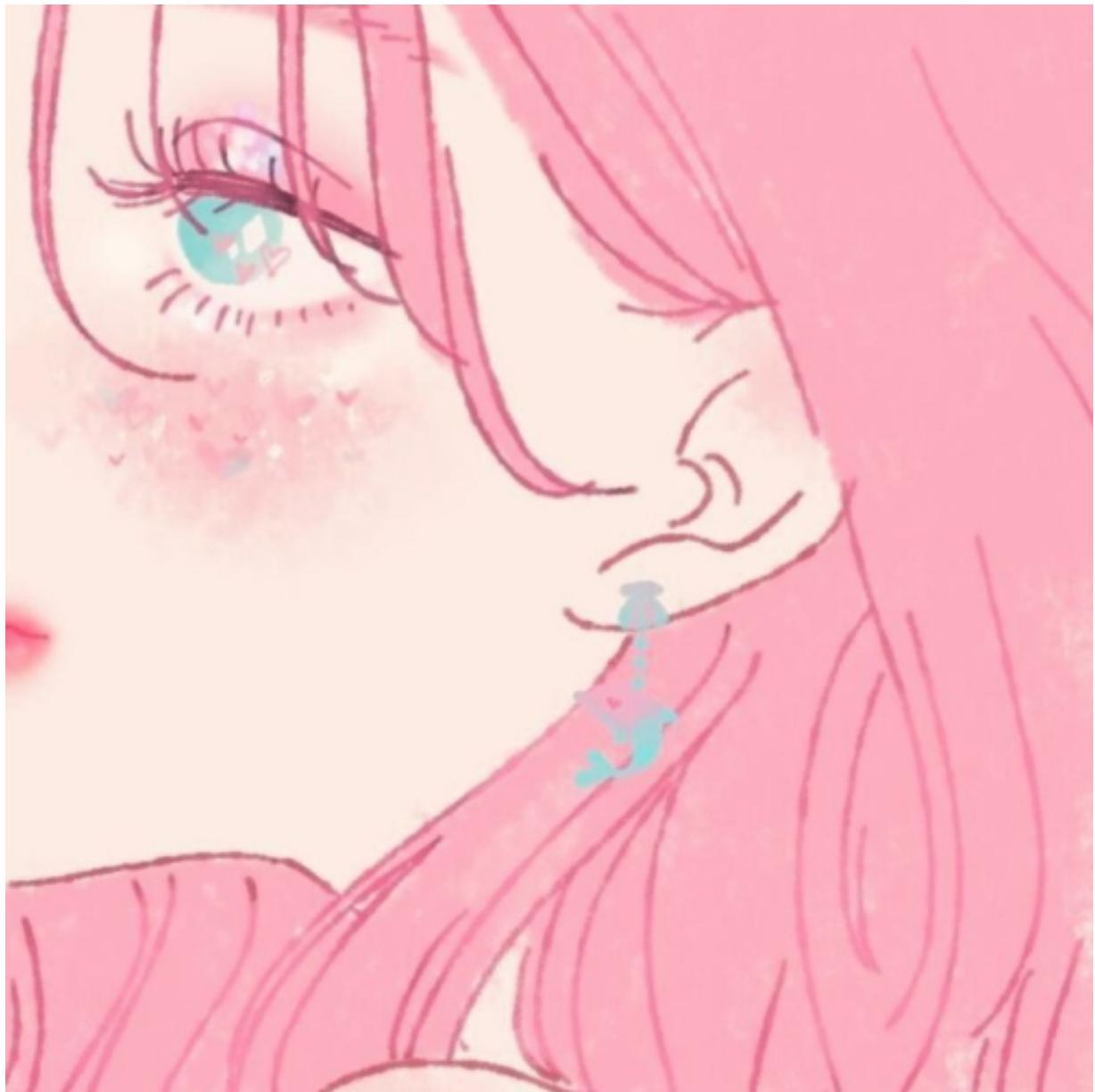
With the exception of YvesChapel, all seven of the great families were descended from a male heir. However, if there were no sons, only an only daughter was allowed to succeed to the title of Countess.

If Sienna had lived, she would have been the next Countess of Sotia.

'So that's why someone of Grace's status was working for a specialized agency of the imperial family.'

It all makes sense now. If the Sotia family had remained intact, Grace would not have had to do such menial work.

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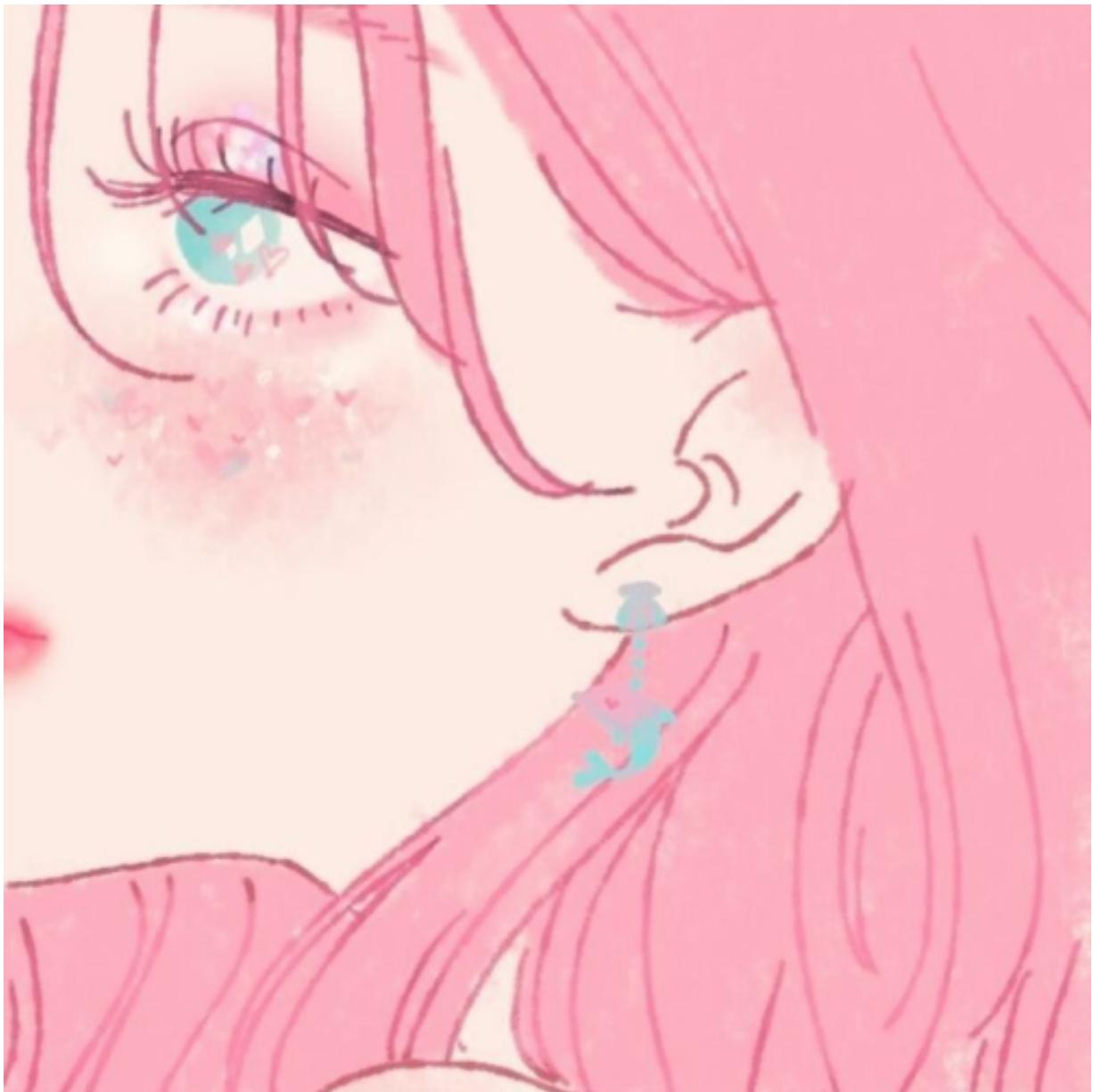


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# Chapter 49

“My family, Sotia, have been advisors to the imperial family for generations, and we know how to forge and use tools, which is why I can wield this ancient artifact.”

“But Grace, you don’t forge tools, do you?”

“My family’s powers were extinguished after my grandfather’s death. Even Sienna was born with little ability.....”

Grace reached out and grasped the Sotia family ring. She touched it affectionately.

“Now that I think about it, I was a bad person. I gave Sienna the family ring too soon. I was like Raul when I was younger. I had a sense of honor, if you want to call it that. I thought the only thing that mattered was keeping the family name alive and regaining power in my generation. I loved Sienna dearly, but I emphasized duty. She must have been under a lot of pressure.”

Nicole once saw Grace sitting drinking one night, staring at something for a long time.

She didn’t realize it at the time, but what she was looking at was the family ring. Nicole had a hunch.

Grace muttered the same thing then as she does now.

<Maybe it’s all me> she muttered.

Nicole didn't want to see Grace in pain.

So she simply squeezed Grace's hand, and then changed her tone.

"Come to think of it, the seven great noble families have almost all lost their titles, so we're in a similar situation."

"Yes. YvesChapel is one of them, and House Rodrias has been wiped out."

"I've heard of the Rodrias. Apparently..... an accident killed everyone in the family, so they were abandoned and most of their wealth was returned to the Imperial family. Do you know....."

"Yes. The Rodrias were very powerful. The Rodrias were small, but they could control the weather. I told you. They are very jealous. When the Rodrias fell apart, there were rumors among the informants that the Imperial Family was behind it."

"Well, if you think about it, you shouldn't feel so lonely. Yves Chapel isn't the only one whose family was destroyed, and compared to both of them, Grace became the Countess Sotia, so I'm so jealous of you. You've got a nice mansion, you're a retired civil servant, you have the most powerful man in the country in your pocket, and Raul wouldn't dare go against you."

Grace was stunned, and then realized that Nicole was teasing her.

"Oh, you've run out of things to say. Have you always been like this?"

Nicole realized that Grace's look of bewilderment was much better than her look of sadness. Nicole gave a small laugh.

"Since you said you'd give me anything, I'll take Grace's family ring for a while. How about you give me this?"

"You're going to leave all these valuable pieces of jewelry for that ugly, cast-iron ring? Why don't you just pull up the roots of the pillars of my family's mansion?"

"Well, it's pretty for a man's ring, so I'll take it with me, since it's heavy."

Grace ended up laughing.

"I lost, do what you want. I've raised quite a bully."

"Isn't that what you said about Grand Duke Valentine? Now I see you're a tamer, Grace, and you've turned both your fake and real pupils into troublemakers."

Grace shook her head in disbelief.

"I wouldn't be able to wear my family ring anywhere, so even if I did, it's useless, and besides, it's broken."

"What do you mean it's broken?"

Nicole knew the ring had a hidden function. It had the ability to store documents.

She wondered if Grace's ring had the same features. Just then, Grace spoke up.

"This ring was given to each of the seven great families of the Empire. Some say it was given to each of the seven families, including the Imperial Family, during the Great War.

They're called magic tools, but ours is broken and doesn't do anything, and hasn't done since my grandfather."

Nicole was a little disappointed, but she wasn't really coveting another family's ring.

She just needed an excuse to make Grace smile for a moment.

'It's true that I joined the Sith to protect my family and survive, but Grace, who called me her disciple and took me under her wing, I'll carry her honor with me so I don't become a noob to such a person.'

Nicole thought to herself.

\*\*\*

In the end, Grace gave Nicole not only the family ring, but also a necklace and hairpin made of rubies.

'Take care of them and give them back.'

And tomorrow morning, Nicole will finally be working as an agent for Raul. Perhaps that's why she couldn't sleep easily.

Nicole slipped the Sotia family ring on her finger and stared at it for a long time, remembering the death of Raul she had watched in her last life.

'No matter how many times I think about it, I can't figure out why you died for me.'

When Nicole first became a grand duchess, people gave her a lot of training. Some were about aristocratic manners, including etiquette.

'I barely remember the first year of my marriage, and for good reason. I had a psychotic break after Jay's death, and my memories before that are hazy.'

But the memories of being educated about Raul and the Valentines are strangely vivid.

From Raul's dislikes to his favorite foods, to his pet peeves and misfortunes. Things that are taboo.....

In the eyes of the servants, Raul was a god, and they feared that the lesser Grand Duchess would turn mar him. No wonder they gave her a thorough education.

'But..... I didn't learn anything important.'

The things Nicole wanted to know most in this life.

What he's thinking behind that inscrutable face? Why he lives for the honor of his family.....

'I don't know why I do this. I keep losing my cool when I think about him.'

It was getting worse by the day, especially after her last lewd dream.

Finally, Nicole sighed, stood up, opened a drawer, and pulled out the calculator she always used to calm her nerves.

Tick. Tick, tick, tick.

Out of habit, Nicole pressed it.

<Emotions are foolish, pain and suffering can be forgotten when the mind is in control. Don't rejoice too much, don't mourn too much. Emotions prevent you from making

important decisions and cause things to go wrong. Many people have fallen to the emotions of the moment. You have to be calm.>

When Nicole was younger, her mother wouldn't let her cry or be overjoyed.

She'd make her press the countdown until she calmed down, and her mind would slowly calm down.

This didn't mean that Nicole had to be a sterile person. It was the full YvesChapel method: first calm her emotions, then teach her kindness and gentleness.

But Nicole got a half-assed education and grew up to be an insensitive adult who didn't even know what her own feelings were.

But for a moment, she was different. The day she smashed this counter with her hand.

'It was because of Raul.'

In her past life, Nicole was taken by force by Raul. Only later was she able to beg the Grand Duke's people to allow her to take some of her belongings from the cabin.

They carefully inspected her belongings and returned only a few items they deemed unimportant.

One of them was a counting machine. From then on, whenever Nicole felt the slightest bit anxious, she would hide in her room and nervously dial the number.

She managed to keep her emotions under control for about a year after she got married.....

Afterward, she learned that her younger brother had died. When she confronted Raul about it, Nicole exploded.

<You're a murderer, you're the devil!>

In a fit of rage, Nicole picked up the calculator, threw it, and smashed it. Raoul stared at it in disbelief. But only for a moment.

'What did he say then?'

At the time, she thought he hated that she was threatening him. Now..... she couldn't even remember what he said.

Anyway, there was something she realized then. Nicole was not a calm, unemotional person. She just suppressed her emotions.

And Nicole would later channel all her emotions into hating Raul.

'I was so sad and hateful at the time.'

But in the end, it wasn't Raul who indirectly killed her brother. It was Celia, the youngest princess of the imperial family. Nicole resented herself for it.

'I should have tried to get to know the real him. Or at least not just hate .....

In retrospect, she realized that Raul wasn't all that evil.

The inheritance of the YvesChapel family was not only a fortune frozen by the imperial family; it was a vast knowledge of pharmacy.

But he never used that knowledge.....

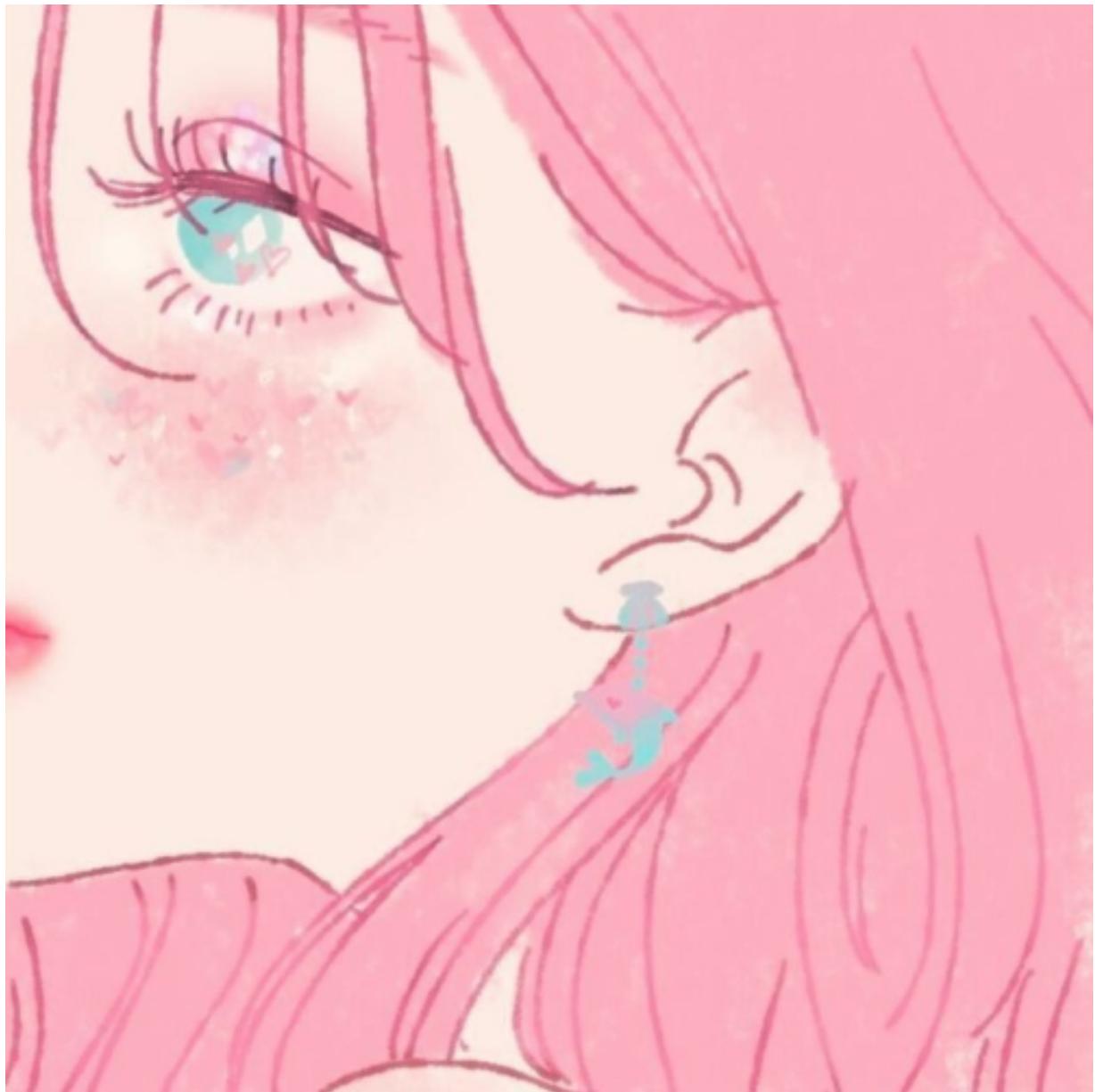
'I never gave it much thought either. I hated him blindly, almost like a madman.'

Now that I think about it, it's quite questionable.

'Why did I do that? And why is my memory so incomplete?'

Nicole tossed and turned for a while before finally falling asleep.

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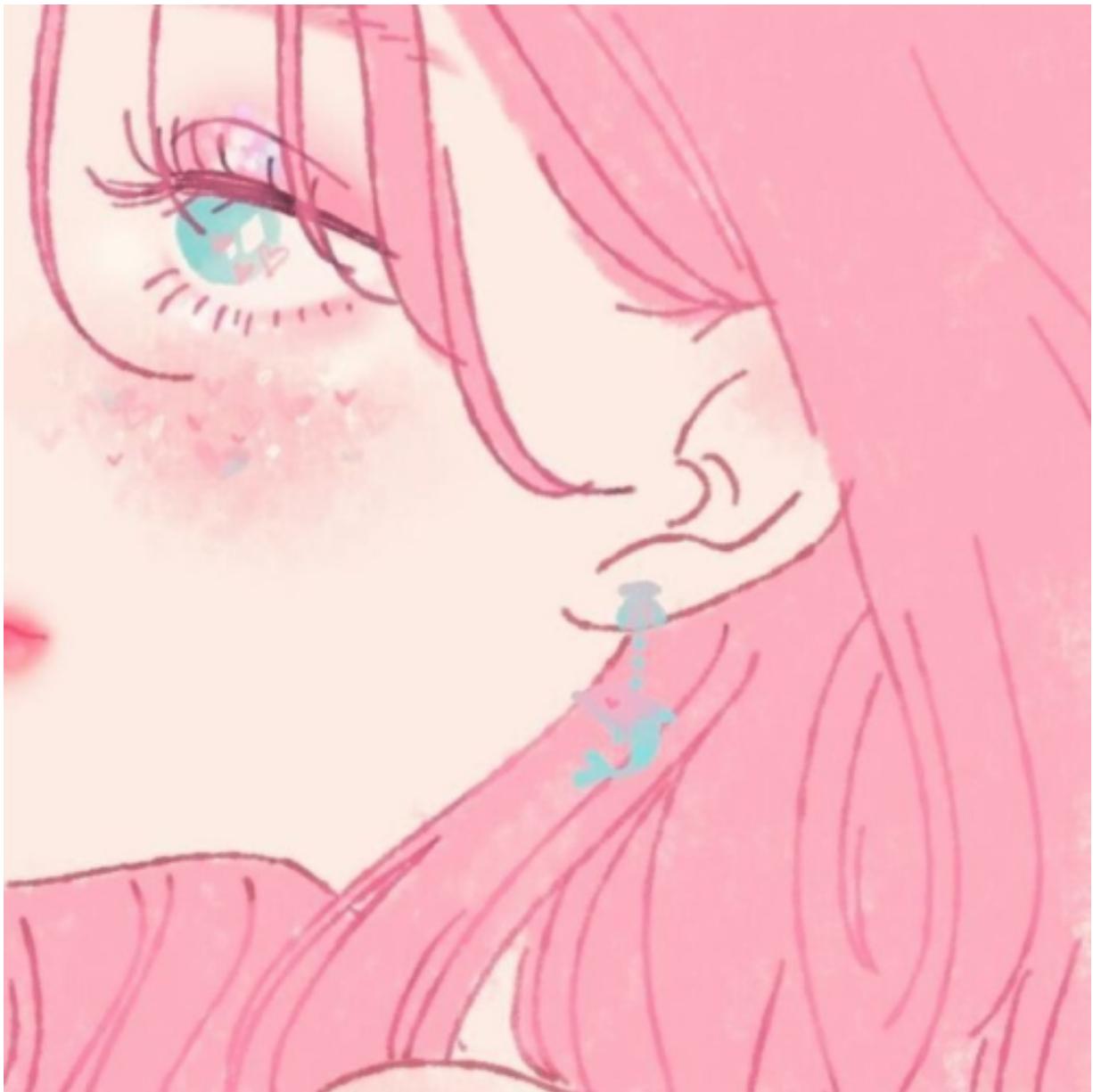


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# Chapter 50

\*\*

“Ah, what time is it.....”

Nicole opened her eyes to a sudden headache.

She had been a light sleeper since she was a child.

She could hear a strange sound in her ears, like tinnitus. More precisely, a chirping sound. It was so intrusive that it made her stomach clench when she opened her eyes.

It was that moment. Nicole had a strange feeling. The ring she'd gotten from Grace was glowing blue.

‘Is the ring making..... sounds?’

Nicole jumped to her feet.

She knew how to use it: press the groove on the back of the ring.

‘Grace said it must be broken, but.....’

Documents appeared, just as they had in Raul’s ring in his past life. This ring also had the power to store documents.

\*

⟨Report on Freya YvesChapel⟩ .

〈Freya YvesChapel was found in a city near the Holy Land while on the run.

She was pregnant at the time of her discovery.

.....

Freya's daughter is still alive.

She can be used to revive the Marriage Pact and use it as a hand to delay the request to marry into the Imperial family.

January 8, 332 Imperial calendar, whereabouts still unknown.

January 4, 334 Imperial calendar, whereabouts still unknown.....

Whereabouts are still unknown.....〉

'I've read this before.'

In the ring Raul gave her in her last life.

It was a report from Raul's men searching for Freya and her daughter.

But why did this document come from Grace's ring and not Raúl's?

'How could this be?'

Nicole questioned.

'There's one more document.'

Nicole hurriedly flipped through the pages. She realized that if she touched the page, it would turn to the next page.

<This letter, in case anyone finds out, I will officially say I did not write it.

Scion of the House of YvesChapel.

It concerns the pardon of the Grand Duchess Nicole.

Grand Duchess Nicole de Freya.

If she, now Nicole Valentine, will accept your betrothal to Celia after your divorce, I will grant your request.

The House of YvesChapel will not be spared, but Grand Duchess Nicole Valentine will be freed from her traitorous status.

I will allow her to live in the comfort of ordinary nobility. I will allow her to live the rest of her life in peace, and I will protect her for life.

The terms of the marriage remain unchanged, of course.  
This is an additional offer.›

A half-torn piece of paper.

It was an unfamiliar document, and it was handwritten by someone.

'This letter was written by.....'

Nicole's heart sank.

The letter didn't say who it was from. But it wasn't hard for Nicole to guess who it was from.

Only the Emperor could make such an offer to Raul.

'No, that's not possible..... Are you telling me that Raul has asked for my good graces in exchange for divorcing me and marrying the Princess?'

She had never played the part of a Grand Duchess. All her life she had hated and loathed Raul.

Nicole felt her world as she knew it crumbled.

"Ah!"

In the blink of an eye, the documents she had been reading were gone. Nicole tried to press the ring again and again.

But the documents she had just read never came back to her, as if it had been a dream. Nicole woke up and checked again.

But this wasn't a dream, it was real.

"Maybe the ring is malfunctioning?"

But even if it was, it was in a past life. Nicole lay awake all night with questions she couldn't answer.

\*\*

'What was that.....?'

Nicole sat at the checkout counter and tapped her fingers on the wooden desk.

In front of her at the worn desk were a few receipts, silver dollars, and coins, all neatly organized.

It's been a few days since she arrived on her first assignment. Nicole's post wasn't in some high noble's mansion or battlefield.

It was a general store and teahouse in the center of the capital, but in one of its most secluded alleys. What made it different from other teahouses was that there was a separate place to pay.

The counter and cash register were covered by an iron shield with tons of tiny holes, so people couldn't see the face of the clerk sitting at the counter.

'I thought she was a clerk at a general store.'

General stores like this were common in the commoner neighborhoods.

They sold all sorts of things and, after lunch, cheap tea and soda.

Nicole even baked cookies in the morning in the store's attached kitchen.

She had bread and sweets delivered, but they only came every few days and tasted terrible, so she didn't want to serve them.

She thought to herself, "It's worth it that Mother taught me how to bake bread and cookies when we were hiding in the mountains. I never thought it would come in handy like this."

Of course, no matter how much Raul disliked Nicole, he wasn't going to make a valuable Sith agent just selling tea and cigarettes.

The store existed for a reason.

*Click. Ding.*

Nicole heard someone throw a rock behind the chair she was sitting in. She pulled her hood up and headed for the wall, where there was a small back door.

“Sister, I’m hungry. Can I get something to eat?”

It was a child with his hat pushed down low. Nicole bent down to see the child.

“Poor thing, just wait a minute.”

Nicole dug into her apron and held out some bread and sweets wrapped in paper. At the bottom were a few silver coins wrapped in another piece of paper.

The boy pretends to take the cookie from Nicole and nudged her hand. When the boy’s hand dropped, there was a small folded note in Nicole’s hand.

“Thank you. May you be blessed.”

“I put a special ingredient in them this time. Eat them slowly, and when you get hungry, feel free to come over with your friends.”

“I like Sister better, because you’re giving me freshly baked cookies instead of tasteless bread.”

The boy chuckled and looked inside, then looked around and whispered quickly. Nicole raised the corner of her mouth invisibly. She closed the back door.

She set the note down on her desk and unfolded a fresh sheet of paper. The note read.

- 9:10. Son of a bitch. Spent the night in a gambling house on Lustrier Street.....

- 10:30. Bastard, out of the capital in a carriage.....

Nicole scribbled it down on a piece of paper. Several other notes were similarly densely packed.

There would probably be more this afternoon. And she'd be spying on others.

That was the raison d'être\* of the shop.

[T/N: purpose]

For some reason, the boys who delivered notes like this one were called Leafs by the higher-ups. Several times a day, these boys would come and go.

And every single one of them called Nicole 'Sister'.

"Hi, Sister."

This time, someone flicked the blinds. Nicole squinted through it, then stepped outside.

Before she knew it, cat-eyed Dagger was sitting at one of the tables, staring at her.

Dagger was dressed like a poor high school student today. Even with his hat pushed down, it was hard to hide the fact that he was a handsome boy.

Dahlia had seemed taller when she was a girl, but now that Dagger was a boy, he was just the right height and was skinny.

"Did you used to be a Leaf, too?"

“I was a Leaf for a while.”

“But why are they called the Leafs?”

“I don’t know, maybe because Shadows has the name of a flower.”

“So when do I get a name?”

If she doesn’t get a name, she will not be provided with accommodation and activity expenses. Nicole was getting room and board and a stipend for her activities now, but it was nothing compared to the perks the Sith enjoyed.

She didn’t need the money right now, but she was growing impatient for merit.

“When your apprenticeship is over.”

“When does an apprenticeship usually end?”

“After you’ve done well on your first assignment.”

He’d give me an answer, but he wasn’t going to give me any specific information. After all, Raul would make all the decisions anyway. Nicole knew it.

“I smell cookies.”

“..... Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“Sure.”

The shop was so out in the back that most of the time it was empty like this.

In fact, the Leafs were the reason Nicole was baking cookies, and she rarely had any other customers.

Early in the morning, Nicole set out plates full of freshly baked cheese and cranberry cookies. She brewed a fresh pot of tea and set it down in front of Dagger with the cookies.

Dagger eyed the cookie suspiciously for a moment before shoving it into his mouth.

"What did you put in these to make them so good?"

"I don't know, by sleight of hand?"

"Are you giving these to me because I'm your boss at work, to get along?"

"No, I'm giving it to you so you'll eat it and stay away from me, because I've had enough of getting my ass kicked by Dahlia."

Nicole said without changing her expression. Dagger rolled his eyes as she sipped her tea.

"Nicole, were you really serious with Dahlia, like friendship or something?"

"I thought I'd have at least a ..... decent female coworker. I never thought I'd have a male coworker my age."

Dagger chuckled, as if he thought that was funny. The look in his eyes was a little like Estock's. I had just learned that they were best friends.

'They say that humans are creatures that pass on traits and characteristics from generation to generation.'

Nicole wanted to click her tongue.

"I've got all the intel this morning, but who is the..... Son of a Bitch? I've got a lot of other intel, but he's the only one who's being spied on everything, and we're using Leafs."

Gambling. And who Raul named the Son of a Bitch.

Nicole had already guessed who he was. But she didn't tell him.

"Oh, that's because the Son of a Bitch has a pretty high profile, and if we get caught sending a mole, we'll have to deny that our Grand Duke had anything to do with it. Leafs are easy to cut off tails, right?"

"Who the hell is ..... by any chance—"

"Care to guess?"

Someone said then. It was from the front door.

A man slowly walked into the store, pulling back the curtain in front of the door.

'I didn't even hear the door open.'

The moment he stepped inside, the mood in the small shop changed instantly. Nicole stiffened as she stood with her back to the partition.

"What brings you here?"

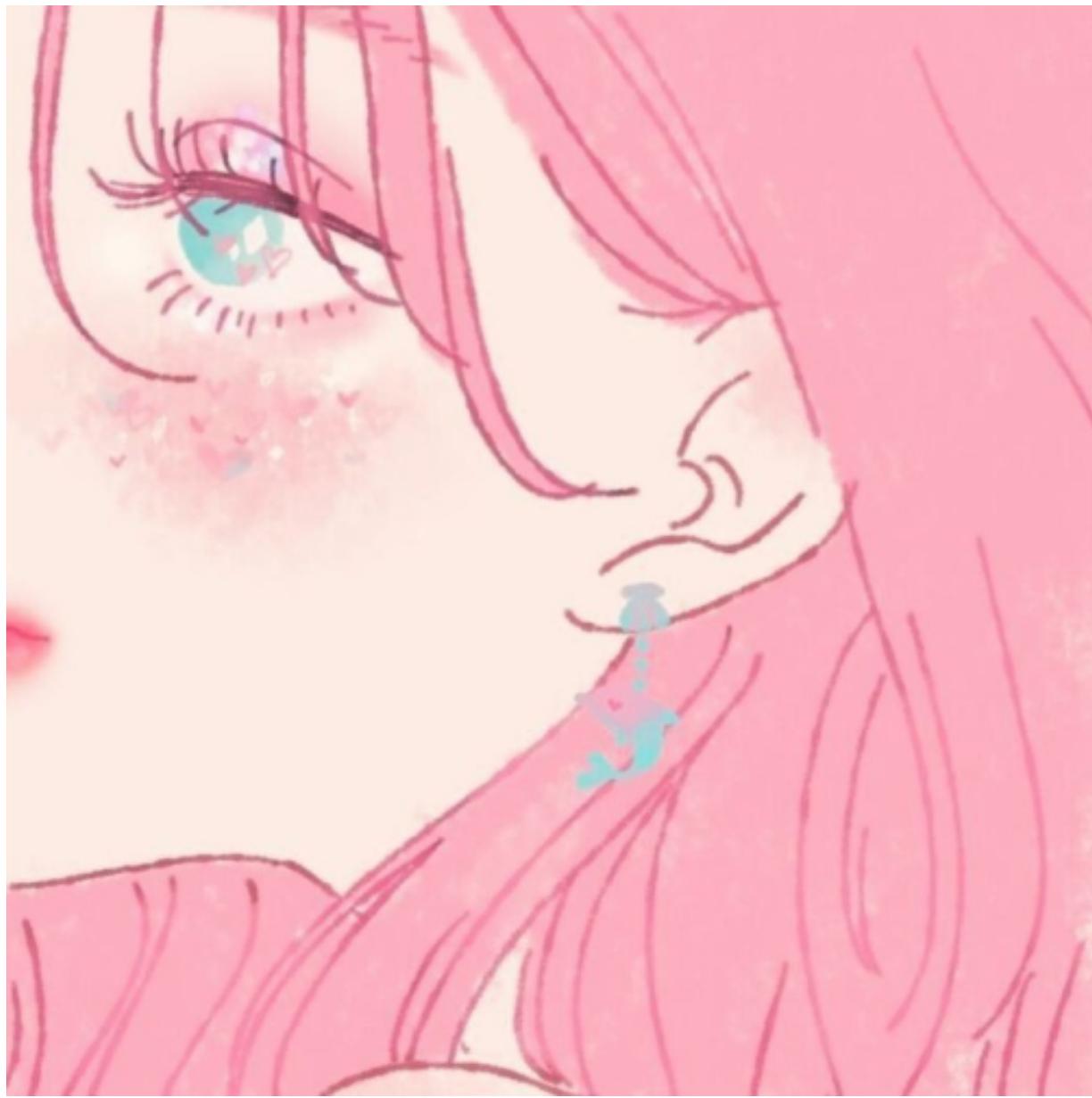
Dagger stood up. Raul didn't answer, just stared at Nicole.

"Good morning, Grand Duke."

Nicole said in a low voice, her eyes downcast. She didn't want to look at Raul's face, not because she didn't want to,

but because of what she'd seen last night..... her heart fluttered unpleasantly again.

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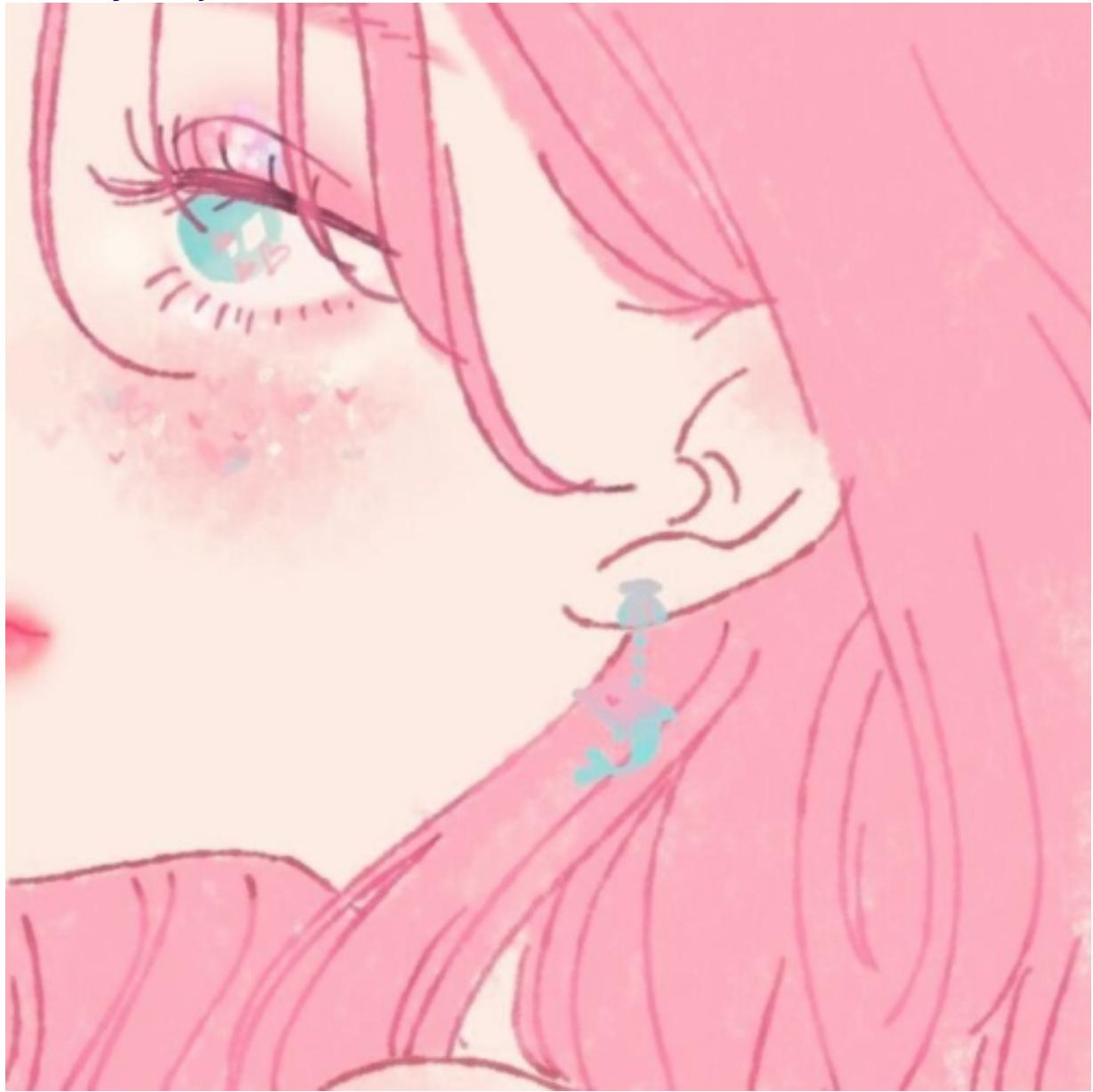


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# Chapter 51

“How’s the work?”

For some reason, Raul asked kindly.

“I wouldn’t call it work, you still have her on standby.”

Dagger answered for her.

Nicole found it sweet. It wasn’t the first time she’d been confused by the sight of Raul, but the events of last night made it even harder today.

‘Why did you try to set me free? What did you think of me then? What kind of person are you?’

So many questions screamed in her head. But if she asked him now, she’d be lucky if she didn’t get labeled a mental patient and kicked out.

“Why? She seems to be good at her job?”

“Miss Karen?”

“Word has reached my ears that her cookies are delicious. She seems to be giving them away to everyone, so I was curious.”

“I don’t think my food would be your cup of tea. I put a lot of sugar in them, so they might taste childish.”

Nicole said in a low voice. As far as Nicole knew, Raul hated sweets.

"I see."

Raul muttered boredly as he looked at the cookies on Dagger's plate.

Nicole's heart suddenly ached. The indifferent expression, the cold face.....

'It was the same in my last life. Why do I feel this way?'

As if something had been taken from her.

Nicole furrowed her brow, trying to control her unknown emotions.

"These are mine?"

Raul took a bite of Dagger's cookie at will.

"Everything in this building is mine."

"You must like the childish flavor."

Raul dusted off the cookie without comment.

"So, first question. Guess who the 'Son of a Bitch' is?"

He asked as if to tease Nicole.

Nicole's brow furrowed slightly. There weren't many people Raul cared about. At least those of the imperial family, and the seven surviving families.

'And of those who now hold power in the capital, the one who was at enmity with Raul was.....'

“Gaston Sarathevee. The young patriarch of House Sarathevee, and the head of the capital’s security knights. Are you referring to him?”

Dagger looked inwardly surprised.

“How did you know that? Did you do any research?”

“I heard a rumor ..... that the two Lords don’t get along, that’s all.”

The Sarathevees were a family of seven generations that maintained power like Valentine. They were also pro-Emperor.

They were practically enemies of Grand Duke Valentine. Nicole had been trained to be careful what she said when she was Grand Duchess, as he hated the mention of House Sarathevee.

“Dagger, I need you to give me a real weakness for House Sarathevee.”

“Is smuggling, false accounting, or bribery not enough?”

“Not enough to disgrace the family.”

He spoke as casually as if they were discussing the breakfast menu.

“If there is a reason for a family to be disgraced, it must be involvement in treason, or some crime so heinous and horrific that it shakes the country.”

“Right. I’m going to need something, and I’m going to need you to send out a dispatch to his neighborhood.”

Raul said.

"Okay. Maybe you have a lead on the case you were talking about last time."

Nicole was lost in thought. She looked at Raul.

"I..... want to be a part of this."

Nicole had to tense up, not because she was afraid of Raul, but because she didn't want him to see her emotions fluctuating. She looked like someone who was barely speaking because she was scared.

"Why?"

Raul asked.

"I want to make a name for myself. Gathering information here is easy and safe, but it's the only way I'm going to be able to establish myself as an agent of the Sith. It's a very important job, seeing as how the Grand Duke himself has come to give instructions."

"You want me to send you, who knows nothing, to such an important job?"

".....Yes."

"....."

"You know that the Marquis of Sarathevee is a 'Son of a Bitch' that deserves a prize, right?"

"Seeing as how you're thinking of all that, it's worth coming all the way up here to see if you can do the job yourself."

"....."

“Dagger, dispatch her to the facility I told you about. If your identity is revealed, there will be no saving you. Remember that, Karen.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nicole nodded.

“I’ll prepare you with a fake identity, and a suitable role.”

Dagger said.

“Just use the name Karen. You don’t need an alias.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to change her name?”

“Karen isn’t your real name anyway, isn’t it?”

Nicole’s legs nearly gave out from under her for a moment. She gripped the desk tightly.

‘Has he figured out I’m not really Karen already?’

A million thoughts raced through her mind. Nicole finally smiled.

“I’m Karen unless you give me the name of a flower.”

“I know. I was just thinking.”

Nicole was relieved. He was still an asshole. Raul nonchalantly ordered Dagger to get her ready right away.

\*\*\*

“The Marquis of Sarathevee is enemies with Grand Duke Valentine, and as scary as our Grand Duke is, he’s an asshole.”

Dagger said as Raul walked out.

“So why are the two houses at odds in the first place?”

“Well, there are many reasons, but the biggest one is.....”

Dagger took a sip of his tea.

“Because the Imperial family wants it.”

“.....”

“The imperial family is most afraid of the seven great families getting along and joining hands.”

The seven great families of the empire. The Seven Famous Families.

The defunct YvesChapel Family was one of them.

“It sounds glamorous at first glance, seven families where special people are born, but it’s not good for a large empire like ours. The less privileged the better.”

Dagger said. Nicole nodded quietly in understanding.

“Because they shouldn’t be more special than the Imperial Family?”

“Yes. The Seven Houses of the Empire originated in the holy land of Fadebel, which is now part of the Lord’s Domain, and the Imperial Family was tasked with leading them..... Later on, they merged the smaller states to form the empire we have now.”

So the seven great families of the empire were meritorious families. How to dispose of hunting dogs when the original

hunt is over? If there were too many hounds, the owner would have trouble finding meat.

This is because the meritorious family would eventually grow to be a threat to the imperial family.

'In the process, YvesChapel disappeared.....'

Nicole knew most of the story, but it was fascinating nonetheless. Dagger continued.

"Anyway, if this empire is a cake, the imperial family is the biggest, prettiest icing on top, and that icing has to be pretty all by itself. The picture the imperial family wants is to reign as the only family with divine powers, which is special because it's a family of powers, but in other words....."

"The seven great families can replace them, right?"

"That's how several families have disappeared or fallen from grace, and aside from Perval, the Holy Family, only the Sarathevee and Valentine families are still standing."

So the Imperial family split the two for a long time. But Nicole suspected that even if the House hadn't been divided, Raul and Gaston would have been at odds. The young patriarchs were too different in temperament.

Gaston had hated and been jealous of Raul all his life. Gaston's abilities pale in comparison to Raul's.

Whereas Raul was nearly omnipotent, Gaston was a mere mortal, possessing the powers of an ordinary man.

To Raul, Gaston was a bug. The only problem was that the Imperial family kept using him to get in his face.

"I heard the Marquis of Sarathevee had a bad reputation."

Dagger nodded at Nicole's words.

"He's been involved in several incidents of assault and injury to commoners since he was a young man, once picking up a woman in a tavern and strangling her to death."

"Why is a man like that trusted by the imperial family?"

"Because that's what he is, a man of poor ability, brilliant but irrational. He's a good hand, and they can always use a mad dog on their side."

"From the sounds of it, he wouldn't get along with the Grand Duke."

"More accurately, he despises him."

If Raul was arrogant, Gaston was insolent; if Raul was clever, Gaston was cunning; if Raul was cruel, Gaston was unruly.

It was a small difference, yet a big difference at the same time.

In fact, Nicole hated Gaston, too. In her past life, Nicole had two bad experiences with Gaston.

'He used Isabel to breed able-bodied offspring. He used me to kill Raul.'

He was just as much an enemy to Nicole as Isabel, if not more so.

In her last life, Gaston had fallen before Nicole's third year of marriage. His many sins were exposed by Raul, and his

family was torn apart. At the last minute, his family was saved by the Emperor, keeping the family name alive.

But the disgusting man returned and set a trap for Raul.

'I will not allow such a man to harm Raul in this life.'

That's what he did to himself by colluding with Isabel.....

Last night, Nicole learned one of Raul's truths.

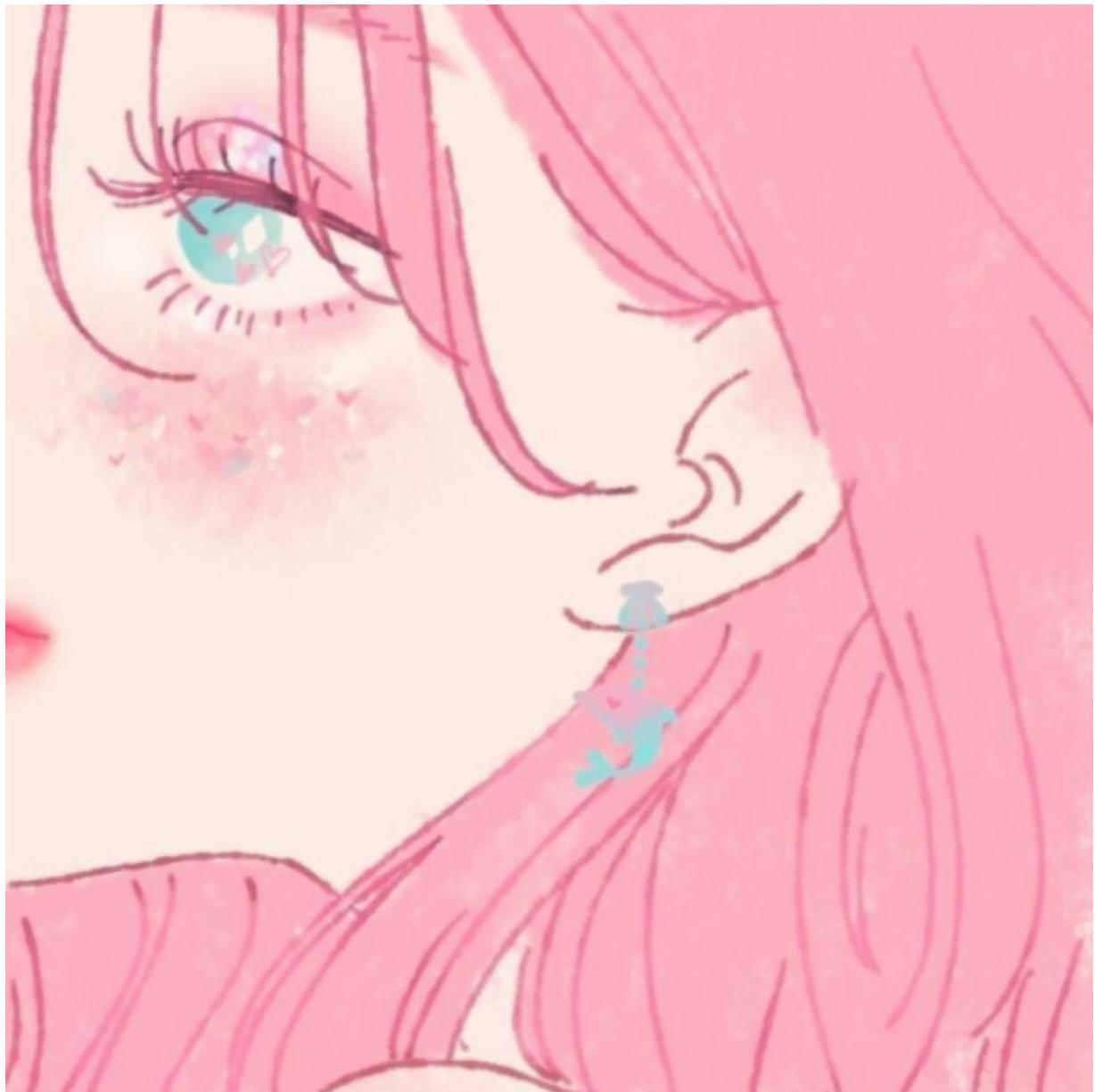
He died for her. And he tried to redeem her.

'That's it. In this life, I will be loyal and sacrifice myself for him.'

At the end of her last life, she gave Raul her life and committed suicide. But it was an imperfect and small sacrifice.

In this life, she hoped she could offer a more complete sacrifice.

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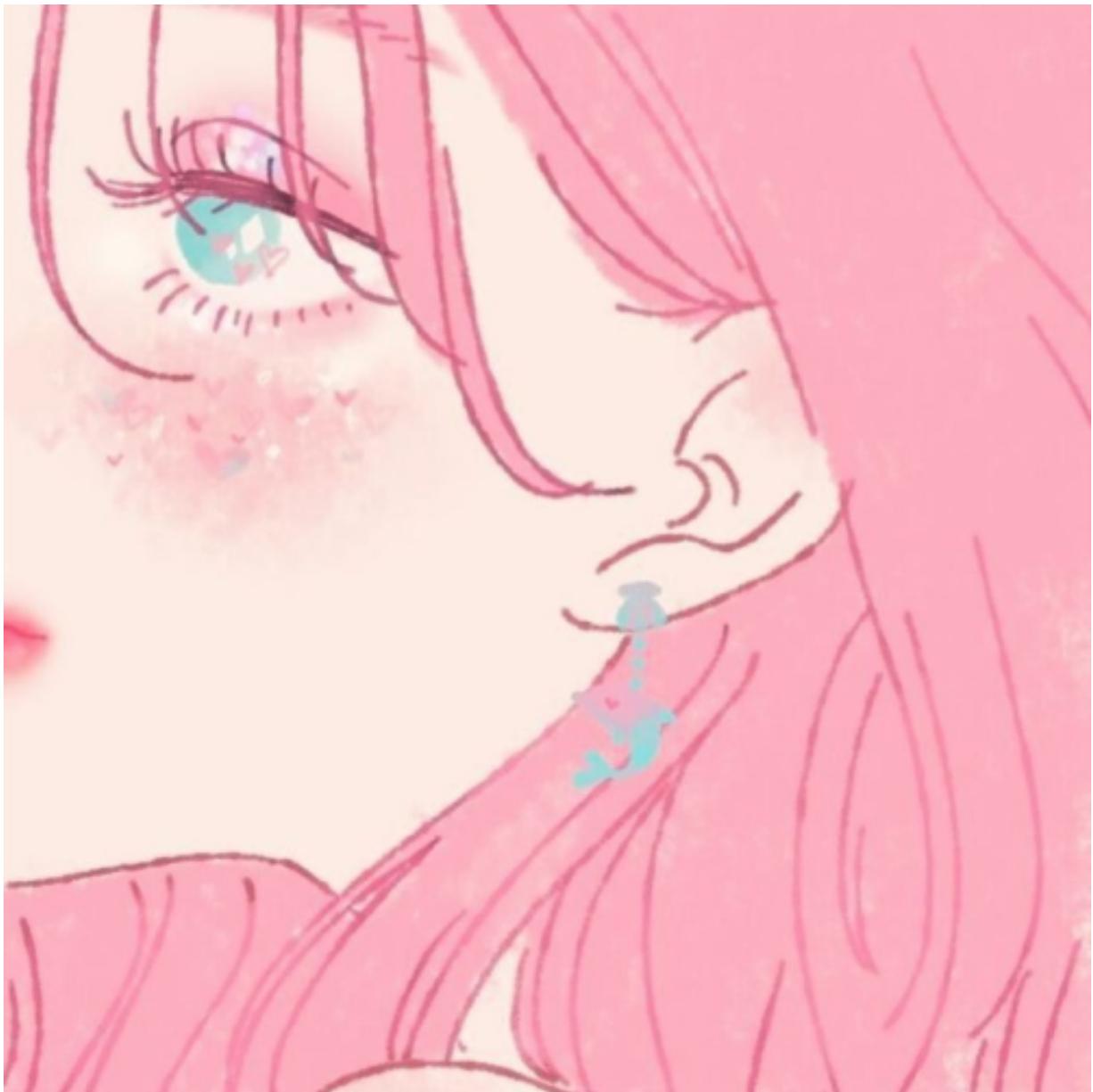


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# Chapter 52

Nicole looked thoughtful for a moment, and Dagger thought she was nervous.

“This is too big a mission for you to take on; the Marquis of Sarathevee kills a man or two without batting an eye.”

“No, I can do it, I will do it, and even if I get caught..... I’m just a probationer, they won’t be able to find any connection to the Grand Duke, and even if they do, even if I get caught and tortured, I won’t be able to say anything since I know nothing.”

Dagger looked at Nicole. He’d send her out, but not on anything too important, and this was a good opportunity for him to teach her the ropes.

Finally, Dagger nodded.

“They say a knight who charges bravely either dies or rises.”

“That’s what Estoc said, isn’t it?”

“Yes. .....How did you know?”

“Because it sounds like something a knight would say.”

Dagger chuckled. He began his briefing.

“Let’s start with the political background. Right now, only Gaston Sarathevee and our Grand Duke have the power to move the troops within the Imperial capital. The imperial family hopes that this will drive the two houses further apart. But.....”

“If Gaston were to disappear, the Grand Duke would be the sole military commander.”

“I suppose that’s what we’re hoping for. Anyway, I’m hoping for the best with this one.”

Dagger said.

“Because he’s a real asshole – or rather, Sarathevee himself is an asshole.”

Nicole was surprised to hear Dagger show even a glimmer of emotion. Dagger seemed to genuinely dislike Gaston.

‘I’m not the only one with a personal grudge against him, am I?’

“He has many sins, I suppose?”

Dagger nodded.

“Do you know the fallen House of YvesChapel?”

The name was so unexpected that Nicole almost stiffened. But she managed a small nod.

“I’ve heard of them. I thought there were seven generations of them?”

“Yes. The Marquis of Sarathevee led the purge of the very same House of YvesChapel, and rumor has it that he led the charge of treason against the House of YvesChapel.”

“.....What are the charges?”

Nicole already knew that the Sarathevee family had been responsible for the destruction of House YvesChapel.

But in her past life, Nicole hadn't realized she was a member of House YvesChapel until she was captured. She felt no strong sense of belonging to her family, since by the time she realized it, her family had already been destroyed, so she didn't hold a grudge against them.

'Of course, I still don't like the Saratheves.'

But Isabel, the one who got stuck with that Saratheve man, really.....

Nicole felt like clicking her tongue out at the thought.

Anyway, Nicole only knew that the Saratheves were responsible for their family's decimation, but she didn't know the details of what they were accused of.

Dagger merely shrugged.

"Anyway, those mad dogs will bite anyone who does anything to the Imperial Family, and their teeth may well find their way to the Grand Duchy, which is where I intend to live and die."

Nicole felt a strange connection with Dagger in that moment. It wasn't the same as with Dahlia.

"Is that why the Grand Duke dislikes the Marquis of Saratheve?"

"Well, he already dislikes him, but the main reason..... is because he ran over and injured a man with his carriage in

front of the Grand Duke last month, that bastard. The poor commoner had both his legs broken.”

“It must have been quite an accident.”

“No, it wasn’t. The commoner had just defeated the Marquis of Saratheve in a private gambling house, much to the gambler’s displeasure.”

“And that’s why the Grand Duke was so angry at the behavior, because he’d bullied the poor commoner?”

“Not that, either. After the accident, he used that as an excuse to block our Grand Duke’s carriage. For a whopping five minutes. He wasted fifteen minutes on the road.”

Oh, she’d forgotten.

The man who was her current boss and ex-husband in her last life was also a total asshole.

At least he was an asshole who didn’t hurt innocent commoners.

\*\*\*

Things were going well. Raul was just joking around about her using the name Karen which is a good thing, so Nicole was given a fake identity.

Her name was Margaret, but that didn’t matter. Nicole got a job at a private gambling establishment that Gaston frequented. Nicole’s role was to serve tea and alcohol behind the bar.

“A cocktail for the Marquis. The usual.”

A waiter approached. Nicole stood at the small bar. Nicole nonchalantly pulled out a flask.

Gaston's private gambling den was a sort of hideout where he brought his many guests.

The room was always thick with cigarette smoke, and it was so dark that it was hard to make out people's faces unless you looked closely.

It made for some tongue-in-cheek comments from the staff, but Nicole was always nonchalant.

"Don't forget to cover your face."

"I know."

Nicole immediately realized why she'd slipped in so easily. Gaston was quite into beauties. The problem was, he liked gambling far more than that.

So to keep himself from being distracted by beautiful women, he asked for women's faces to be covered with a translucent veil who worked in his parlor.

'I'm sure it's some kind of bizarre working condition, but it's good for me.'

After all, Nicole is an agent now. The less people could see her, the better.

"My favorite drink has arrived. Drink it and let's continue."

Gaston enjoyed his gin with lemon, floating ice and herb leaves. Nicole set the glass down in front of him. Gaston took a sip of his drink.

Nicole stood next to Gaston and waited. Gaston was handsome enough, but his overall appearance was too scruffy, and he looked like a municipal worker compared to Raul.

Nicole felt a surge of disgust as she remembered Gaston taunting her in the dungeon. Gaston had even glanced at Nicole and said.

“You’ve got better breasts and a better waist than the last girl. I guess it’s better to be young.”

“How do you know she’s younger with her face covered?”

“I know it when I see it, and I’m saving it for the day I take it off. Anyway, everybody look away. The gambling gods are angry if you take your eyes off the cards.”

Nicole gritted her teeth. But she had to wait until Gaston said there was nothing more to do.

‘He really deserves the name asshole. He’s got a good nickname.’

Nicole had one more unpleasant connection to Gaston. It was the memory of Gaston’s attempted murder of Nicole in her past life.

‘I’ve heard that the Saratheve family’s powers are limited to the ability to move animals at will.’

Of course, being able to control dozens of creatures as large as beasts could be quite intimidating.

Long ago, in the Holy Land, Saratheve’s ancestors were said to have had such powers.

But not anymore, and like Grace's family, they only produced offspring with limited abilities.

'Now he can only move small animals at will, so he's been mocked as a circus manager.'

Anyway, that's why the Marquis of Saratheve wanted the women of the House of YvesChapel.

'I can't believe the Saratheves think the YvesChapel women were stolen from them by the Valentines.'

Before being sent here, Nicole had talked with Dagger in the general store.

She learned of the long-standing feud between the Saratheves and the Valentines, and that the Saratheves had long wanted the women of YvesChapel.

The YvesChapel family has always produced exceptional people, so they hope that having a child through one of their women would make a difference.

At the very least, they might be able to deprive the YvesChapel of their healer lineage - that was their plan.

'I suspected it, but now I'm sure.'

Nicole suddenly realized exactly why Gaston had done what he had done to her in her previous life, and why he'd been in league with Isabel.

'So I've heard that the Saratheves wanted YvesChapel's heir, their eldest daughter, in exchange for the destruction of YvesChapel.'

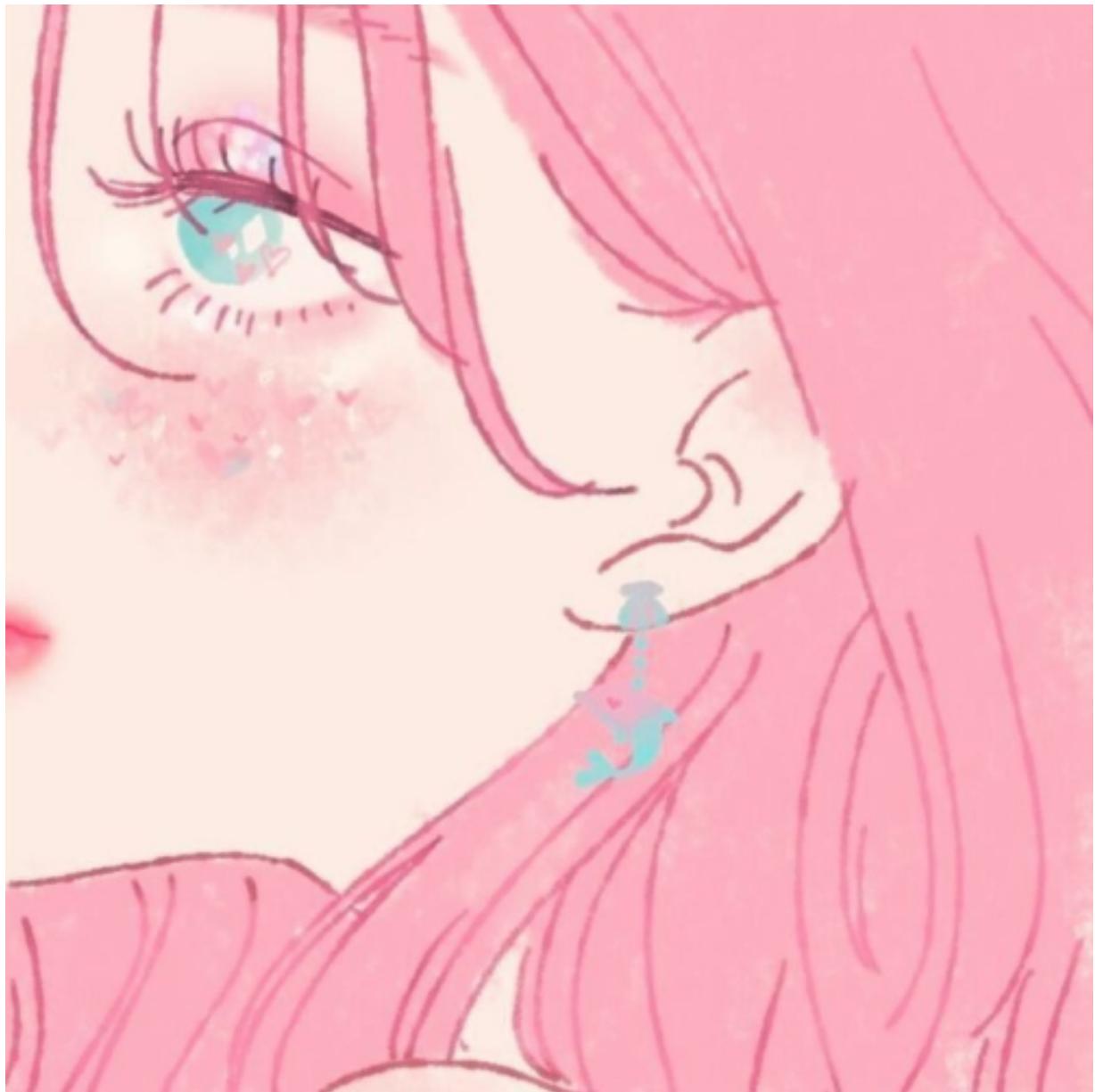
But Freya managed to escape. And the Saratheve family was next in line.

But Gaston did not give up. He was secretly searching for survivors of the YvesChapel family.

'But he never found us.'

Nicole and Raul's marriage, then, upset Gaston again.

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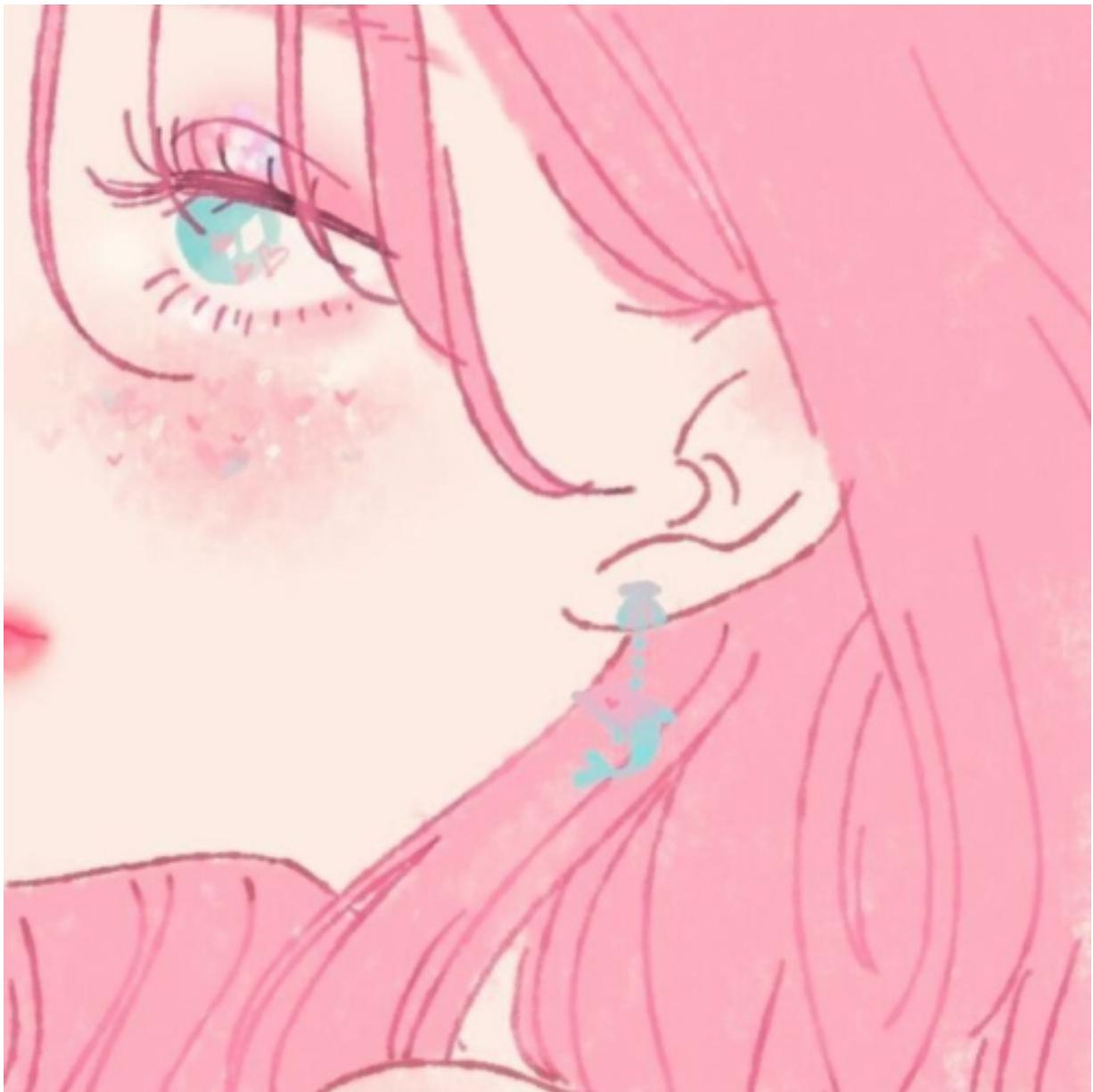


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# Chapter 53

In her last life, when Nicole was Raul's wife and the Grand Duchess, they were in their second year of marriage.

During this time, Nicole was not entirely confined.

After learning the truth about her father's death, she and Raul had fallen out. Although she was mostly confined to her room, she would occasionally go for walks alone.

During this time, she remembers spending a lot of time in silence, staring at the sky.

'Of course, even then Raul didn't let me out or do any public ducal duties, so it was lonely.....'

At least then, Jay was alive to keep her sane.

One of the most traumatizing things happened to her.

Around that time, a big banquet was being held at the Grand Duke's house.

Nicole was stuck in her room all day, so she snuck out to the back garden.

'I was carefree then. I didn't even know the truth of my father's death.'

It was an accident that she ran into a drunken Gaston. Gaston recognized Nicole immediately.

<You are the eldest daughter of House YvesChapel? You're prettier than I thought. Do you realize you could have given birth to my child? I've fantasized about fucking you a few times, but the whores of YvesChapel are a dime a dozen. I've spent a fortune searching for you, but I've come up empty-handed, and now it's that bastard Grand Duke Valentine who gets all the goodies!>

Gaston muttered something unintelligible, then grabbed Nicole hard, forcing her to the ground.

<Let go of me, please, don't do this!>

<I'm not going to tell anyone, but if you did, Grand Duke Valentine, that cocky bastard, would beat you to death, it would be a disgrace to have his wife taken from him, so keep your mouth shut if you don't want to be found out!>

Nicole stiffened at his words, unable to speak.

When Nicole finally regained her senses and tried to crawl away in desperation, Gaston chuckled.

<You're as good as a rat in YvesChapel, you little bitch.>

Gaston crushed the back of Nicole's hand, which made him..... excited; he enjoyed tormenting the weak.

'I don't even want to think about it.'

But it came back to her: the sensation of her clothes being ripped off, the way she'd been pushed into the bushes and taunted.....

'Luckily..... I was found by people then.'

No. Who was it that saved her then?

<A worm.>

When she came to, Gaston was lying on the ground, and Raul, his white gloves stained with blood, was staring at her coldly. His eyes were filled with contempt.

<Nicole, get up, now.>

It was so strange, even then.

‘Then Jay died, and things fell apart between me and Raul. After a long time, I began to resent him for the insult I’d received from Gaston. I was insulted because he hadn’t treated me like a grand duchess.....’

She was shocked by that.

However, in retrospect, Raul had saved Nicole’s life, something that hadn’t occurred to her until now.

She had no idea why she hated him so much.

“Hahahaha!”

There was a loud roar of laughter.

“Royal straight!”

Gaston exclaimed merrily, putting down his hand. He gestured toward Nicole, pointing to the glass.

Nicole picked up the glass without a word. Just as she was about to turn away, Gaston spoke.

“That’s a nice drink for a change.”

Nicole smirked, invisible behind her veil.

"I put a little sugar in it to help you focus on the game - sugar makes you more alert - and to wish you victory."

Nicole changed her tone of voice and spoke calmly. Gaston felt better, so he told his subordinate to tip Nicole.

Gaston won three games that day, and was so excited that at the end of the last game, he turned to his entourage and said

"That girl, I think she's a good luck charm. Bring her to the game at home tonight."

"No problem, and if you're interested in her, why don't you lift her veil so we can see her face?"

He can always let Nicole into Gaston's bedroom. Gaston understood what his aide meant.

For a moment, greed flashed in Gaston's eyes. He glanced at Nicole working the bar in the distance and shook his head.

He had reason to stay away from her for now.

"Leave her alone. There's no shortage of women, so why touch the lucky one."

And so Nicole slipped into Gaston's house with ease.

\*\*\*

When Nicole wanted to be involved in direct surveillance of Gaston, Raul assigned her to Gaston's private gambling house.

'I know she's ambitious, but she has a talent, so she should be cherished. I can handle this kind of work myself.'

Dagger liked Karen. From the time she walked into the training center, through the test, to becoming a shadow, she was incredibly calm and smart. And she baked amazing ..... cookies.

There was definitely something fishy about Gaston's private gambling house. But with such a large mansion, how much could a small parlor be fancied up?

Moreover, Gaston had been gambling like crazy the entire time he'd been there, so Dagger had placed her in relative safety and kept her off important duties.

'I'm afraid, *noona*, you're going to have to behave yourself this time.'

Dagger planned to tell Nicole that when he saw her again.

Until she met the woman who had come into the house with the maids this morning.

'Karen.....*noona*?'

Dagger's eyes widened. Nicole was ushered in by the maids.

"This is the maid who will be in charge of the Grand Duke's drinks from today. She'll be entertaining the dignitaries in no time, so please give her a quick lesson in etiquette, and make sure the kitchen is stocked with a few quick bites to eat, since there will be games in the evening."

Nicole walked away, brushing past Dagger, who stood dumbfounded on the window sill. Nicole looked into Dagger's eyes. Invisibly, her lips twitched into a faint smile behind her veil. Dagger's eyes widened in recognition. Nicole slowly stepped in front of Dagger.

'I told you, I want to make a contribution.'

Nicole's expression seemed to say so.

\*\*\*

'Still, having been fooled once, I guess that's why I recognize him right away this time'

Dagger, disguised this time as a young servant, was polishing the clock in the hallway.

'If Dagger had the ability to infiltrate right here in the first place, he could have sent me here as well.'

But Nicole was not ordered to infiltrate the mansion. She had no choice but to come on her own.

'He says he played well after drinking my cocktail? Of course. I laced it with drugs.'

Nicole recognized Gaston as soon as she saw him.

'His eyes are red and his hands shake sometimes. He's not an addict, but he does drugs often.'

Feeding a drug-addled body a cocktail of achok grass and raw reagents can give a person a short-term boost in concentration, as well as a racing heart and an overwhelming sense of well-being.

However, this was a harmful drug. Trace amounts are undetectable, but if you take it for more than a year, it damages your organs.

Before she was sent here, Nicole read everything she could about Gaston. It was information she'd already gathered from the Sith.

Gaston had a childhood similar to most children of the Seven Houses. Expectations of unrealized abilities and an education that bizarrely suppressed emotions.

As a result, Gaston was moody and unruly. He was obsessed with gambling, and his likes and dislikes of people changes quickly.

'I've seen him do this before, fawning over employees and then firing them arbitrarily because their luck ran out.'

Of course, sneaking drugs into Gaston's drinks wasn't easy.

The bar was open to the public, and there were often henchmen watching closely.

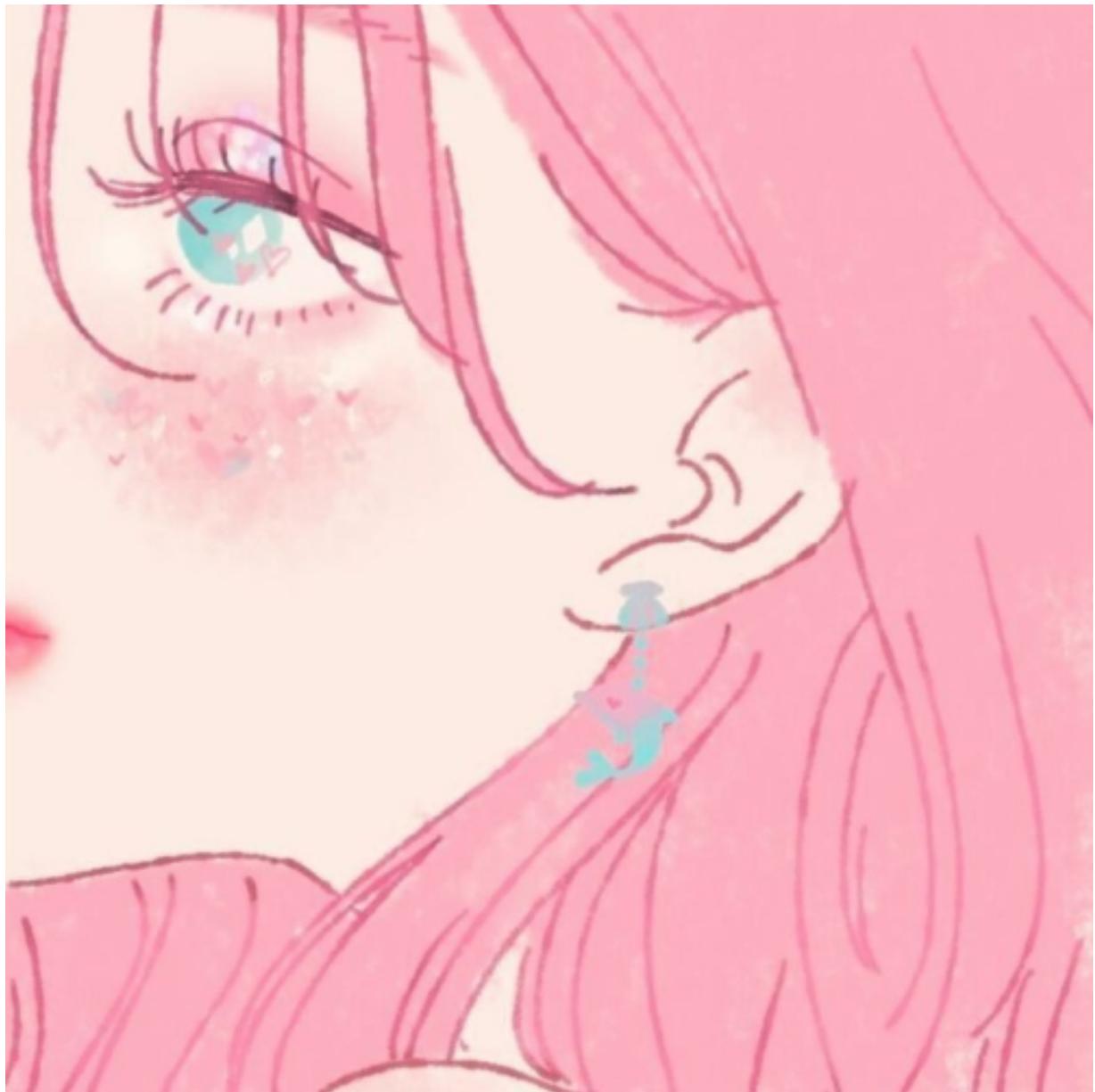
But Nicole had gotten her hands on the herbs Gaston was slipping into his drinks in the first place. The herbs looked very similar, and Nicole had simply replaced them with pre-marinated achok grass.

It probably wouldn't show up on a poison test. Chances were he didn't even know what an achok grass was.

'Herbs only known to House YvesChapel, they are our family secrets. Secrets that have been kept throughout the long history of the Empire.'

And that knowledge would help Nicole in the future.

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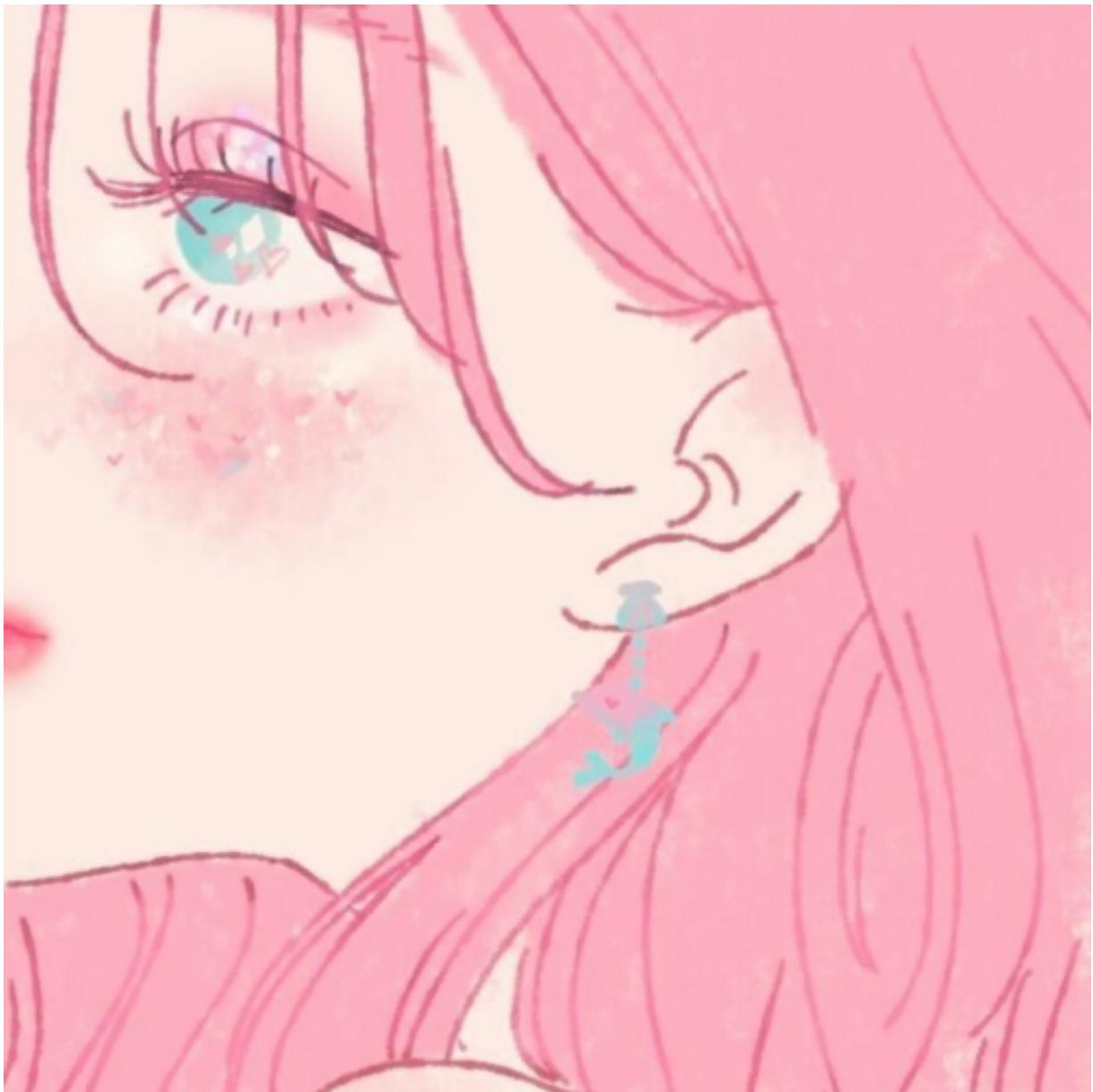


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# Chapter 54

\*\*\*

“Noona, what kind of magic did you do?”

“I must have made something delicious since Dagger loves my cookies. I guess I’m good at making tasty treats with my hands.”

That evening, Dagger and Nicole met at the general store as promised.

As Nicole walked into the shop, taking off her coat, Dagger, who was waiting in a chair, gave her a stern look.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. I’m your boss, so why don’t you tell me the truth?”

“I thought such things were just formalities and all shadows are equal?”

“But I’m also Dagger.”

Nicole nodded, completely convinced by that.

“It’s just a coincidence, really, when he took a liking to me and asked me to come over to the mansion to prepare for tea and drinks, how could I refuse?”

“Noona, you know the way you lie is so insincere. What if I turn on you for doing something our Grand Duke didn’t ask

you to do? It would hurt quite a bit to be punished directly by him, don't you think?"

"Ah, you should cover for me. I deserve it for feeding you all those tasty treats."

"Ah. Noona is really...!"

Dagger laughed in disbelief. The boy's feline eyes glowed blue.

"What do you really want?"

"To get ahead."

"You're smart and pretty, so I know it's a shame where you come from, but I'm sure there are ways to get ahead."

"You think so?"

Nicole said.

"You know what it's like for a girl with a half-decent face who doesn't have a decent status, since even a pretty boy like you has to go through a lot. I know that, even though I'm not blessed with exceptional beauty."

Dagger was silent. She has a point. Nicole realized that Dagger was looking toward her and spoke softly.

"Dagger. Believe it or not, it's not just the glamorous life I want; I want to have the honor, the money, the whole nine yards, just like the proper knights of the Sith."

"It's not exactly glamorous when you're hiding out in someone's house undercover in the first place, is it?"

“Who cares if the road to get there is a little rough, as long as you know where you’re going, and.....”

Nicole said in a low voice.

“I have beliefs, too.”

Today, Nicole is Karen. A back-alley girl from humble beginnings. A woman who doesn’t know who her parents are and has lived a nearly criminal life.

She’s the kind of woman who’s used to speaking in crude terms and talking about money. So Nicole decided to explain her current status.

“When I say I want to make a name for myself, I mean that I want to do the right thing, and after all, the whole country praises the Grand Duke, and I want to help the most wonderful person I know, so I’m just greedy to make a name for myself.”

Nicole said. She suddenly realized she had talked a lot today. Dagger smiled faintly.

“Our Grand Duke is a much better man than that asshole, but you know, you become an asshole when you deal with an asshole.”

“Well, that asshole is the most admirable ally I’ll ever have, anyway..... Don’t doubt me.”

Dagger gave a small sigh.

“.....I understand, then, but I want you to stay away from Grace’s house until this mission is over. I don’t want you to get involved with her, and I don’t want you on any future missions.”

“I understand.”

Nicole said in a small voice. It wasn’t much of a penalty; she’d been sleeping alone on the second floor since she’d started working here anyway.

The first floor was a tea house, but the second floor was for staff sleeping quarters. It was safe and fully secured.

“By the way, if you can, try to leave the mansion at night and come back. It’s not safe for someone like you to be in that bastard’s mansion all night.”

“What do you mean by someone like me?”

“You attract the bad guys, don’t you know?”

Dagger said. Nicole was beginning to wonder how old Dagger was.

When he finished, Dagger stood up.

“Goodbye, Dagger.”

Nicole waved goodbye to Dagger and went upstairs.

After a while, Dagger turned his head toward the darkness.

“This ..... do you still want to interrogate her yourself?”

“Yes.”

Raoul replied briefly.

They spoke in low voices, barely audible.

“It sounds like a lie, so I don’t know where to start.”

“But *noona*, I mean, Agent Karen, is.....”

Dagger started to say.

‘At least she seemed sincere when she said she wanted to work for the Grand Duke.’

No way.

The same thing as what happened to Sienna shouldn’t happen twice. Dagger thought. Raul was silent for a moment.

He had a habit of frowning slightly, without wrinkling his brow, an expression that enhanced his good looks and made him look cruelly handsome. This was that look now.

“She’s a nuisance, that woman. No one is worth a long tongue.”

Raul said briefly.

“We’ll see.”

Dagger said.

But strangely, Dagger had the feeling that Raul cared a great deal about her. It was a touch he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

\*\*\*

The next day, her peaceful undercover life resumed.

‘This house..... Something’s wrong.’

Nicole quickly noticed the discrepancies. First, there were times when the hired hands were never allowed to move

about the house.

At 7 p.m., the butler would ring the bell and go around the manor.

At that time, boarders would return to their bedrooms, while nonboarders would either return quickly or retire to the common room for an hour.

Some days Gaston was home, some days he wasn't.

On the days he wasn't, he'd usually go to courtisan's house or spend the night at a private gambling house. But the rules were always the same for his employers.

"This is the time when our Marquis prays to the Lord. Be quiet and follow the Marquis as he prays for the faith."

When the hired hands asked why they weren't allowed to move around at that hour, the butler would cough and say something like that.

'Has Gaston have any faith? Even a passing dog would laugh.'

Gaston was a scoundrel and a psychopath. When he was in a good mood, he would harass a passing maid then give her money. The next day, when he was in a bad mood, he would slap the maid on the cheek.

But, strangely enough, the butler would go out the back door to greet someone.

<I think they're smuggling something, and if my guess is right, it's.....>

Dagger rattled off the details.

<Remember, smuggling and tax evasion aren't going to bring down the Marquis of Saratheve. Those sorts of sins are usually committed by those in power. Anyway- there are two ways to do it. Either you blow the big one out of proportion in a way that can never be turned away by the imperial family. Or you make him a traitor.>

A little of both would be nice.

<*Noona*, I think Gaston is up to something underground.>

Dagger quickly found a clue. After a thorough sweep of all his employees, Gaston consistently disappears underground. And the suspicious crates that came in through the back door all headed underground.

<Something smells fishy. There's something down there.....>

Nicole agreed. The tense atmosphere in the house got even stranger after seven o'clock.

There were fewer servants than in other mansions, thanks to the unruly owner, and the servants, tired of the drudgery and the whims of their master, were silent, and their mood was no better.

<Did you ever succeed in breaking into the basement?>

<I'm afraid that would be a problem: this is a very old mansion. In other words, this was built when the power of the seven great families was stronger than it is now.>

<What does that mean?>

<The door to the basement can't be opened unless you're Gaston, and this house has a door that was installed a long

time ago by people from House Sotia.>

That meant it was a magic tool. The Sotia family, now headed by Grace, were masters of magic tools.

<It's a kind of magic identification device, so you have to open and close the doors yourself, and if the owner of the manor manually locks the door to the basement, there's no way to open it - unless the ancestors of the Sotia family who helped design this house come back to life.>

Nicole pondered the words.

'If what I am thinking is correct.....'

Then they must enter the underground. There is a secret there that will destroy Gaston.

'You owe you a debt from my last life.'

Gaston owes her a debt, a grudge from a past life.

And this grudge is long overdue. It was the Saratheves who helped destroy the YvesChapel family.

In a way, they were responsible for the ruin of Nicole's life.

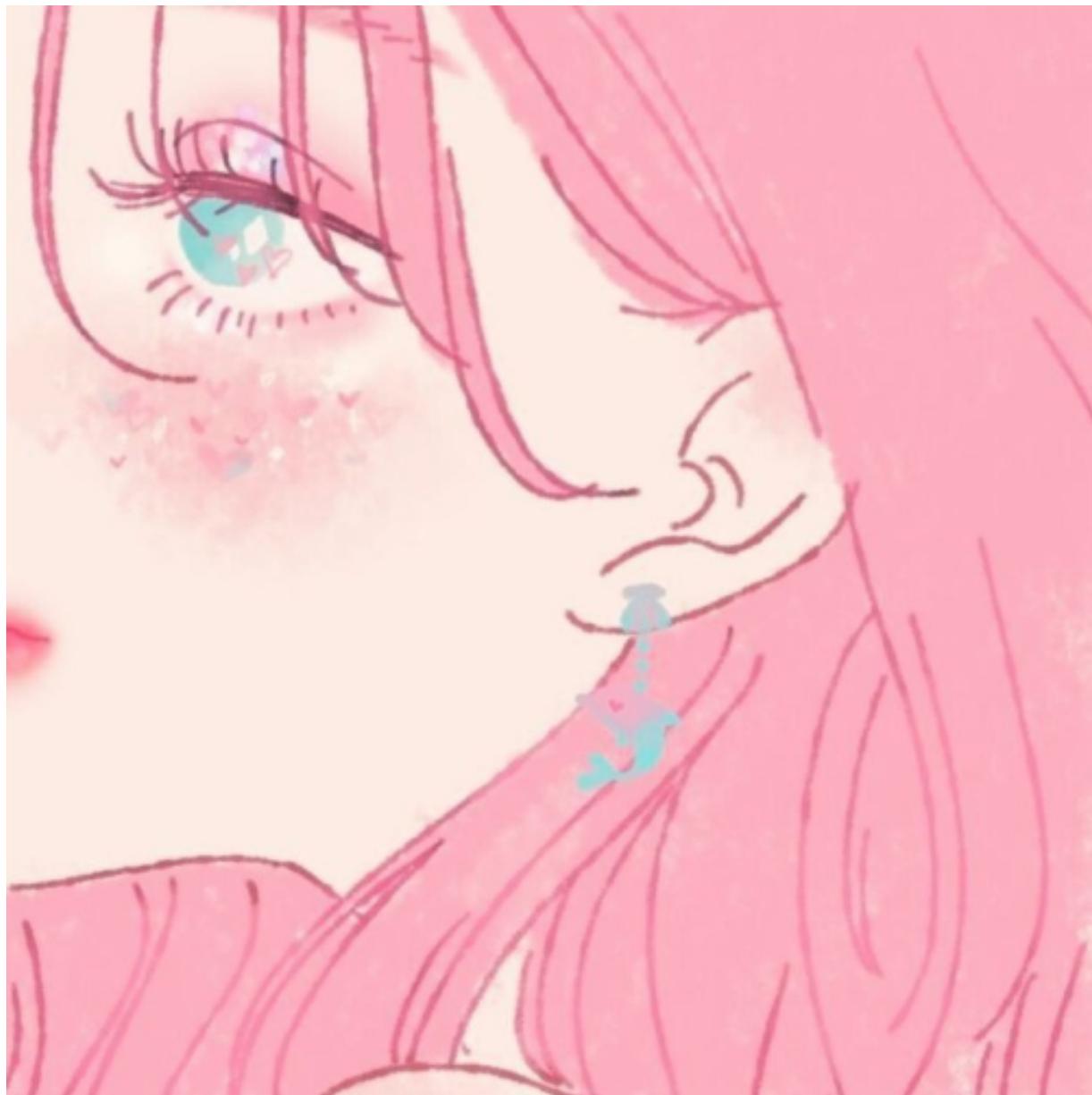
In her last life, she had been too exhausted to dwell on it.

But this time was different. Nicole was clear-headed and able to recognize her situation.

'In three years, Raul will destroy Gaston, but it won't be enough. After all, Gaston survived with the help of the imperial family. We have to make sure that even if the imperial family gives Gaston a way out, it won't matter.'

Nicole was determined to see this through, and she needed to take strong action.

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# Chapter 55

\*\*\*

The clock struck seven as usual.

The daylight was short, and with the garden lights extinguished, the Marquis of Saratheve's house, which had been noisy in the daytime, quickly fell silent.

Gaston's butler, a member of the Saratheve family's entourage, paced nervously near the back door before welcoming the guests. They were all men with hoods pulled down to hide their faces.

"Are you sure about the goods today?"

"Yes. Of course."

The butler really didn't want to get involved in this. But he had been cleaning up Gaston's dirty laundry for a very long time.

He knew so many of Gaston's secrets that he couldn't escape them.

But it was a blow to his pride. He was a butler for a prestigious family. He wasn't supposed to be in a position to deal with shady men like this casually.

"Even so, aren't you charging too much money? I'll have to have a word with my family's accountants."

“It’s getting harder and harder to get things. We’re risking our lives for believers like you.”

“Believers? How dare you. Ahem. Anyway, move your stuff.”

At those words, the hooded men moved.

The barrels of unidentified goods were too heavy for two or three men to carry. The hooded men pressed the wagon against the back door.

The wagons had been specially adapted, with large doors that made it easy to load and unload the hidden barrels.

The men grunted as they loaded the barrels onto a large plank-wheeled cart that the Marquis of Saratheve had prepared.

“F, fire!”

A servant shouted, rushing outside. A gust of wind had knocked over a gas lamp in the hallway and set the carpet on fire.

The day before, a maid had spilled some perfumed oil on the carpet while moving it, and it had unfortunately caught fire.

As the smoke billowed into the room, the employees, who were in their bedrooms or common rooms, came running out.

“What happened!”

“Move the wagon back!”

The men scrambled to get the crates back on the wagon.

Nicole hid behind the mansion and watched.

“Quick, quick!”

The hooded leader shouted.

The crate shook violently, and a gurgling sound echoed from inside.

‘Is there life inside? Is it human?’

Nicole could clearly see the crate shaking. A hand reached out from under the open lid.

‘A human hand?’

Sure enough, Nicole saw a skinny hand. But the men reloaded the barrel and hurried off in their wagon.

\*\*\*

Nicole wanted to run after them, but she couldn’t afford to. They weren’t her target in the first place.

‘People and animals are the same, they run out of their burrows when there’s a fire.’

Surely Gaston would come out of the room he was in. She had to catch him.

Nicole entered the mansion amidst the chaos.

“What’s going on? Fire!”

Gaston appeared out of nowhere in a robe. Nicole ducked behind the door.

The butler came rushing in.

"There's a fire on the second floor. We've evacuated everyone and are putting out the fire."

"Ugh, but isn't there..... *that*?"

"They took it back, now is not the time for that! I'll take care of it, I'll clean up the mess."

Gaston looked around. There was a pungent smell of smoke from somewhere.

Servants were running around with buckets of water. The fire brigade would be here soon. He gritted his teeth.

"I haven't closed the door yet, so when the fire is out, you'll clean up the basement. Do you understand? Damn it. I paid good money for that thing, and I want it back!"

Gaston fled. The butler turned as if to go to the portrait room.

"Everyone take cover, the beasts have escaped!"

Gaston kept a variety of animals in his menagerie, which was only a few minutes' walk from the main house.

Gaston's ability was taming, the ability to tame and control animals.

Gaston was obsessed with this ability, so he collected bears, lions, tigers, and other beasts of prey.

He wanted to practice his Taming ability to control and subdue them.

Now they had escaped.

*Krrrr! Grrrr!*

The beast's barn was adjacent to the manor's main building. She could hear the tiger howling outside.

"Eek!"

The butler turned white and ran outside.

'Fools.'

Nicole covered the corner of her mouth with a cloth and went into the room where Gaston had come from.

It was called the portrait room. The faces of every member of House Saratheve stared back at her.

'The door is open!'

Nicole spotted an open door between the portraits. It led to the cellar, which looked like a gaping maw of a beast.

'So Dagger was right, there's a ritual to closing this door, huh?'

Apparently, it was true that no one but Gaston could open the door. But the process of closing it must take a lot of time.

In any case, the landlord wasn't around to enforce it now.

Nicole descended slowly. The stairs were narrow and long. And.....

'Oh, my God.....'

Nicole covered her mouth. The basement was clean, with lights on every wall. Large beds were arranged in a circle on one side of the room.

And there were sleeping people lying on them, tied up tightly.

'Five in total.'

Their whitened faces were mute, their mouths closed.

Some were short, some were tall. Some were men, some were women, but all of them were unconscious.

Outside there was a fire and a great commotion, but they didn't stir. It was as if they had fallen into a deep sleep.

'Did they take sleeping pills?'

But even if they had taken sleeping pills, it didn't make sense that they wouldn't stir.

They were all dressed in what looked like flimsy pajamas. Nicole walked over to them.

At that moment, she stepped on something.

'What is this?'

Nicole picked it up.

It was a necklace of richly textured leather. It had a thin, wide copper plate pendant on it.

Then there was a sound outside.

*Scratch*— It sounded like scratching. Nicole's eyes widened. She rushed out of the basement.

'Thank goodness, I don't think anyone looked in here with all the commotion outside.'

Nicole hurried out of the room.

\*\*\*

The fire on the second floor was small compared to the commotion. The servants rushed over with buckets so it was quickly extinguished.

Gaston, irritated, went to change his clothes.

The butler stood up and hurried to the portrait room to check on the situation in the cellar, where Gaston had left the door open.

Then he spotted someone near the room.

It was a woman with her face covered.

The butler recognized her as the bartender and maid in charge of the game room.

“What the hell, what are you doing here?”

“That’s.....”

Her face went white.

The butler’s eyes grew fierce.

“If there’s a fire, why are you wandering around the mansion? Tell me quickly!”

“Actually, I came back inside the mansion as soon as I heard the cries that the fire was out, to protect the Marquis’s precious tea.”

Nicole unfolded her cloak; she had a small velvet pouch hanging from her arm, filled with precious teas wrapped in

paper.

At that, the butler remembered that there was a tea warehouse right near the portrait room. And that she worked in and out of it.

“Were you trying to steal?”

“No! I was afraid that the shed might get smoky and these tea would lose its freshness..... I was just trying to get it out of there to a safe place, and when I went to get it, I saw a bunch of stuff, and that’s why I was late!”

The butler frowned. But then he remembered that Nicole had once nagged him about the tea.

He wanted to grab Nicole and give her a good scolding, but Gaston had opened the cellar door.

The butler, who hadn’t checked the basement earlier, was uneasy. He couldn’t wait to get rid of Nicole and check the cellar.

Nicole sensed his mood and stammered.

“I feel so wronged! Here’s all the tea. Don’t you think if it were to go missing, I’d be the first to be suspected? Do you think I am stupid? I don’t want to lose this job, and the Marquis of Saratheve pays me generous tips!”

“You’re making a noise, put it down and go away! You’re a stupid girl.”

The butler said. He roughly snatched the pouch of tea from Nicole’s hand. After checking the contents, the butler told Nicole to leave.

Nicole seized the opportunity, thanked the butler, and hurried out of the mansion.

\*\*\*

“Eek, help me!”

“No!”

As soon as Nicole exited the mansion, the scene was chaos.

Some of the beasts had escaped, and a tiger the size of a house was roaming the garden.

There were panicked people cowering in the garden, sobbing, and knights running around trying to catch it. It was a sight that made her head hurt.

‘The butler must have run away and returned to the manor once the fire had died down and the knights had returned.’

It wasn’t hard for Nicole to figure it out. At the same time, she wanted to mock Gaston.

‘If you’re going to collect beasts, you should at least take better care of them.’

Then the tiger looked at her.

*Crouch, crouch.....*

The beast lowered its head and began to walk slowly toward her.

“Don’t come!”

“Stop it!”

The knights drew their swords and stopped the tiger.

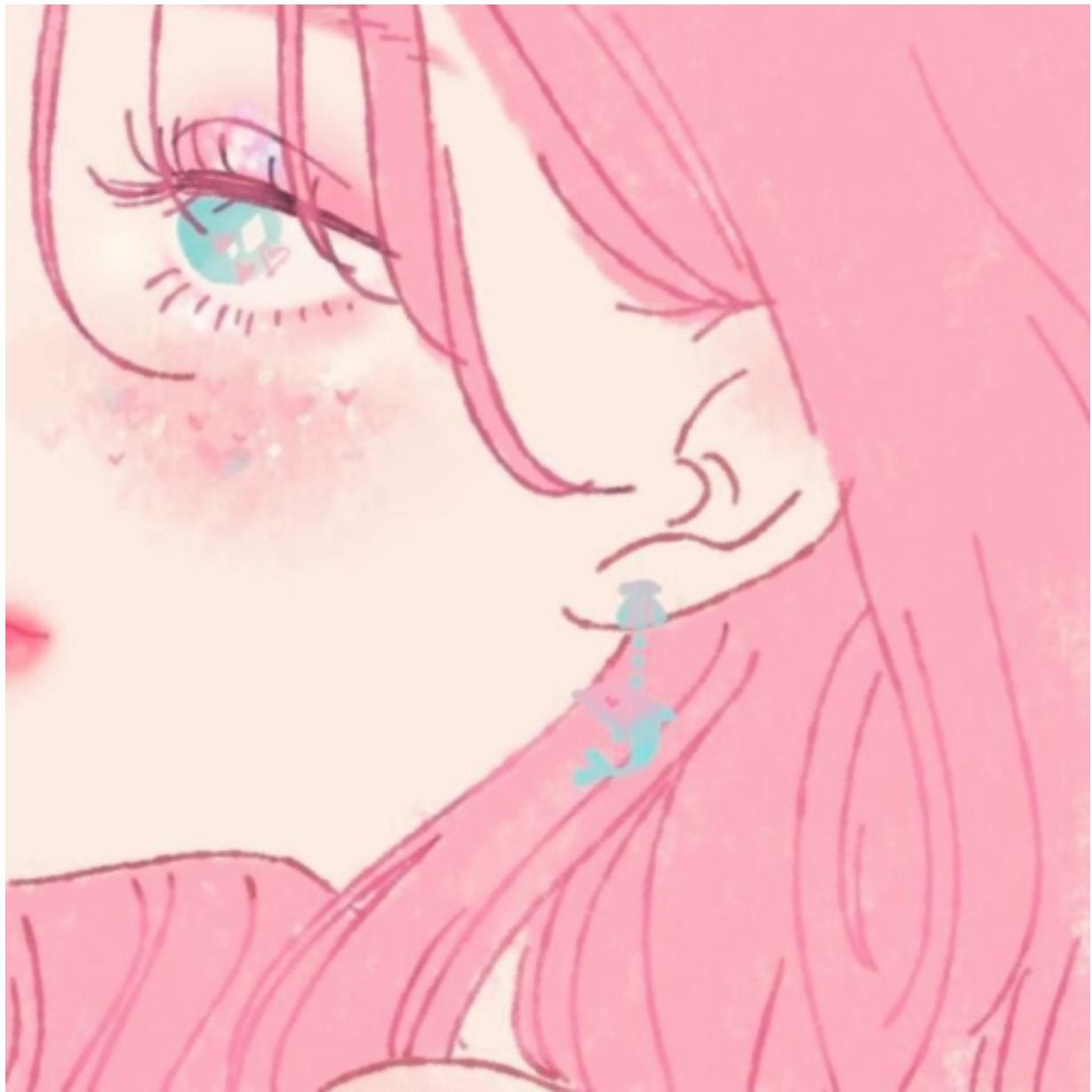
*“Psst, come to the back door.”*

A familiar voice rang out behind her. Nicole turned to see Dagger, dressed as a servant, staring at her.

Dagger said a word or two to Nicole and disappeared.

Nicole started running across the garden.

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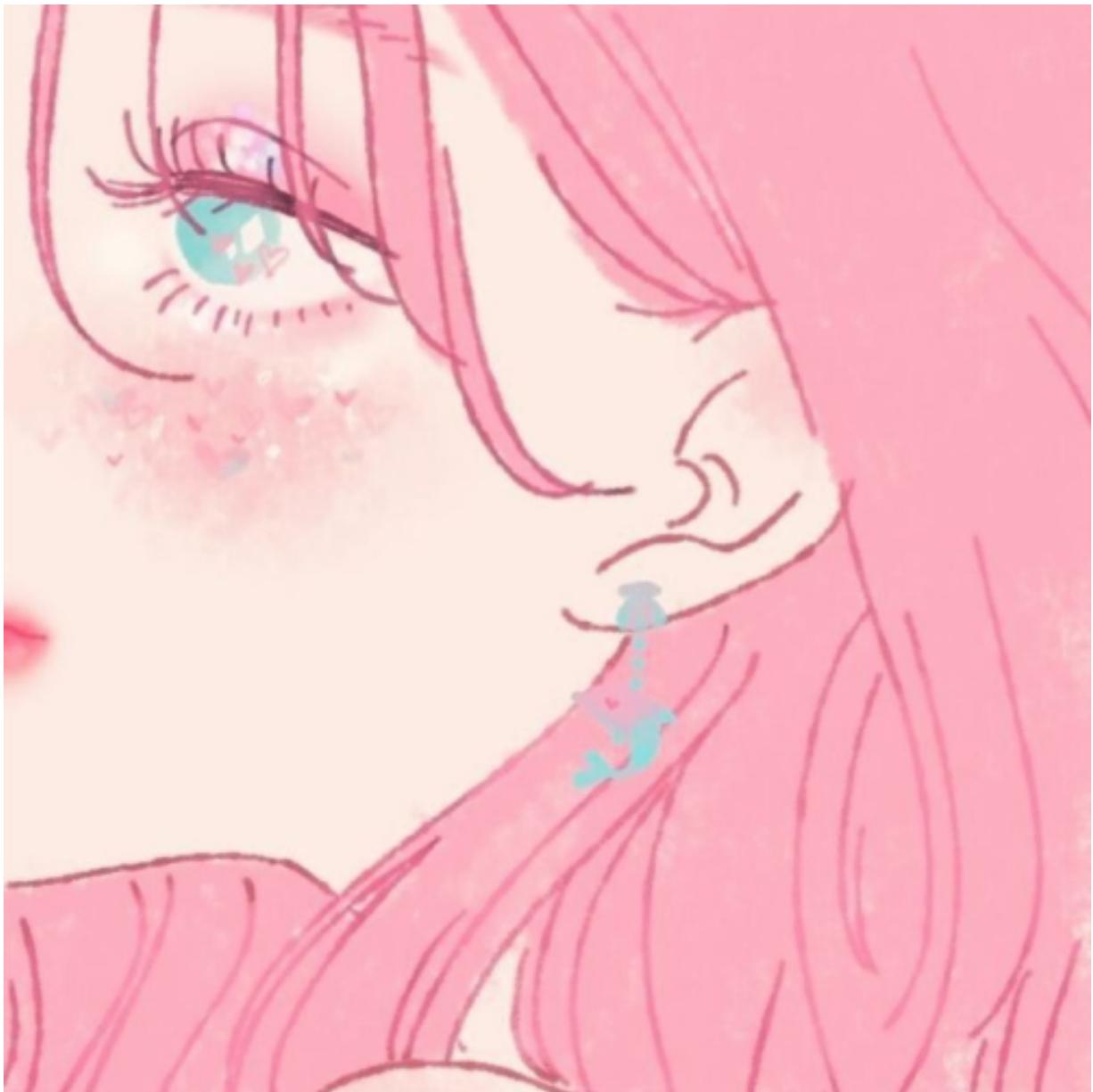


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# Chapter 56

\*\*\*

“You know, this plan you’ve got going on, do you realize that it’s insane?”

“We cannot stay undercover forever. Are you planning to wait for the basement to open your whole life?”

Nicole and Dagger quickly left the mansion. There would be many hired hands who had begun to desert in the commotion of the day anyway, so their disappearance wouldn’t raise too much suspicion.

They stopped under a small bridge.

“We should head back to the mansion.”

Dagger said.

“You have no idea how much these twenty minutes I made for *noona* meant to me, and I’ve done some suspicious things today, so I need to take care of myself.”

“You didn’t do anything suspicious, you actually did something. You were the one who started the fire, weren’t you Dagger?”

Dagger nodded slightly at Nicole’s words.

“That was our mission.”

A competent agent would accomplish the mission skillfully and quickly. Nicole made a suggestion to Dagger to break up this tedious standoff. She suggested starting a fire.

Of course, she had no intention of hurting innocent people. Nicole made a thorough calculation and set fire to the second floor.

There were fewer people in the main building than in the daytime, because after 7:00 p.m., employees who didn't work overnight went home.

She also checked the weather. It wasn't windy in the capital at this time of year, so the chances of the fire spreading were low.

Nicole, who had nearly burned to death once, knew better.

"Did you know the Marquis of Saratheve?"

Dagger asked, glancing at Nicole.

"How would I know that son of a bitch?"

"You seemed to know him very well."

"Well, he's a narcissist anyway. I thought he'd run away, so I saw an opening."

Nicole replied.

In any case, there was no time.

"Did you know that the Marquis of Saratheve was secretly buying people?"

Nicole asked quickly this time.

“If you mean the illegal slave trade, I knew.”

“And you let him get away with it?”

“I told you, it’s what he does with the slave trade that matters. Buying a few people might hurt him, but it’s not enough to end his family, and he belongs to the Seven Houses of the Empire, so as long as he doesn’t get taken down on the spot, he’ll get away with anything.”

The imperial family had no intention of ceding the capital’s sole military power to Grand Duke Valentine.

So they would let him kill a few innocent people in the Marquisate of Saratheve.

Nicole had expected the imperial family to do so, but hearing it from Dagger’s lips made her mouth taste bitter.

“Then how about this, what if we reveal what they’re doing with the people they’ve bought and sold? What if they’re being used as human sacrifices in a cult?”

Nicole pulled something out of her bosom. It was a copper plate pendant.

The copper plate pendant had a horned devil raising his hand. It was a classic piece of devil worship.

“This fell down in the basement.”

“Hooh.”

Dagger’s eyes changed.

“This is a common object carried by those who practice demon worship. He was performing a ritual sacrifice for it.....”

It's a different story when religion is involved. Currently, the Imperial family has prophetic powers and divine powers granted by the gods.

If someone who is a vassal and right-hand man of the imperial family is practicing a cult, that's pretty serious.

In an empire where religion holds absolute sway, it would be difficult to avoid public criticism.

Social rituals involving the sacrifice of life, especially human sacrifice, were among the most forbidden of the Empire's religion.

In the imperial family, they'd be too afraid of the stares they'd receive to ignore it.

"*Noona*, you made an accident. If you steal something like this, the marquis will notice that you're suspicious. I have no choice but to report this to the higher-ups."

"..... That part was my mistake."

Nicole admitted meekly. It's standard in undercover work to preserve a perfect scene and leave no evidence of a break-in.

In all likelihood, Gaston would notice the missing items and begin to suspect that someone had broken into the room.

"You probably won't make it back to Saratheve Manor."

Dagger looked at the copper plate a few times, then smirked.

"That's resignation for anyone else, but I don't know why you're looking more and more competent by the minute."

Dagger's face lit up with a strange kind of amusement.

"I'm glad because I finally see a chance to punch that son of a bitch in the face."

Dagger said.

Nicole gave a small nod. But inside, she agreed with Dagger more than anyone.

*'I'm the one with the grudge against Gaston.'*

She couldn't even hate him anymore, knowing he was doing this disgusting thing.

*'But does Dagger have a personal grudge against Gaston?'*

Nicole felt her suspicions grow, and she quickly recounted her encounter with the butler.

"I think I've avoided suspicion, but I don't know what's going to happen."

"I'll make a report to the higher-ups on my end, and you'll go to the general store and hide yourself. I'll find out about this pendant, and you'll stop working for the Marquis of Saratheve. Don't leave the general store."

"Understood."

Nicole nodded obediently.

"I've got to go now, *noona*, take care of yourself."

"Are you okay after starting the fire?"

Nicole grabbed Dagger one last time.

"Don't worry, I'll never get caught. And even if I do get caught, I'm not only Dahlia, I'm also Dagger, so I can get out of there on my own."

Dagger stuck his tongue out a little. It was the most boyish thing Nicole had ever seen him do.

"And when you went into the main house, guess who let the animals out?"

".....That was Dagger, too."

Nicole marveled at her colleague's competence. And Dagger had even kept her near the main house, just in case.

In many ways, Dagger wasn't a bad senior.

"I'll be back with new instructions around midnight, so wait for me, and make sure you lock the door."

Dagger said in a low voice.

\*\*\*

Nicole felt dizzy. She pressed her hood deeper into her face and hurried through the dark streets of the capital.

*'I'm tired. I've gotten myself into a lot of trouble today.'*

She hadn't eaten all day and was starving. At this rate, she's going to starve to death before she makes it big. At the same time, she laughed out loud.

*'Yes, I'm hungry.....'*

In her past life, she had been skinny. She was always depressed and mentally ill, so she didn't think it was a good

idea to eat something tasty. She didn't think she'd be rewarded for it in this life.

*'If people are going to keep dying anyway, I might as well stop it.'*

But where does Gaston get people?

Nicole thought Gaston needs to die anyway. Quickly, before he does any harm to Raul.

She turned into a deserted alleyway, just a short walk away from the shop.

It was the moment. Nicole felt someone staring at her from behind.

*'Who is it?'*

Was she being followed? An ominous feeling of foreboding shot through Nicole.

*"Heok!"*

Nicole quickened her pace. The streets in these back alleys were narrow and winding.

*Step, step*

The sound of footsteps grew closer. Nicole's pace quickened.

*"Hah, this is more like it."*

But it didn't take long for Nicole's pursuer to catch up with her.

He was a foul-smelling man with a boil on his nose. He was dressed in very plain clothes, a leather hood over his head,

and a knife in his hand.

“The marquis wants to see you.”

As soon as she heard the words, Nicole had a hunch.

The butler had reported to Marquis Saratheve that he had seen her near the portrait room today.

“Why does he want to see me?”

“You’re quite a handful. Do you think we don’t know who started the fire today?”

“..... Let go of me, I’m calling for the Royal Guards.”

“*Hihi*, if he hadn’t told me to bring you in urgently, this would have been fun. I’m sure our master will have a good time torturing you himself today.”

The man’s eyes glittered with greed.

Then there was the sound of shuffling footsteps.

*Tak, tak. Biik!*

A whistling sound accompanied the steady footsteps. It was the whistle of a security knight on a routine patrol.

“Over here!”

Nicole tried to shout. It was the moment.

*Puk.*

Nicole didn’t know what had happened to her. Her vision turned red and her stomach felt like it was being ripped apart.

“I told you to be quiet!”

The man said. Nicole fell to the floor, a smelly hand clamped over her mouth.

The man muttered something profane.

*Step, step*

The sound of the knights’ footsteps grew closer.

“The order was to capture her, not kill her, damn it.”

The man muttered through gritted teeth, then turned and began to run.

Nicole clutched her stomach and ducked into the shadows of the building.

She had to avoid the security knight. She didn’t want to be recognized.

Perhaps..... Raul wouldn’t want that.....

‘I mustn’t create a disturbance.....’

The sound of the knights’ footsteps passed by. Nicole staggered against the wall and began to walk. Her stomach was damp. It was still bleeding.

Along with pharmacy, she knew basic medicine.

*‘This is a fatal wound. I’ve been stabbed.’*

Is she going to die?

That’s what Nicole thought at that moment.

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# Chapter 57

*'At least..... to a safe place..... to the general store.....'*

Dagger said he was coming at midnight. I'll go to the general store and do first aid, and then.....

*'How did I..... get here?'*

The old sign for the general store came into view in front of Nicole.

Parchment and shoe prints that wouldn't even be visible if you didn't look closely. Nicole crouched under the creaking sign.

*'Mother, Father..... Jay.....'*

*Slip.* Nicole sank to the floor, gripping the wall by the front door. The gas lamp on the porch lit up.

Nicole looked at her palm. Her hands were bloody from pressing on her wound.

She remembered being tortured in her last life. The memory was so diluted that the pain was unfamiliar.

"No, I don't want to die."

Nicole thought.

*'Stay awake.'*

Just then, Nicole felt someone call out to her.

"Noona."

Jay?

Nicole looked up.

'Why is Jay here, when he should be at the Knights Templar at Grace's behest?'

Nicole thought, feeling her consciousness slipping away. A large, cold hand touched her cheek. Nicole grasped it.

It felt eerily familiar.

"Please help me, don't leave me alone."

Tears streamed from Nicole's eyes.

The vision of Dagger that flashed before her eyes became Jay, and Jay became.....

The man she'd been thinking about and picturing all this time.

She remembered.

<If things had gone as planned, you would have become my wife. This is revenge against the bastards of the Grand Duke Valentine's family.>

Hot breath. The rustle of clothes. A body pressed against hers.

This is a memory of her past life. The loud, colorful party, the night she was insulted by Gaston and nearly forced to commit.

*Hiiing.*

Fireworks exploded overhead.

<I'll end this quickly if you shut the fuck up. Raul's going to dump you anyway for me putting you through this.>

A dirty voice in her ear. A disgusting breath. It came back to her vividly.

And then, *puk*. The sound of something dull hitting something else.

Raul had hit Gaston from behind. Gaston tumbled to the ground on top of Nicole. It was so heavy that Nicole felt her breath stop.

Raul kicked Gaston right in the face.

<Dead..... He's dead.....>

Nicole stuttered. She was too stunned.

<He's not dead, so get up on your own two feet.>

<.....>

<Stand up, Nicole.>

Raul said. Nicole managed to get to her feet.

<Nothing happened to me.>

<.....>

<You don't have to dispose of me, nothing happened to me.....>

Nicole was in pain and anguish. She hated this man.

But she hated the fact that she had to rely on him. She hated herself for breaking down, trembling and weak, over something like this.

<Walk slowly.>

Raul said, commandingly.

<No one will know about this, and Gaston will pay dearly.>

Nicole nodded and followed him. When she stopped walking, Raul scooped her up in his arms.

<Ah!>

Nicole squirmed in his wide arms, but she was too weak and tired, so she decided to keep quiet for now.

\*\*\*

Raul laid Nicole down on the bed in his room and called for the maid.

<She can't seem to fall asleep, so give her the medicine the doctor prescribed>.

Nicole hated the headache medicine the doctor used to make.

If she made them, they would be much better. They always made her terribly drowsy, especially with all the sleep-inducing stuff in them.

<Get some sleep.>

<Your Highness, I'm.....>

<I know it's not your fault. You should get some sleep. You'll feel better when you're rested.>

<.....>

<And I'm not disposing of you. Being a Grand Duchess is not the appropriate position for that.>

Nicole seemed reassured by those words.....

She took the medicine and slowly closed her eyes. She could feel the tear stains in the corners of her eyes. Her body continued to shake. Nicole felt her heavy eyelids and fell half asleep.

\*\*\*

This happened sometimes. She's clearly sleeping with her eyes closed, but she's still conscious and hearing the sounds around her.

She'd been like this since she was a kid when she was under a lot of stress. She wanted to push her counter.

Nicole opened her eyes in such an incomplete state.

She heard a voice in her ear.

<Having her around isn't helping.>

It was Bastard's voice.

<Perhaps we should send her somewhere safe and far away, a temple or a cottage in the countryside.>

<I looked away for a moment, and that's what Gaston, that bastard, almost did to her. Where would I send a woman like her?>

A voice that sounded like a snort. Nicole managed to open her eyes and look up.

*'Why do you look at me like that?'*

Raul stroked her forehead, his eyes tender and loving.

Maybe it was just my imagination.

His face was dark with his back to the light.

The light in Nicole's room was off, and only a dim glow from the light in Raul's bedroom.

And Bastard stood in the doorway between the two rooms.

<She's mentally unstable, she would be a weakness. Besides, how long will you continue to protect the bloodline of YvesChapel, I fear you'll lose your temper>.

<She's your master, your mistress.>

Raul said.

In the Empire, both wives and husbands were referred to as masters.

Usually, in a noble family, the wife ruled the house and the husband worked outside, so the outer master and the inner master, so a harmonious couple might call each other master

<She is my wife, I swore and prayed to God that she would be, and her life is mine, and I am somewhat bound to her fate, so that's the way it should be in this life.>

Nicole, half asleep, gasped in surprise.

But somehow, when she woke up, she'd forgotten his words.

*'It's all because of Raul, that man, that I almost went through that horrible thing with Gaston!'*

Over time, Nicole began to distort her memory.

She didn't know if it was because she was depressed after Jay's death.

*'Raul hates me after what happened. He treats me like I don't exist anymore. Let him do whatever he wants, because I hate him too.'*

Why did she think that then?

Nicole questioned herself, feeling her body grow wounded and cold.

*'He cared about me, and he didn't throw me away when I was useless. Why did I forget all that?'*

The ungrateful Nicole could only hate him.

*'You protected me.'*

It was definitely not a dream.

Nicole lifted her head.

Her whole body was cold and her teeth clattered together, thankfully less painful, but she was paralyzed, unable to move.

*Tap.* A bright light came on in front of her.

Raul was looking down at her.

"That was a good move. I sent you out, you messed up, and you've already been exposed."

"....."

"I told you, if you fail the mission, there's no next time."

This wasn't a dream either.

She was almost stabbed to death. This was Nicole's reality. Tears streamed from Nicole's eyes.

*'If I die at your hands, I have nothing to say.'*

She was a fool. Raul had been right. She didn't deserve to beg him for mercy twice.

"What shall we do?"

Raul said. His face was unmoved as he watched a person die in front of him. In a way, he even looked pleased.

"Shall I finally make you comfortable?"

She couldn't tell if he meant to release her or kill her.

But if this was the Raul Nicole knew, it had to be the latter. And she still owed him her life.....

*'If he's going to take it, he can take it.'*

Nicole thought. Her whole body trembled and her body temperature dropped. But she felt hot inside at the same time. Her heart felt like it was slowing down, and she was slowly becoming dazed.

The pain was so intense that she couldn't feel her limbs. She thought she might be bleeding out.

"Are you....."

Nicole managed to say.

She didn't know what Raul had thought of her in her past life.

Still, he was.....

He was the one who called her master. He was the only one who recognized her as his wife.

But she knew nothing then, and now it was too late.

"My life is yours."

Raul paused. Shadows fell across his face, and Nicole couldn't read his expression. She couldn't look him in the eye, for what might be the last time in her life.

Tears welled up in Nicole's eyes. An unspeakable, overwhelming sadness rose up inside her.

"It's been a long time, and I didn't realize it. I'll never hate you again. If I survive this time..... If I get another chance....."

"....."

"This time, I will..... surely..... sacrifice myself perfectly for you, my master....."

Nicole mumbled and slowly closed her eyes.

\*\*\*

Raul stared down at Nicole. He was now in a dark alley, in front of a teahouse.

*'This woman must die.'*

That was the first thought that came to Raul's mind.

There were many reasons for this: she had most likely been compromised by the Marquis of Saratheve. It was Saratheve, not someone else. She was now useless as a secret agent.

There was also a personal reason. This woman, Karen, kept causing him minor distractions. She was a variable that made him emotional.

Just as he was about to make a decision, she spoke.

"My master."

She opened her mouth and spoke. It was a bizarre experience as if a corpse was singing.

"This time, I will..... surely..... sacrifice myself perfectly for you, my master....."

Bitter pain flowed from within her eyes. A strange emotion that seemed to be compressed dozens of times.

In the midst of it all, she was looking at him. Raul felt the uncomfortable stiffness in his chest grows even stronger.

'Who are you?'

His confusion deepened.

Then, with the last of her strength, her hand dropped from his collar.

He looked at her and sucked in a breath. He checked her stomach and, thankfully, the knife hadn't gone deep, so the

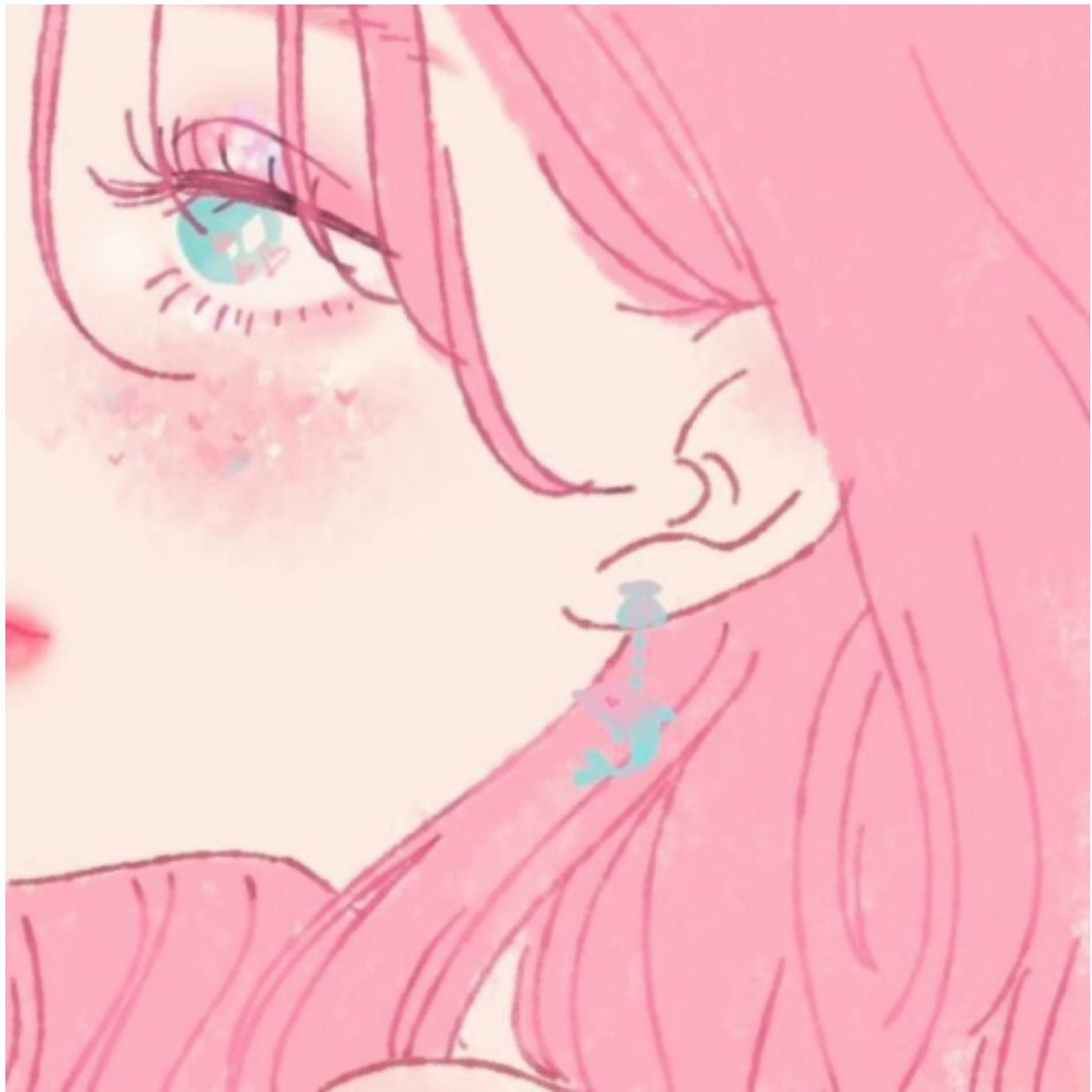
wound wasn't fatal.

But if she was bleeding on the cold floor like this.....  
maybe.....

Raul scooped Nicole up into his arms.

Nicole took slow breaths in his arms. Raul picked her up and began to walk briskly.

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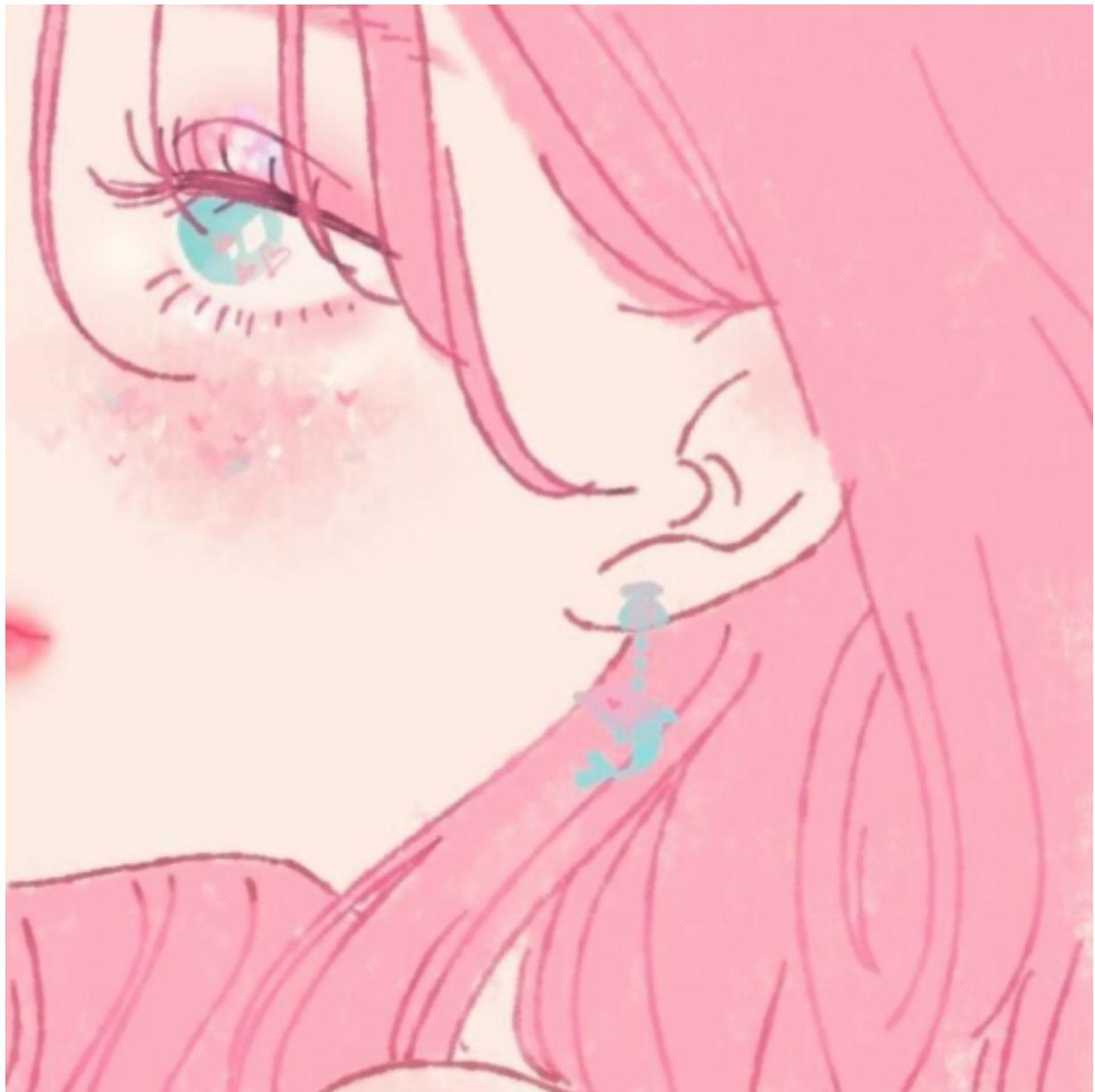


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# Chapter 58

\*\*\*

*Clattering. Clattering.*

I heard a familiar sound.

Most of the furniture in the Grand Duke's house was antique, and the value of each old object was hard to calculate.

The furniture in those rooms was not easily removed or changed.

As a Grand Duchess, Nicole was surrounded by such furniture every day. As a result, she could guess what the maids were doing just by hearing the clatter of utensils and furniture.

'The maid is preparing the morning tea.'

Nicole thought, the clinking sound coming from a teacup hitting the porcelain-topped table next to her bed.

*'I don't feel well. I don't have an appetite today.'*

But she didn't want to give him an excuse to interrupt her. He was the kind of man who would surely comment sarcastically if she skipped a meal.

<You know that kind of protest doesn't work with me. If I think you're going to starve to death, I'll tie you up and force food into your mouth, and if you still refuse, I'll starve your pampered little sister instead.>

Nicole was terribly thirsty. She tried to say something to the maid, but her lips wouldn't move.

*'Where am I?'*

Suddenly, she remembered what had happened before she lost consciousness. Nicole had been stabbed by a knife by the person sent by the Marquis of Saratheve.

*'But why am I in the Grand Duchess's room?'*

She jerked awake. When she finally opened her eyes, she saw Estok, his eyes sparkling. Estok was leaning in close to Nicole.

*"Hick!"*

Nicole squealed.

*"Ah! You surprised me!"*

A startled Estok jerked upright. He looked even more bizarre in his white tunic and white pants. He looked like the Grim Reaper.

*"Whoa, you scared me. Hi. I'm glad you're alive, and I guess I won the bet!"*

*"What do you mean, why am I here....."*

Nicole clenched her teeth as she tried to get up. The pit of her stomach hurt so much.

She was indeed in a terribly familiar room.

The Grand Duchess's room, connected to Raul's. It had been Nicole's in her last life.

'Raul hasn't abandoned me....., but why am I here?'

Nicole looked at Estok with confusion. Estok stuck his head into her stomach this time, whether she was curious or not.

"Do you mind if I take a look at your wound? Do beautiful women have pretty scars? Do you mind if I sketch it out so I have a record?"

"....."

Nicole thought right now that if she were in her right mind, she might have punched Estok, so she summoned her patience and spoke as gently as she could.

"Sir Estok?"

"I quit being an examiner a while ago! Please call me Estok."

Technically, Estok was her superior, so she couldn't call him by his first name. Unlike Dagger, who was a knight and a Shadow.

"Yes, Estok. Since I asked the question, you should answer it. Why am I here?"

"Oh..... That's....."

Estok nodded, as if remembering something.

"Congratulations, you're the first Shadow Agent of the Sith to not be killed during your probationary period. On some

whim, the Grand Duke brought the young lady who was attacked here."

So why here?

The fundamental question remained unanswered. Fortunately, Estok rang the bell, and the doctor who had been waiting outside came in. Nicole had never seen him before.

"I'm going to give you some sedatives, no worries, you've overcome the danger."

As the doctor examined her, Nicole felt herself calming down.

Nicole was stabbed in the stomach, but it was shallow and didn't go right through the middle of her stomach, so she would need to recover for a while, but it wasn't life-threatening.

She would have died of hypothermia and blood loss if Raul hadn't found her and brought her in.

*'That's weird because the vision I saw before I passed out..... My wound was very deep and fatal, but how can it not be serious?'*

And what was the vision she had before she blacked out? Nicole had clearly seen Jay.

*'Did Jay..... come here and save me? No. That can't be right, he's very far away.'*

Estok continued to chirp.

"Oh, doctor. I thought you couldn't speak; when I looked at the young lady and asked you whether she was a corpse or a soon-to-be corpse, you wouldn't answer me; and when I asked if she will live, I asked whether the Grand Duke had brought her here to kill her, or whether he intended to preserve her if she didn't live to see the end of the day; when I asked you these things, you wouldn't answer me!"

"Who answers questions like that?"

Nicole managed to say, swallowing the sedative. The doctor gave her another shot. Her body grew languid.

The doctor glanced at Estok with a grotesque look in his eyes, then acted as businesslike as possible and left. Nicole leaned back against the pillow with difficulty.

"Do you remember anything?"

"Not much. I remember the face of the man who stabbed me, and then..... I think I saw the Grand Duke."

Nicole said in a small voice. Estok rolled his eyes.

Just then, a heavy voice came through the open door.

"Rude fellow. Estok, are you in my room without permission?"

It was Raul. Nicole realized that she hadn't seen him in this room in a very long time.

In fact, even in her past life, he rarely crossed this room.

"I was wondering why you hid her in this treasure trove. Does she have an unusual appearance? Or does she have a

grotesque scar? Or is it her immense charm and charisma.....”

Where the hell does charisma come into this, she wondered, but Nicole’s next question, in a dumbfounded voice, was about something else.

“Why is this room a treasure trove?”

“Because it’s the safest room in the mansion. You can’t get in unless you go through our Grand Duke’s room, and it’s flood-proof, fire-proof, and it was originally reserved for the youngest members of the Grand Duke’s family.”

“.....”

Nicole’s eyes flickered.

*‘But this is..... This is the room I had in my last life.’*

The information was new to Nicole. At the same time, Nicole was confused. In her past life, Nicole had believed that Raul had imprisoned her in a maid’s room.

It was then that Estok spoke innocently.

“Speaking of which, what do you think of taking the lead in becoming a solo agent?”

“What?”

Nicole furrowed her brow.

“I’ve heard that it’s standard procedure to drop agents whose identities are revealed during their probationary period. Do you need that?”

“She doesn’t need it yet.”

Raul said. Estok laughed softly, his momentum breaking.

"That's good because I was actually going to beg you not to."

"Estok, shut up."

Raul said softly. Estok sulked, then shut up and became like a docile sheep.

"Go to the back door right now and see if Dagger can sneak in, and if he doesn't, you can go out to find him."

"Understood."

Estok replied dutifully and took off at a brisk pace.

'What a strange man,' Nicole thought to herself. At the same time, she was worried about Dagger.

Now that her identity had been revealed, she couldn't imagine what kind of situation Dagger might be in, but she couldn't bring herself to ask Raul. After all, her situation was like a candle in the wind.

Nicole and Raul were alone in the room. Nicole cautiously looked into Raul's face.

".....Why did you bring me here?"

"You're the one who begged for my life. Did you beg and now you've changed your mind?"

Nicole remembered Raul appearing in front of her as she lay dying in front of the general store.

But after that, she couldn't remember what ..... she had said.

“Did I beg you to let me live?”

“Something like that.”

Nicole’s heart sank.

“Whatever I said must have been nonsense, I swear.”

“It was nonsense?”

“Yes.”

Nicole replied, a little impatient.

“That’s a big problem. I received a check with a large sum, but it turned out to be a counterfeit.”

Raul said lazily.

“What the hell did I say.....”

“You said if I let you live, you’ll be mine.”

The corners of Raul’s mouth were smiling, but his eyes were not.

“So now your life and death depend on me, and in this life you are mine.”

His tone was breezy like he’d just bought a new horse. Nicole was relieved. She didn’t seem to be talking nonsense about her past life.

But strangely enough, her face paled and her body temperature rose.

“So you’re saying you’re not going to kill me, then? You’re saying you’d take my life if I offered it to you.”

Nicole finally answered, a tempo slow.

"Do you have guts or not? You can't even look me in the eye because you're scared, but you answer everything I say."

Raul said in disbelief. Then he walked over to Nicole and leaned down. He seemed to be examining her wound.

Nicole belatedly realized what she was wearing: a sheer, see-through linen nightgown. She could even see her bloody bandages.

"When I approach you, you squirm like a baby animal about to be hunted. Is this all an act, or are you actually on edge?"

"Uh ....."

Nicole opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. She couldn't admit that she was a weirdo, that she was emotionally disturbed, and she couldn't claim to be normal, because that's exactly what a weirdo would do.

".....You saved my life, so I'm going to make one more plea: let me be a part of this, just this once. I'll make it up to you somehow for exposing my identity. I almost died thanks to the Marquis of Saratheve, so I already have a grudge against him. I'll do my best to support you, even if it's just behind the scenes."

Raul smiled thinly at that answer.

"Not bad, it's only by coming out like this that I can make your life worthwhile. From now on, follow my instructions. Of course, you can't go anywhere without my permission until this is over."

Raul said. Nicole suddenly had one more question.

“Why did you put me in this room?”

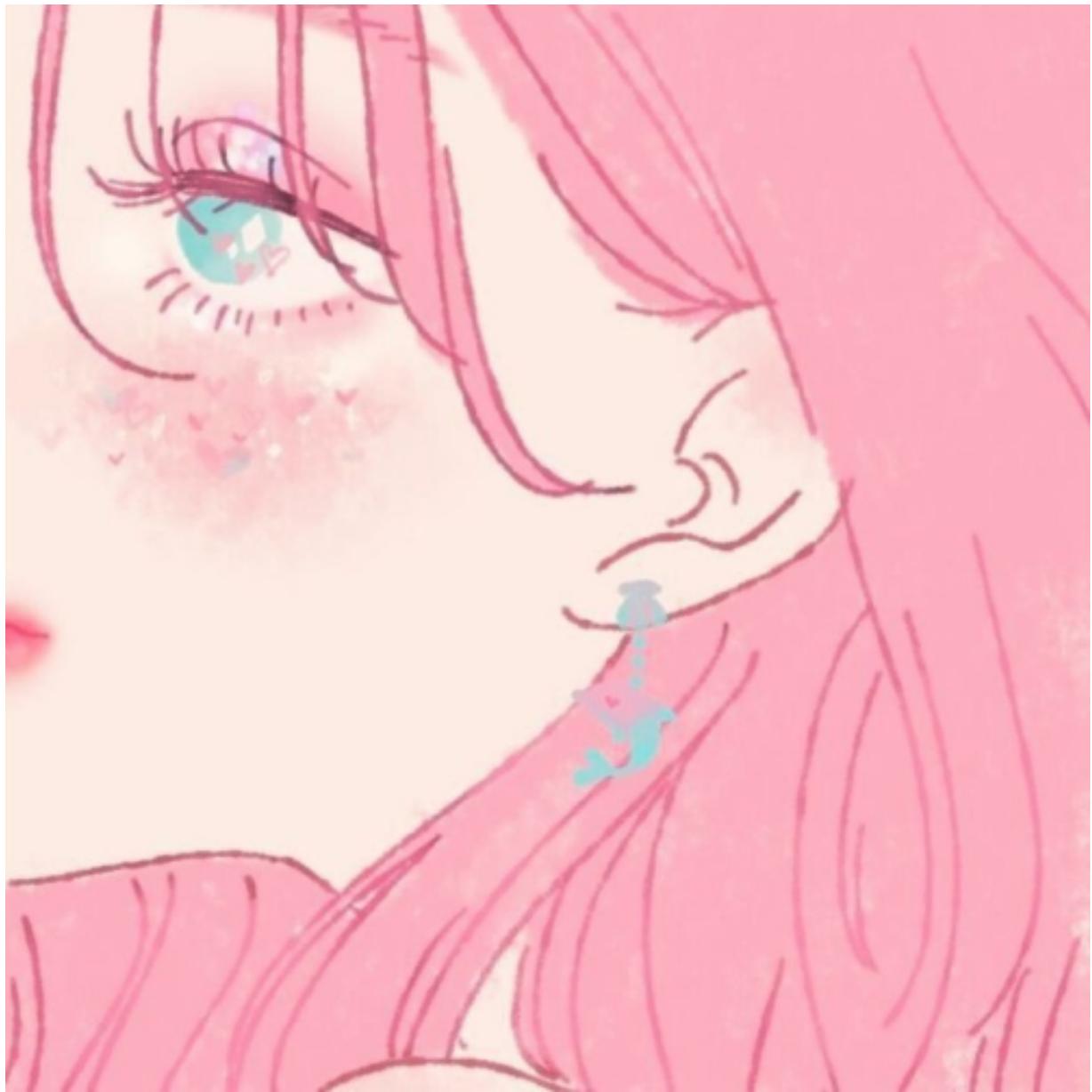
“Because it’s the most secret place in the house.”

Raul said.

“Where else would I hide you after your identity was revealed to the Marquis of Saratheve?”

Nicole gave a small nod.

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# Chapter 59

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Then there was a knock on the door. The door opened and in walked Dagger and Bastard.

*'Thank goodness Dagger's okay.'*

Nicole was relieved to see Dagger; they were accomplices in this together.

Nicole winked at Dagger. Dagger returned Nicole's look that said, *'Well, I'm fine, so don't worry about me.'*

"I've got Dagger. I sent Estok to the rehearsal hall."

Bastard said, his face as calm as ever. Raul nodded.

"So, are you going to keep her here?"

That's when Bastard looked at Nicole's outfit, puzzled.

Bastard was a man of sound mind. He was also a knight. It was rude to nobles, including knights, to see a scantily clad woman they didn't know.

Besides, Nicole had been injured on a mission, so he didn't know if he should ask how his colleague was doing or apologize for seeing her scantily clad.

"If you're so embarrassed, turn around."

Raul scolded. Bastard's ears flushed and he turned away. Raul was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the sight.

He gestured, and Dagger swooped in.

The bed Nicole sat on had four pillars that connected to the ceiling. Two layers of curtains hung from each pole, which Dagger untied and drew closed with ease.

"Speak."

Raul said. Dagger nodded meekly.

"My lord. I have been rash in my actions. I reported to you long ago that something was definitely hidden in the Marquise of Saratheve's cellar, but due to the nature of the mansion, I was unable to access it, so I took extraordinary measures. It was a reckless move, and I apologize."

"Do you even know what exactly you did wrong?"

"I acted recklessly, I got emotional, and my biggest fault is that I didn't debrief you before I did it."

Dagger said. Nicole was a little impressed that he spoke with such sophistication despite his young age.

"Why is it that only one person is at fault? Karen, what about her?"

Raul snapped.

"Karen was only following my instructions. I set the fire, I ordered her to peek into the basement for an opportunity, so it's all on me."

Nicole was inwardly touched by Dagger's total defense of her. But Raul only snorted.

"That's not funny, you two make such a good team, and now that she's been exposed, I'm torn between disposing of her and you."

"My lord."

Bastard spoke up.

"While it's true that Dagger was in the wrong, he did catch Marquis Saratheve in a major weakness. He was killing people for a ritual, and that's pretty valuable information. Besides, Ms. Karen is a....."

Nicole had expected Bastard to be blindsided by Dagger and blame her. For most of her life, Bastard had actually hated Nicole.

A woman who hated their lord, Raul, and shunned the duties of a Grand Duchess. That was his assessment of her.

He made no secret of it. He was too modest to say it out loud, but he showed his disdain in his demeanor.

"In any case, Miss Karen succeeded in getting inside the Marquis's room. She even managed to steal some important evidence. She covered her face with a veil the entire time she was working inside the gambling house and the Marquis' mansion, so I think you should give her another chance. It's quite remarkable that she managed to do this much on her first assignment."

"That's quite generous of you for a woman you barely know, Bastard."

"I apologize if I was presumptuous."

Raul gave a crooked smile. He'd realized earlier that both Dagger and Bastard cared about this woman. Even if Dagger was still a kid.....

"Looks like she's cast you all a spell since you all seem to be firmly enthralled by her."

Bastard closed his mouth. But he didn't take back his words.

"That's it. You've done your research on the copper plate, right?"

"Yes. It's a social symbol of a recent cult that goes by the name of the Blood Record, and the object of their worship is an ancient demon. They say it's only given to core members who donate large sums of money."

In recent years, bizarre religious groups worshiping ancient demonic deities have been popping up here and there.

They weren't strong enough to be considered mainstream yet, but they were a nuisance.

Bastard explained briefly. Worshippers of ancient demons, they practiced a kind of socialization that had been around since ancient times. The rituals were usually unremarkable.

Some of the rituals had tangible effects.

They might make you feel better, or improve your concentration, but that was about it.

"It's no secret that the Marquis of Saratheve's natural abilities are tenuous. Perhaps he was trying to enhance his abilities through this ritual."

"There's no way something like that could really work."

Raul said nonchalantly.

"Of course not, which is why the circumstances..... seem to indicate that the Marquis of Saratheve is being scammed, especially with the rituals involving the blood of the living..... He's been smuggling in a large number of people to be sacrificed, mostly outsiders or unrelated prisoners. Perhaps it has something to do with that ritual."

"The Marquis of Saratheve is that stupid? Yeah, well, he's an imperial bastard, and the imperial family doesn't use just anyone."

The Marquis of Saratheve, Gaston, was actually quite good at his job. He just had a bad reputation for being cruel.

"What if the Marquis of Saratheve is just as desperate?"

Just then, Nicole pulled back the translucent curtain and poked her head out. Her pale face stared straight at Raul.

"What if..... he is losing his powers?"

".....Keep talking."

Raul's eyes narrowed slightly as he looked at Nicole.

"From what I've been able to piece together, the Marquis of Saratheve has fallen into a cult. Normally, a person living under normal circumstances wouldn't fall for a false belief, but the Marquis of Saratheve has made his lack of abilities a complex his entire life. If he's losing even his tenuous abilities, wouldn't that make him a candidate for a religious scam?"

Raul frowned for a moment.

"His powers are useless to him anyway, and you think he's going to go crazy just because he's losing them?"

Nicole had something to say about that. Nicole had hated Raul her entire life. The reason she hated him the most was.....

*'I hated you because you were so amazing, so shiny, so good.'*

When she realized that the rest of the world loved and praised someone who was the devil to her. The more you hate him, the more you realize how great he is.

It almost drives you crazy. Nicole wasn't now, but she was then.

"There's the presence of the Grand Duke."

Nicole said softly.

"People don't get desperate if they have nothing to compare themselves to, but there's the Grand Duke, a symbol of absolute power, so it's no wonder he's going crazy with inferiority complexes."

Raul had her pull up records on Gaston. Certainly his behavior had been strange lately.

Moreover, Gaston had recently purchased a number of beasts. A man's whereabouts and records were his own. He was certainly doing a lot of out-of-pattern behavior.

There are many records of him changing dog breeders and servants.

It's easy to overlook this when you think of him as an eccentric, crazy person. But when you put it in perspective, Nicole's suspicions made sense.

Nicole looked at Raul and spoke calmly.

"If the Marquis of Saratheve's powers were gone, I could see that as a problem. He's losing what little he has left, and yet he's still enjoying all the benefits of the Seven Houses of the Empire."

In fact, he is a member of the Seven Families who were still alive and had immunity for minor offenses. They were allotted better estates than other nobles and received more rust. And they enjoyed numerous other perks.

Gaston, in particular, was a troublemaker, causing trouble on several occasions, and it was his privilege that allowed him to go unpunished.

"If the Marquis of Saratheve were to be stripped of his immunity, he would have to pay for his crimes."

Understanding, Bastard nodded.

"Now you want me to go straight to the imperial family and argue with them? Do you think the Marquis of Saratheve is the only one who is losing power?"

Raul said. But there was a gleam of interest in his eyes.

"You just need to set a good stage. It's the anniversary of the founding of the Empire, and I've heard that the Seven Families, along with the Imperial Family, will be worshipping the Lord, and you could ask the Marquis of Saratheve to demonstrate his power at that event."

Every year, Raul would close the ceremony. Usually, it was a mild display of power. But on one occasion, he really showed his power.

Raul had been told that he possessed the powers of all seven generations of his family.

Different powers are available on different days, and no one knows exactly on what days or in what pattern they operate.

One day he made a small rainfall in the garden, and it was said to be an unforgettably beautiful event.

“What if you reminded them of that day and asked them to bring the Marquis of Saratheve to see him manipulating the animals – that is, controlling them – he would never refuse because he has a big ego.”

“And if the Marquis of Saratheve can’t do anything, I can use that to my advantage?”

“Yes.”

“And if he does well?”

“Then it will be business as usual. His power is insignificant compared to yours. You can mock his paltry strength, and the mere sight of the Grand Duke standing in front of him will make him feel humiliated, which will make the Grand Duke feel better, won’t it?”

Dagger and Bastard stood there at a loss for words.

*‘Where did you even start with this? Is this all an improvised ruse, Noona?’*

Dagger looked at Nicole in that way. Bastard was inwardly impressed.

"You think I would do that?"

Nicole nodded.

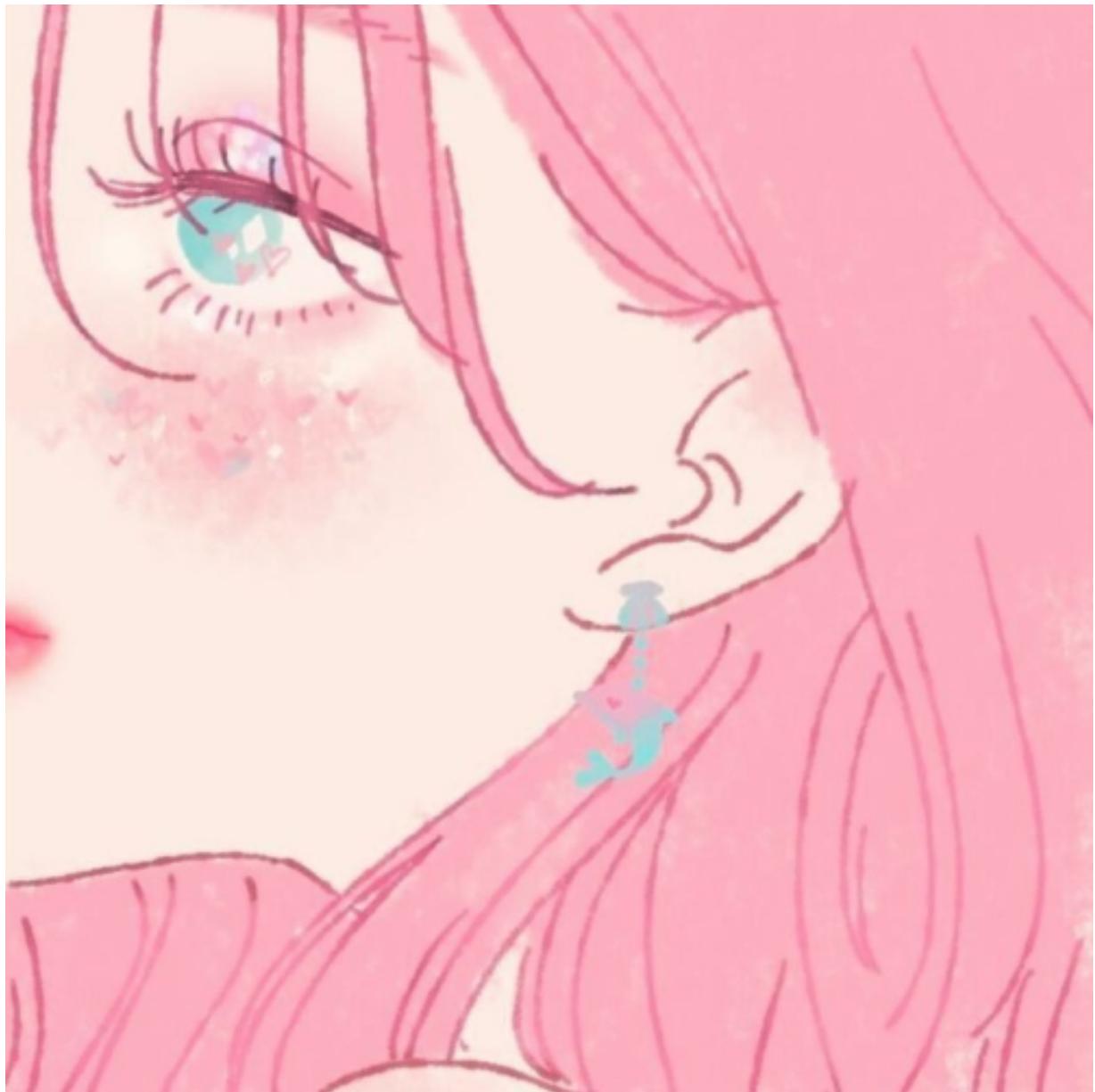
"You love to see a man like the Marquis of Saratheve so angry he can't stand it, and you love to push, and I'd love to have the chance to give you the whipping you love so much."

Raul smiled faintly. He looked at Nicole in amusement.

"You're doing well. That way, I can continue to roll your life in the palm of my hand."

Nicole wanted to rub her chest in relief— until he said the next words.

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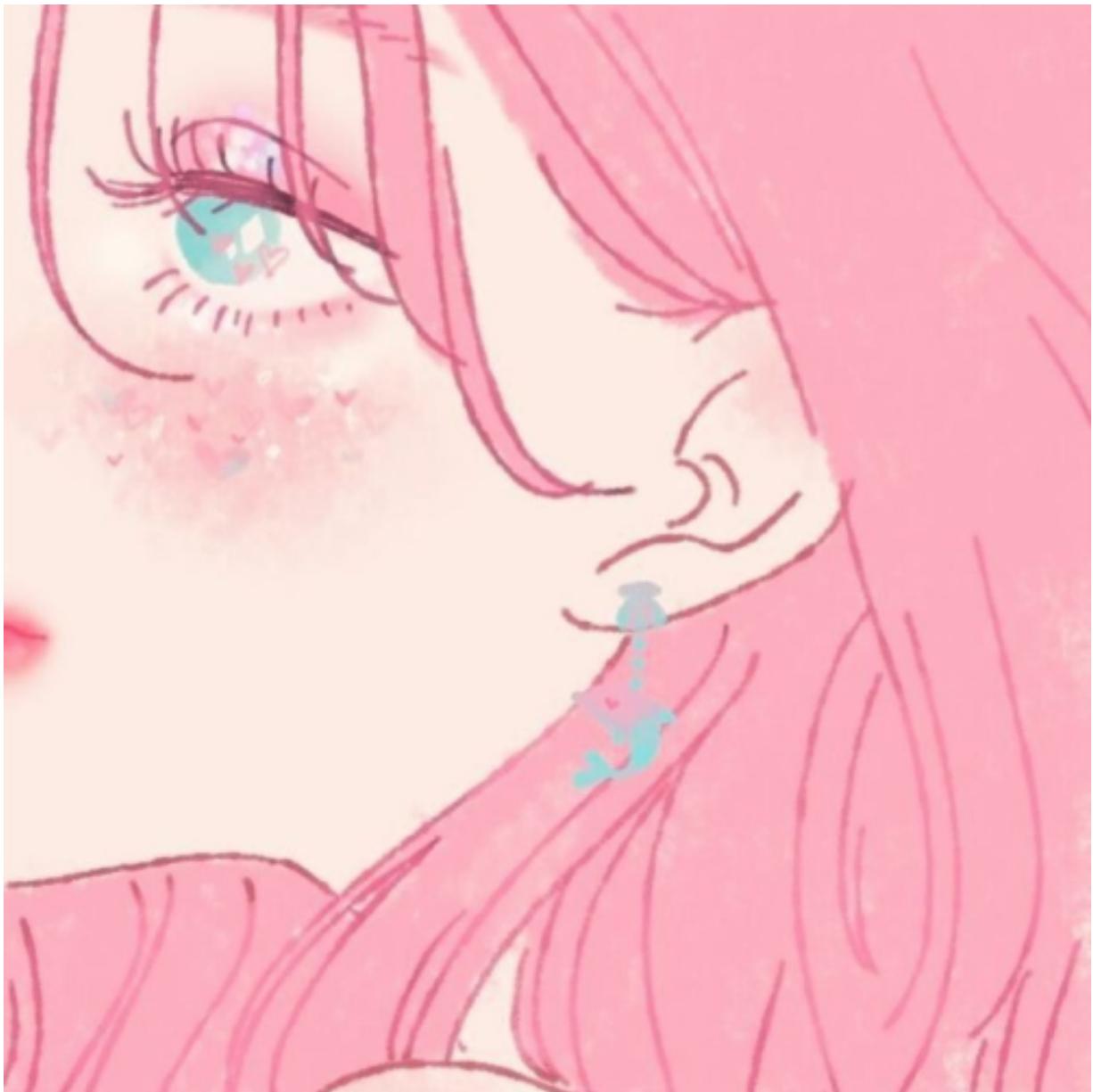


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# Chapter 60

“But there’s a catch. What about the religious group?”

“What?”

“Because they caught you breaking in, the Marquis of Saratheve is going to clean up all the evidence in the room tonight, so I don’t know how you’re going to cover that.”

If Nicole had been a little less nervous, she would have realized that Raul was teasing me. But Nicole didn’t notice.

She didn’t seem to be afraid of him after a while and kept talking.

This was the smart, level-headed Nicole that Raul had seen in the examiners’ reports and evaluations. But when she poked her a little, she quickly became afraid and averted her gaze again.

It was quite a refreshing pleasure. Enough to make him want to tease her all night with the tip of his whip.

“Ah, well, it’s not quite time yet.”

“So?”

“You can clean out the basement or run away, but you can’t get rid of a ‘religious group’ overnight. Blood Records isn’t part of the Marquis of Saratheve’s organization, and if you catch him and question him, whether he’s affiliated with

Blood Records or not, he'll have someone to turn to, and since there aren't many clients who spend as much money as the Marquis of Saratheve, he'll turn up any evidence. So, if you piss him off with some imperial event, and then put pressure on the religious organization behind the scenes....."

Raul nodded slightly, then looked at Bastard.

"Are you ready for the interrogation?"

"Yep. We raided their secret meetings, and we're done analyzing their books."

Nicole's ears perked up. If this was what he was saying, Raul had already.....

*'You've already arrested the Blood Records people?'*

*'Then why did you scold me? Did you ever.....'*

Nicole suddenly realized that Raul had looked away from her.

As soon as he saw the copper plate, he knew who it was, and he knew where Blood Records was based.

"Focus on the core group. They're a small group, so they probably don't have many executives. Send all the poor religious folk back home."

"Yes. We'll use tax evasion and tax arrears as the pretext for arrest."

Raul was in charge of the Capital's Knights of the Guard, so he had the authority to arrest them.

"Religious organizations get caught with that a hundred percent of the time. It's funny, isn't it? The faithful love cash."

Raul said. His eyes were smiling.

"Good for you."

Nicole bit her lip.

"You were good at talking earlier. Why? Keep on talking preetily."

"..... That's enough."

"Speaking of which, get the doctor. Give her some more sedatives before she passes out."

"Then Ms. Karen is....."

Bastard asked cautiously, looking at Nicole. He looked like he wanted to take Nicole's side.

"It's compassion, it's a crush."

Raul said, frowning. Bastard lowered his head again.

"Leave her alone. Move her to another room when she's better."

"Yes, sir. I'll be ready."

"Remember. Karen. You're not going anywhere for a while without my permission."

"Understood."

Nicole nodded obediently.

"There's a religion called the Blood Record, one of several societies, and it's popular in the capital because they have a reputation for performing rituals that allow people to become as powerful as the Seven Houses of the Empire. A ridiculous scam, of course."

The words left Nicole speechless again. This man was playing with her on the tip of his tongue.

If the Blood Records were a popular group for that reason, Raul would have recognized it as soon as he heard it.

'The Marquis of Saratheve is becoming impatient to strengthen his powers.'

That means.....

*'Since then, did the Grand Duke already know that the Marquis de Saratheve was losing power?'*

Raul laughed with his eyes.

"Let's just say the compliment was genuine, at least."

The man liked to talk about people, after all. Besides, Raul seemed quite amused.

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A few days passed. Nicole locked herself in her room, but Raul was busy and didn't show.

Nicole stayed in that safe room for a few days, then was moved to another room.

A few days later, Dagger sneaks into the room where Nicole is hiding.

“This is getting very interesting.”

“What happened?”

“You know, our Grand Duke’s way with words. He’s been toying with the Marquis of Saratheve.”

Gaston wasn’t a complete idiot. He realized that someone had sent a spy to learn the secrets of his crypt.

He scrambled to erase all traces of the trafficking and the rituals. He hadn’t thought to retaliate against Raul, and he didn’t have an excuse.

He’d gotten Nicole and Dagger out of the way right away, and Gaston’s suspicions were justified.

Besides, Raul had arrested the entire executive team of Blood Records and was investigating them for tax evasion.

The House of Imperial family had something to say about it: rumors of their social mischief had already spread, and Raul had earned it.

*‘The imperial family rules by prophecy, and that prophecy is said to come from the gods, so cults must be an eyesore.’*

Nicole had already predicted this.

Gaston was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Rumor had it that Gaston was naturally cruel, but when he was pushed, he became even more violent and bullied those around him.

“Do you still have agents in the Marquisate of Saratheve who have not withdrawn?”

"A few, following my instructions."

Dagger said leisurely.

"What's the story?"

Dagger recounted an earlier meeting not long ago.

"It is said that on that day, the Marquis of Saratheve gritted his teeth as soon as he saw our Grand Duke."

Raul happened to be discussing the festivities with the Emperor at the time. He said

<I don't think I'll be in the best of spirits that day, so I think it's best if I don't take the lead, but it's a relief to know that there's someone other than me to uphold the power of the Seven Houses. As you can see, the Marquis of Saratheve seems to be in high spirits these days, so why don't we have him take the lead role in the ceremony instead of me?  
>

Gaston's face went blank and then white in an instant.

But he could not refuse. It was a matter of pride, for he was deathly jealous of Raul.

<Since the Marquis of Saratheve is willing, I think we can go ahead with this event as planned, and open the Summer Palace to the public.>

The Summer Palace of the imperial family was an outlying palace on the edge of the capital. It was rarely used, so it was regularly open to the public.

So Raul's suggestion had this subtext: "Let's make it a big event, not just for the imperial family and nobles, but for the

citizens as well.”

“Did the imperial family say yes?”

“Of course, because the Marquis of Saratheve is paying for everything.”

“Really? How did you organize such an event?”

“I don’t know how much provocation our Grand Duke would have needed, but of course, he would have pushed for it.”

Nicole felt like smiling. Dagger seemed to be in a good mood, too.

“What tricks do you think the Marquis of Saratheve will pull?”

“It’s an important event for the imperial family, and tampering with animals like rabbits and small birds won’t impress anyone, so.....”

“I suppose he’ll have to demonstrate subjugating a lion or tiger, like the one the Marquis of Saratheve keeps?”

“It would be something to see if it worked, though I doubt it.”

“Then why is the Imperial family being so hard on the Marquis of Saratheve? I thought they knew the Marquis of Saratheve would never be able to tame a lion.”

“Noona, what do you think is the use of grasping the opponent’s weakness for some moment?”

Nicole thought for a moment.

“To spite the other person?”

“Similar, but different... Weakness, you need it for when they’re weak, and you plunge the knife of weakness into their back dozens of times.”

“And what knife did you drive into the Marquis of Saratheve’s back this time?”

“The Grand Duke has informed the Imperial House that the Marquis of Saratheve has secretly sought out the survivors of House YvesChapel.”

“.....”

She knew the Marquis of Saratheve was looking for the survivors of YvesChapel.

The Marquis of Saratheve was losing his powers, and he wanted to capture the powerful women of YvesChapel and have them bear him children.

“Same reason the imperial family wants Grand Duke Valentine.

So Nicole was constantly being hunted by three factions: the Imperial Family, the Marquise of Saratheve, and the Grand Duke of Valentine.

‘I’ve lived this long without being caught by those people.....’

It’s amazing how discreet her father and mother were.

Anyway, the point is that the Marquis of Saratheve’s attempt to get his hands on the YvesChapel’s daughter was enough to anger the imperial family.

The House of YvesChapel was an enemy of the Imperial family. Freya, their eldest daughter, had managed to escape.

It had damaged their reputation considerably, and now that he was trying to steal one of their women, the Empress would be furious.

“Perhaps the Empress is trying to tame the Marquis of Saratheve by punishing him, for he is but a hound to her.”

“I see the hound taming the hound.”

The only thing Gaston was good at taming was his pack of large, beautiful black dogs, which he had pampered and bred since they were young, and they served him well.

“The Marquis of Saratheve will be embarrassed at the very least, and at best be put in a very bad light.”

Nicole said to Dagger with a light smile.

“Dagger, I haven’t spoken until now because we’ve been in a hurry. Thank you for helping me with my plan, and thank you for taking my side in front of the Grand Duke.”

“Well, I’m just glad you’re alive, and anyway, things are moving along quickly thanks to you, and it’s pretty fun.”

“Dagger doesn’t like the Marquis of Saratheve, I see.”

“Yeah, he’s really disgusting. A lot of people have been wronged by him, and he’s never been punished.”

“I hear you’re very close with Estok, come to think of it, you two look alike sometimes.”

Dagger didn’t know if that was an insult or a compliment.

“He’s a weirdo who doesn’t know the difference between heaven and hell, and besides, we’re just friends.”

“How close? Does he know Dagger’s secret?”

“What do you mean .....secret?”

Nicole said softly.

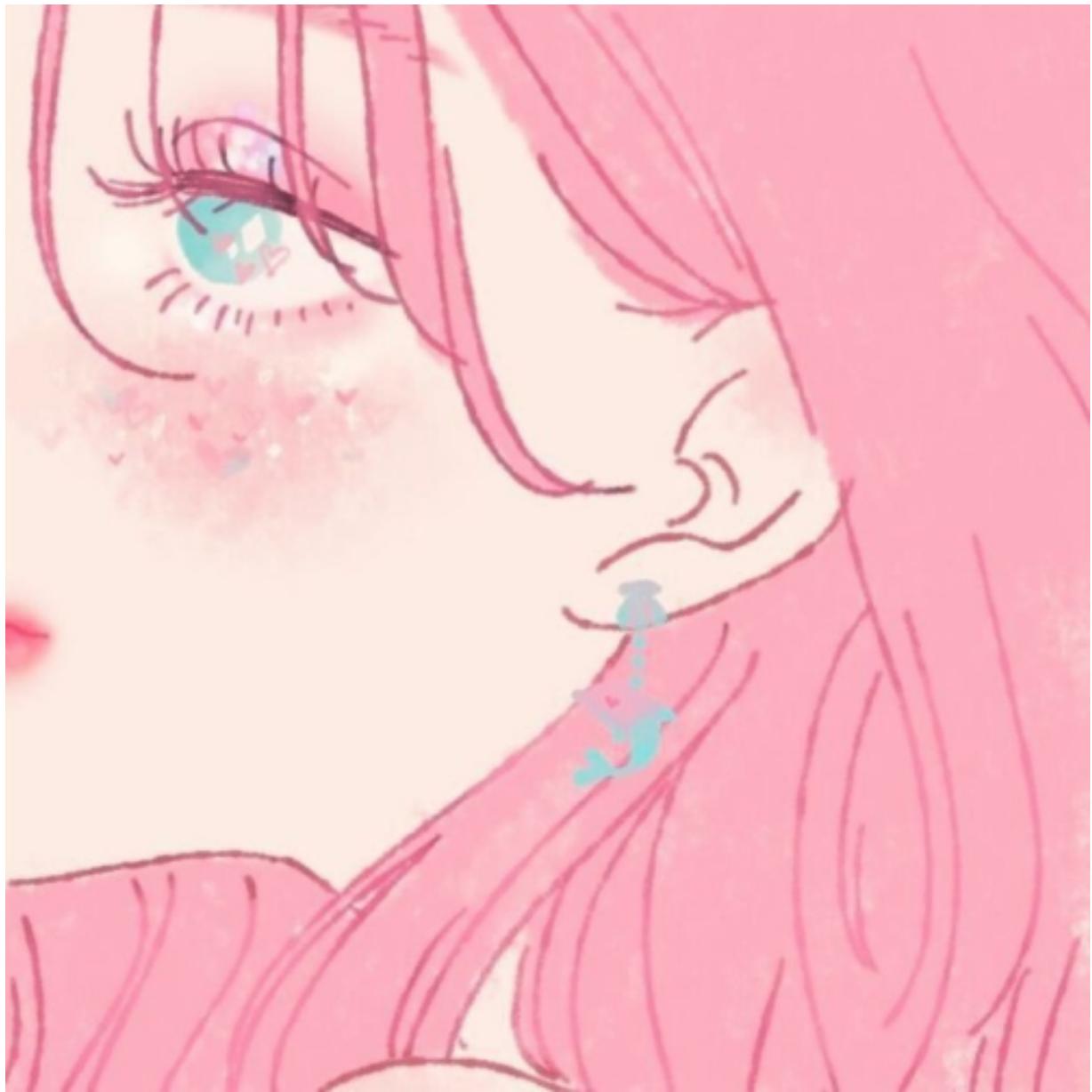
“Does Estok also know that Daeger has healing power?”

Dagger’s body stiffened. Dagger slowly raised his head.

“What?”

*[T/N: WAIT what bombshell is this??]*

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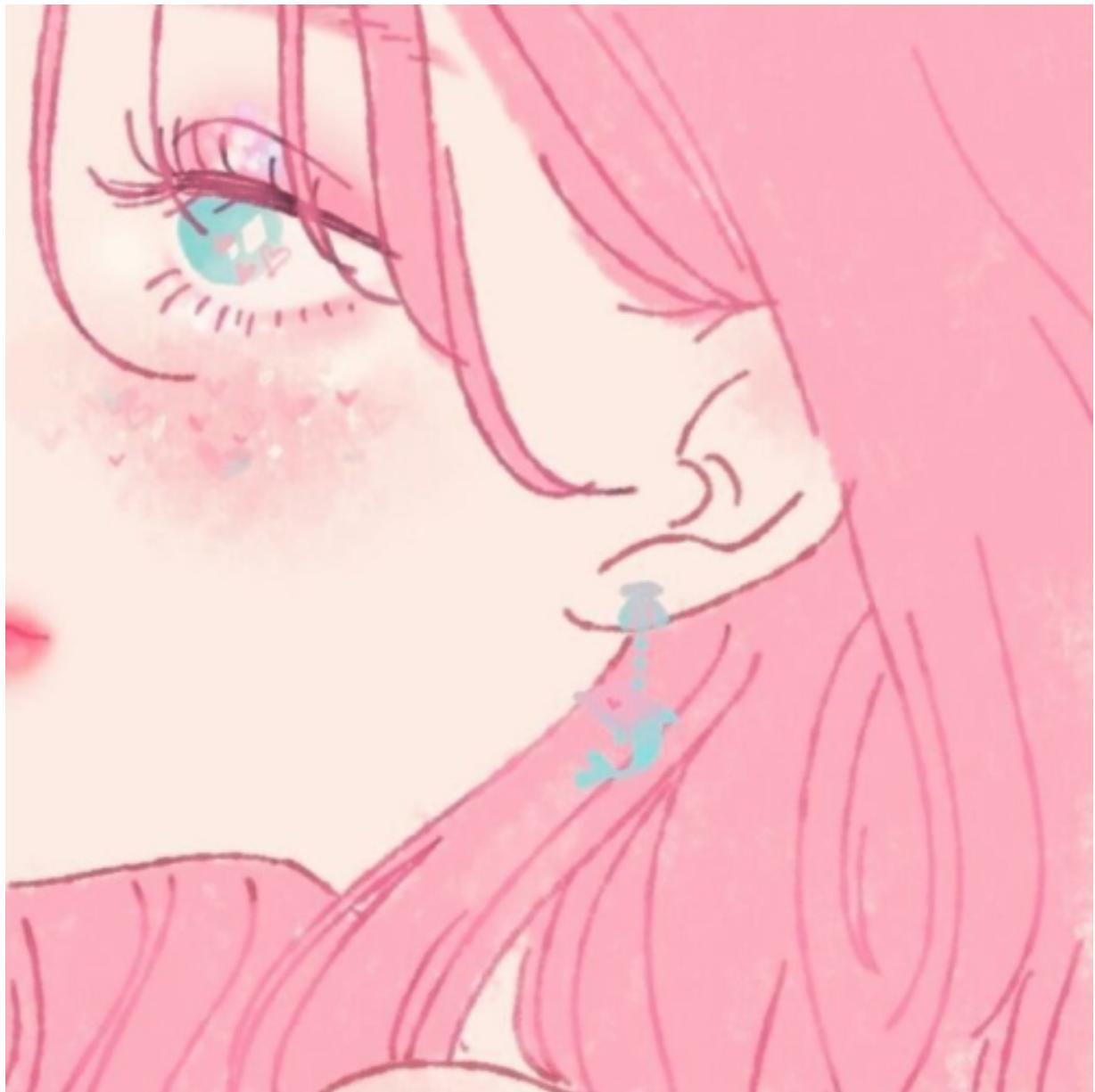


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# Chapter 61

Nicole sat back on her heels and looked at Dagger, never once looking away.

"As I lay dying in front of the general store, stabbed by one of Marquis Saratheve's men, I had a vision. I thought my brother had come for me, and my wound was definitely fatal."

Nicole remembered the moment. There was a reason she had seen Jay's vision. She had seen him use his healing powers many times before.

Someone touched her stomach, and her stomach was enveloped in a bright, white light, and slowly the wound began to heal itself.

And the wound healed to some extent. When Nicole was just about to die, the light stopped.

'I can't help but think of Jay, now that a boy I don't recognize is using his healing powers on me.'

As she rested, Nicole continued to try to think clearly about what had happened that day. But she couldn't remember what she'd said to Raul.

She was relatively lucid at the time of Jay's vision. Now that she thought about it, it wasn't Jay she saw, it was Dagger.

Raul had shown up after Dagger had finished his quick kill and fled.

"Oh, for God's sake, Noona, don't you remember?"

Dagger ruffled her hair and looked around. Sure enough, no one was there.

"I really didn't remember at first, I wondered if I was hallucinating what I saw, but I realized something was wrong because of..... Estok."

Nicole replied calmly.

When Nicole came to the Grand Duke with a stab wound. Estok had been hovering around Nicole's room, acting strangely. He asked to see the wound and tried to check on her several times.

'He can tease me for fun and say crazy things, but how dare he come into Raul's room without permission? He knows Raul's character.'

Even if Estok had been unruly, he had obeyed Raul.

And now he's entering the Grand Duke's chambers without permission?

Raul might have let it slide that day since Estok had been so erratic, but it wasn't normal.

'It's unthinkable for the Sith I know.'

Nicole pondered.

'What if Dagger is hiding his healing powers, and Estok heard about the situation and came to visit me?'

In fact, Nicole didn't say anything about the healing powers, and Estok disappeared after Dagger arrived at Raul's summons.

Estok was relieved that Nicole didn't seem to remember Dagger healing her.

'No wonder he didn't think I noticed anything since a normal person has never experienced healing powers.'

But Nicole knew more about healing powers than anyone.

"How the hell are you so smart, and why are you so perceptive?"

Dagger sighed.

"Then I was right, Dagger."

Nicole was a little surprised that she was right.

"Yes. I saved you."

Dagger briefly explained the day's events. Dagger was a more sensitive superior than Nicole had realized.

"I'm pretty sure the security knights were patrolling unusually often that day because I made them."

Still, Dagger wasn't reassured, so he surreptitiously checked to see if Nicole had made it into the general store, even though he was too busy.

What Dagger found was Nicole, attacked and dying.

'What do I do with her, save her or kill her?'

Dagger was torn. Worst of all, Dagger didn't know what Raul was thinking.

'The Grand Duke seemed to care about Karen. Is that because he likes her, or because he's really suspicious?'

On principle, it was right to let Nicole die after failing her mission and being discovered. And her body would have to be disposed of. But if.....

'What if the Grand Duke likes her and wants to use her for something important?'

Then shouldn't he risk his life to cure her?

'No, actually, that's an excuse.'

Dagger was strangely fond of her; she was a capable agent. He wanted to keep her alive and keep working with her.

"Ha, I shouldn't have eaten your cookie so much."

In the end, Dagger settled on a middle ground. He gave her the bare minimum of treatment to keep her from dying and then left her alone.

"You were going to leave me like that?"

Nicole asked, grateful to Dagger for saving her life.

"No, I wasn't. We were supposed to meet at midnight. In fact, the Grand Duke and I were supposed to meet at the general store at midnight. I figured you wouldn't be dead by then."

He was right, and Dagger met Estok waiting near the general store and quickly filled him in on the situation.

“Estok is usually always near the Grand Duke, so.....”

“You explained the situation and asked him to make sure you didn’t get caught using your healing powers?”

“That’s right.”

Estok and Dagger seemed to be very close. She can’t believe Estok knew about Dagger’s healing powers.

Nicole thought to herself.

“Alas, I’m not cut out for good things. I risked my life to save yours, and now I’m getting caught.”

Dagger sighed. At that, Nicole smiled faintly.

“Dagger, I never forget a favor, and neither do I hold a grudge. I didn’t know I was that way, but I’m sure now.”

“.....”

“First, thank you for saving my life, for whatever reason.”

“I played a small part, but you were the one who made the final decision to save your life.”

“I know, so it’s only fair that I repay the favor.”

Nicole felt like her heart would burst, wanting to ask what Dagger had to do with House YvesChapel.

‘If he can heal, then Dagger is related to House YvesChapel.’

Could that be possible? Hadn’t House YvesChapel itself been destroyed and all of its members enslaved and scattered?

How could someone of YvesChapel's blood be an agent of the Grand Duke of Valentine?

But there was something more important right now.

"I'll take Dagger's secrets to my grave. And I need a favor from you....."

Dagger's eyes widened at Nicole's words.

"You want to attend the ceremony?"

"Yes. I need you to help me disguise myself, preferably as a maid."

Dagger frowned.

"The Imperial Palace is heavily guarded, so you'll never get in, but the Summer Palace is rather lax, so it shouldn't be too hard to get in, but....."

The corner of Nicole's mouth drew an arc.

"It would have to be on the day of the ceremony, and I'd have to help Marquis Saratheve organize it."

\*\*\*

The Summer Palace ceremony began with the opening of the gardens.

The Summer Palace was one of the products of the ancient times. The building was old but well-maintained, and inside the gates, including the gardens, it was warmer than anywhere else in the neighborhood.

Furthermore, the entire building was constructed of white marble, which was smooth and elegant.

This mysterious architecture was also said to be a product of antiquity.

That's why the flowers were still in full bloom. People wandered around admiring the mysterious scene.

In principle, anyone could join the event. In practice, however, the dress code was checked, and admission was quickly closed once a certain number of people had been admitted.

Outside the Summer Palace, there were also various stalls selling food and alcohol to people. For those who couldn't get in, this was the place to go.

The entire Summer Palace was buzzing with a festive atmosphere that seemed out of place in the middle of winter.

A well-dressed orchestra played music throughout.

Throughout the Summer Palace, Grand Duke Valentine's name came up in conversation.

"I heard that the Grand Duke is so handsome, will he come to the ceremony?"

The idea of a beautiful ruler being an unmarried nobleman always attracted people's attention.

\*\*\*

Deng- Deng—.

Just then, a clear bell rang throughout the Summer Palace. It was the beginning of the ceremony.

"What is the condition of the dogs, and the lion?"

Gaston, the Marquis of Saratheve, was on the verge of insanity; he hadn't even left the backyard where the animal cages were set up.

"Don't worry, sir. The lions are so well trained that they won't attack anyone, and they've been sedated so they won't have the strength."

After several reassurances from the servants, Gaston left.

"Why don't you go for a walk and clear your head, it's not good for you to be so tense."

Gaston brought with him a butler who was not normally allowed in the palace to take care of small matters.

After the butler managed to calm him down, Gaston reluctantly left to go for a walk.

"You, you....."

They were walking down a deserted corridor. Gaston spotted a familiar woman behind him.

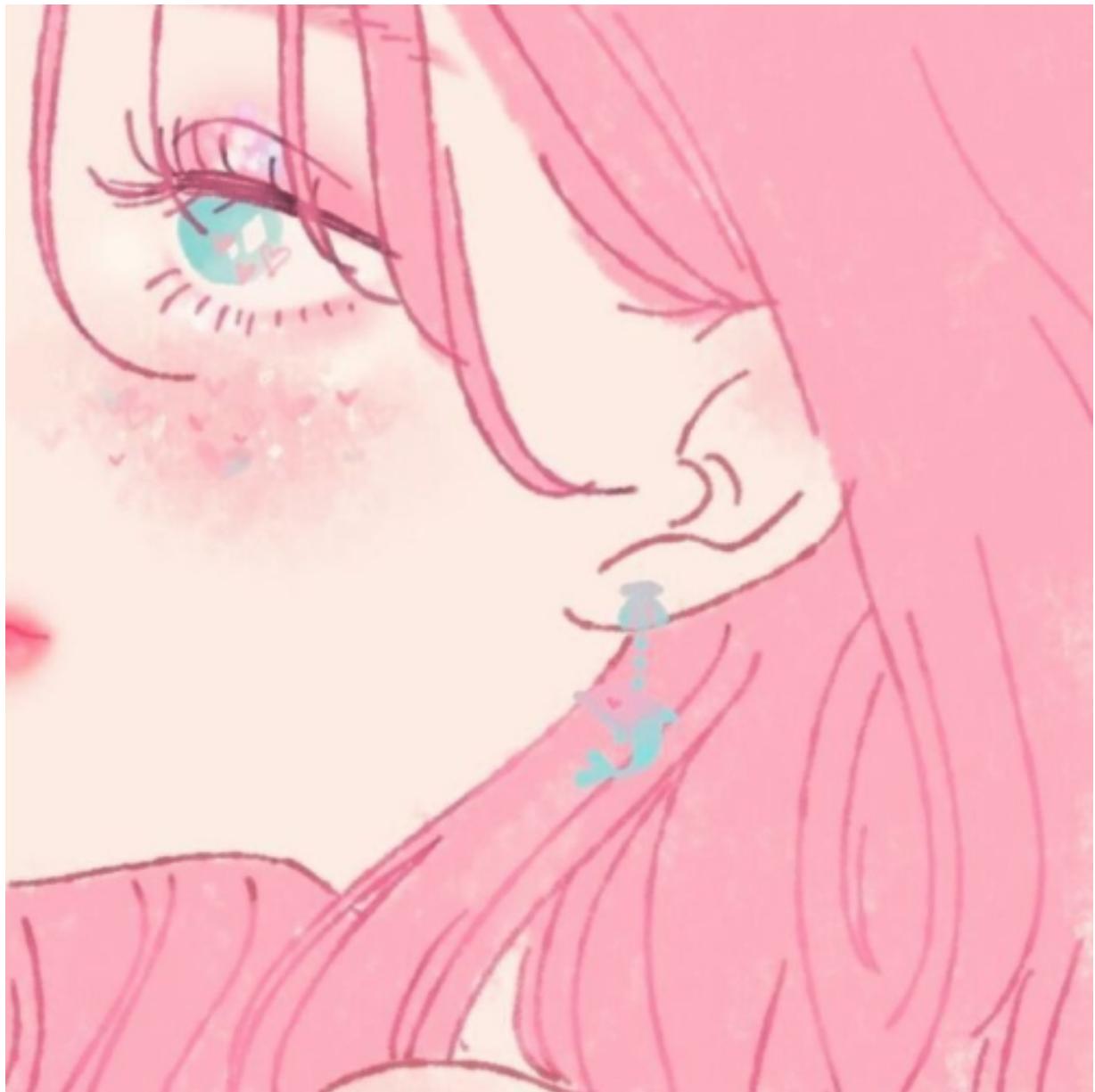
He turned and ran toward her.

"You bitch, Grand Duke Valentine is insane, letting a mole in here, in the palace?"

Gaston grabbed her and shoved her against the wall. She was the spy he was looking for.

It was Nicole.

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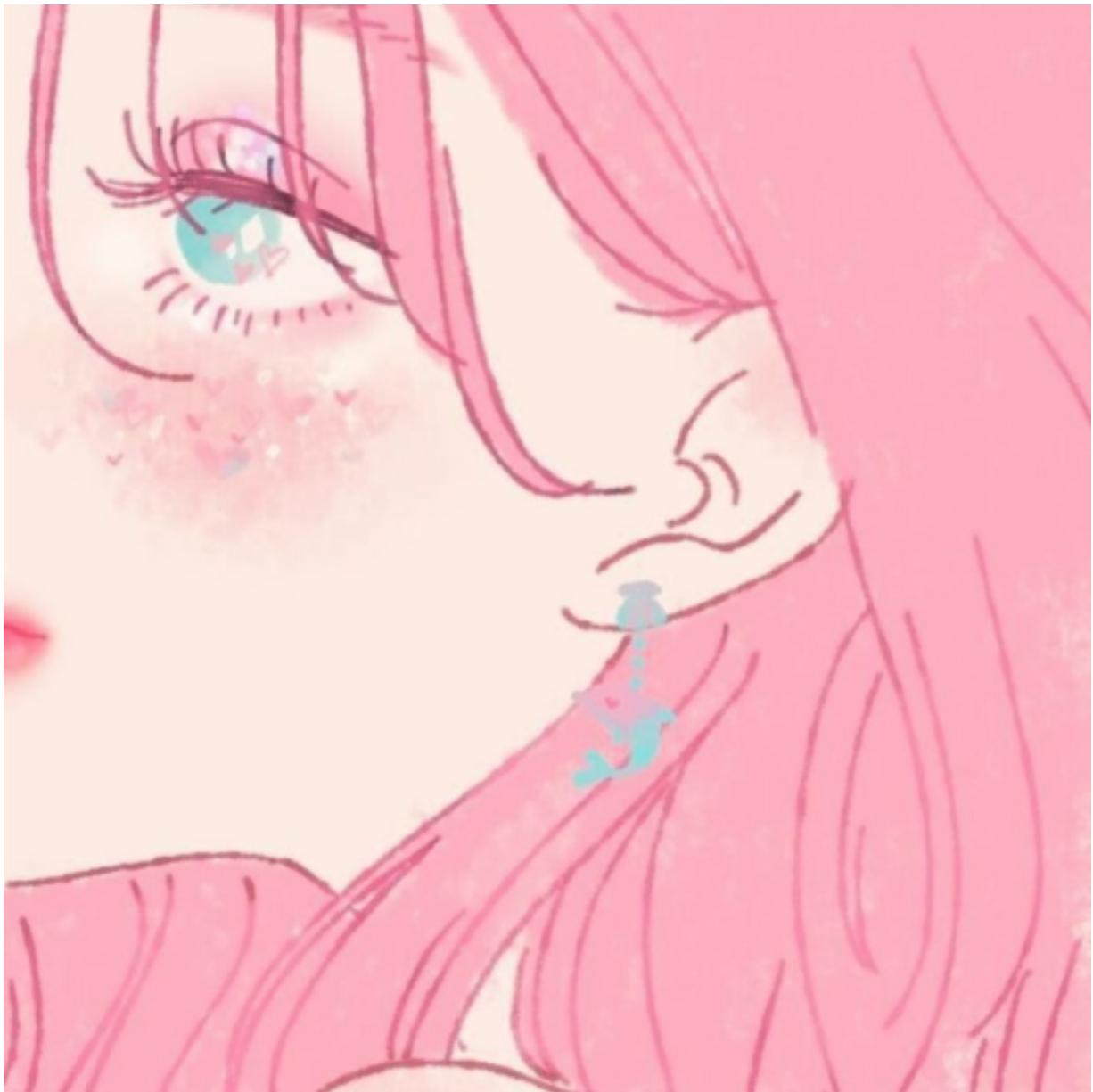


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# Chapter 62

Nicole said, taking off her watch.

“I’m just a maid from outside, temporarily assigned to work in this Summer Palace, what are you talking about?”

But Gaston did not back down. This woman was clearly the spy he had missed. Her whole aura was eerily familiar.

“I remember those eyes, I remember them clearly. Common but deep blue eyes. Through you, I will reveal that Grand Duke Valentine has been spying on me!”

Gaston roughly tore the veil from Nicole’s face.

Nicole’s head snapped back as the veil fell away. Nicole stared at Gaston in disbelief.

“Do you think you’ve seen my face? You’re tormenting an innocent person.”

“Shut up, you lowlife.”

Gaston said. Nicole looked at him mockingly.

“Very well, Marquis Saratheve. Since you seem to have a question for me, let me ask you a question of my own. You were looking for the women of the YvesChapel family, right? What were you planning to do if you found a descendant with abilities?”

"How would you know that? Is that why you're suddenly pestering me in the Imperial Palace? Grand Duke Valentine, did he know I was looking for a woman of House YvesChapel?"

"If you want an answer, answer my question first."

"Very well, I'll answer it. The women of House YvesChapel are what Raul's chewed-up mouth wants, and that alone is worth something to me, for it will restore my dignity, which he has so far dared to trample. So if I can get my hands on a woman of House YvesChapel, I will."

"Restore your pride?"

Nicole snorted.

"If harassing an innocent woman is the kind of thing that restores your pride, then that pride is cheap."

"They are lowly traitors who have attempted to harm the Imperial family. Is it wrong to deal with them?"

"Didn't it ever occur to you that they are people too?"

"People? Wouldn't it be better for them to serve the likes of me than to roll around in the dirt and die?"

Nicole had thought this about Raul before.

'A man of power who flatters his lowly self, born of a traitor.'

But now that she's seen Gaston, she knows better. Raul was qualitatively different from a scumbag like Gaston: far more extraordinary, far more precious.

"Even the lowly, as the Marquis Saratheve calls them, would rather fall into the hands of the Grand Duke of Valentine

than a man like you. At least the Grand Duke of Valentine is a 'real man,' a real nobleman."

Even Isabel in her previous life wanted Raul at first. When he wouldn't even consider her, she seduced Gaston as a substitute.

'It's a pity. You didn't even get to meet Isabel in this life.'

In retrospect, they were quite the pair.

"You damned wench!"

Gaston's eyes glazed over and his entire body shook at her blatant comparison to Raul.

"So don't blame anyone for getting hurt for lusting after power, and you'd better not speak ill of anyone, even the most wretched and miserable, the ones who are on the bottom and waiting to die in prison, because even they have ears and remember what they've been told."

Nicole finally smiled. Her eyes narrowed and the corners of her mouth turned up.

She hadn't realized she was capable of this kind of smile.

She didn't know why Raul smiled when he said mean things then, but now it didn't feel so bad to be sarcastic when she wanted to be.

Gaston's hand shot up, ready to slap Nicole right now, but he managed to catch his breath. It wasn't good to get excited before something big.

"Hey. Get her now."

He'd just called out to the men escorting him from behind.

His knights, who had been working elsewhere, appeared out of nowhere and rushed over.

"No, what are you guys doing here?"

"Marquis. There's a problem with the animal pens. You'd better come over."

Gaston was just about to yell at the knights. One of his men called out to him in a panicked voice.

He spun around to see that Nicole had disappeared.

"Damn it, find the woman who was just with me. One way or another, I'm going to torture her to death and throw her alive to a pack of dogs!"

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A steady stream of flowers, simple food, and liquor were sent. The people drank in gratitude for the Imperial family's favor.

"Glory be to the God who has given us this empire today, and blessings on the Imperial family. Let us all pray with reverence for the founder of the empire and the noble families that follow him."

The High Priest said solemnly.

Soon, priests stepped forward with long silver staffs.

As the crowd fell silent in prayer, the boy priests stepped forward and began to sing slowly.

"Now it is our turn to show the power that the Lord has bestowed upon us."

The High Priest turned to the Marquis of Saratheve, Gaston.

Amidst the applause, Gaston stepped forward with a smug smile on his face.

The animal cages were already set up on one side of the room. They had a wire fence around them, just in case.

Before the event started, a tiger went on a rampage. Two tigers and a lion. The event, which was supposed to feature three tigers, was scaled back and changed to two tigers.

The zookeeper said the change of scenery upset the tigers, who had become quite tame. Gaston was even more disturbed by the unexpectedness.

“Are we really going to see a tiger?”

“From what I hear, the Marquis of Saratheve can make any beast of prey look like a docile cat.”

People whispered. Nicole hid in the crowd and watched the spectacle.

Then, with a dull creak, the cage opened.

The rabbits were released first, followed by dozens of dogs.

Then dozens of black dogs were released.

The knights moved in unison, and the banner of the Empire rose from the pillars surrounding the garden.

It was a golden lion, prostrate in submission to the sword and flowers.

Behind it, the green banner of a dog and an unnamed beast rose with a clattering sound. It was the symbol of House

Saratheve.

'He's happy to have his family's flag flying alongside the Imperial flag, you foolish man, who's only here for such a lowly honor.'

Nicole sincerely wanted to laugh at Gaston.

*Kung kung!*

The dogs began to bark. The dogs walked in rows, like soldiers.

A gasp escaped the crowd's lips at the sight, followed by the release of dozens of tiny rabbits from the other side.

Tak tak tak!

The dogs pounced on the rabbits, bared their tongues, and savagely bit their throats. Soon the grass was covered in rabbit blood.

Some people looked away, thinking it was cruel, while others admired it. The dogs carried the rabbit in their mouths and triumphantly laid it down under the banners of the Empire.

"God bless the loyalty of the Marquis of Saratheve, who sacrifices his prey in the name of the Empire."

The High Priest said solemnly.

Just then, several people appeared from the balcony.

'Those are the people of the Imperial family.'

Nicole looked at them.

'In a way, they are my enemies, for they have desecrated the House of YvesChapel.'

The Emperor's face was hidden by the curtains. Only the hem of his wine-colored silk robe was visible.

Beside him stood a man of very poor complexion.

The man..... was dressed in a very thin robe, and in the sun his entire garment shimmered. But if you looked closely, it looked like patient clothes.

And his face was thin and bloodless. He didn't look at all like the crown prince Nicole had imagined.

'He just looks like a regular guy with no energy.'

A very pretty girl stood beside him.

'Princess Sylvia.'

Nicole bit her lip. It was the name that had haunted her for most of her life, the name that had gotten her brother Jay killed.

She was pretty, too, though not as pretty as Isabel. Tall and slender, but with a skeletal build. Her hair was long and silver.

She blinked shyly, staring at someone for a long time.

She stepped to the edge of the balcony and leaned down.

'And, Raul.....'

Raul is the object of the Princess' gaze in ecstasy. Nicole felt a little strange seeing him standing side by side with Sylvia. Her heart sank.

'It's strange because I know they're not in a relationship. In fact, any relationship of his is none of my business.'

Nicole thought. But she couldn't stare at them for long. The crowd erupted in applause.

"Long live the Marquis of Saratheve!"

"Glory to the Empire!"

Someone booed.

"Show us something other than this circus!"

"Who can't tame a hound!"

There was a moment of silence at those words. A few people averted their eyes and snickered.

Gaston curled his lips once. Then he gestured.

The last of the cages were drawn back. Inside were two prostrate tigers. They were a male and female pair.

"Here come the beasts."

"Everyone, step back as far as you can from the fence!"

The knights shouted. When the beasts did appear, the men stepped back from the high wire fence in fear.

Gaston paled and slowly stepped inside the fence, clutching the heirloom in both hands. The long rod and whip, made of green, the family's emblematic color, had been passed down from generation to generation.

"Now even the wild beasts will show their submission to the Empire."

Gaston said. He approached slowly and alternately struck the floor with the rod and whip.

Nicole glanced at Raul on the balcony. Raul covered his mouth with his hand and laughed at what Gaston was doing.

'He's such a wicked man.'

Nicole couldn't believe he was laughing so openly, but she sympathized.

Anyway, thankfully, Gaston didn't see it. He was too focused.

The tigers growled and slowly walked out of the cage as a pair.

But there was no strength in their eyes. Gaston had been drugging them for days for this day.

The drug was a kind of tranquilizer that would daze a human.

Gaston also tamed the beasts for a time.

By offering them raw meat if they walked in front of the imperial banner. Normally, beasts can't be tamed, but when they're hungry, it's somewhat possible.

And Gaston wasn't completely without taming abilities. It was just that it was very weak and fading.

It's relatively easy to dominate and command a small animal, and even a beast can move around a bit when it's disoriented.

So Gaston intentionally starved the tigers for several days. He fed them a small amount of raw meat just before

releasing them to help them regain their strength for the event.

The tigers were wide-eyed and piercing.

Grrr, grrrrrr.....

A pair of tigers slowly walked through the cage. They made it to the base of the Imperial family's flag, which was quite a distance away, and then shuffled over and knelt down.

The kneeling was the result of Gaston's intense taming.

"Waaaaah!"

The crowd erupted in applause once again.

'Good, very good.'

Gaston chuckled, trying to hide his wobbly legs.

"Well, I see the Marquis of Saratheve is still capable, not bad."

"Not as good as they used to be, I think he had more tricks up his sleeve when he was younger."

Princess Sylvia said dryly. Then her eyes twinkled and she looked at Raul.

"It's a circus kind of ability, but it's quite curious, isn't it, Grand Duke?"

"It looks like the beast is starving, which is a pity since they should have been fed to the hilt after kneeling under the Empire's banner. The Marquis of Saratheve doesn't even seem to feed his servants."

Raul sneered lightly. Sylvia nodded fiercely, not understanding the meaning of his words.

“Yes, I feel sorry for the animals, but thanks to them, people know the majesty of the imperial family, right?”

Raoul sneered wordlessly and coldly.

At that moment, Gaston once again pounded the floor with his rod.

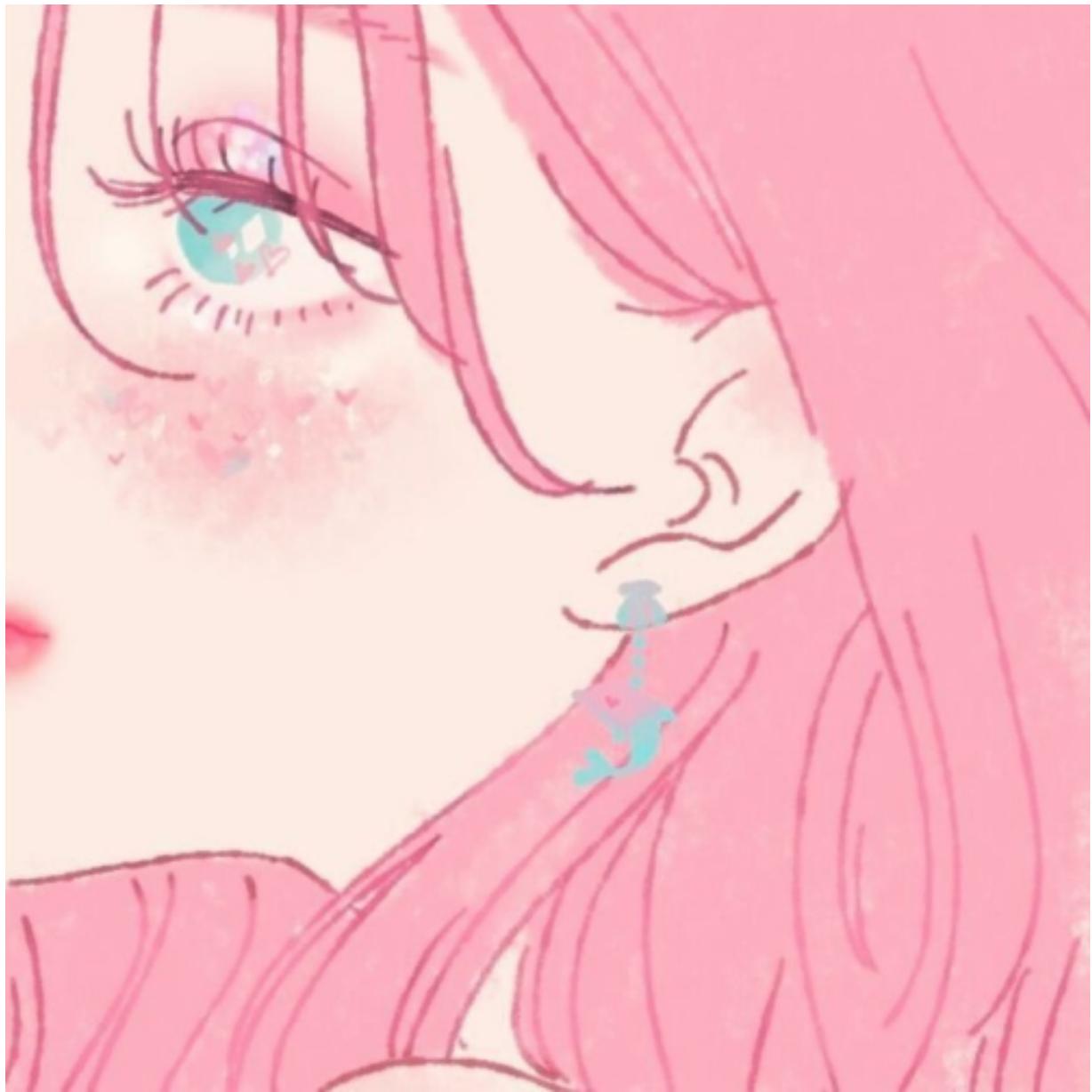
Bang, bang, bang!

The two beasts that had gotten up staggered to their feet.

“Huh?”

It was then that Princess Sylvia’s eyes changed.

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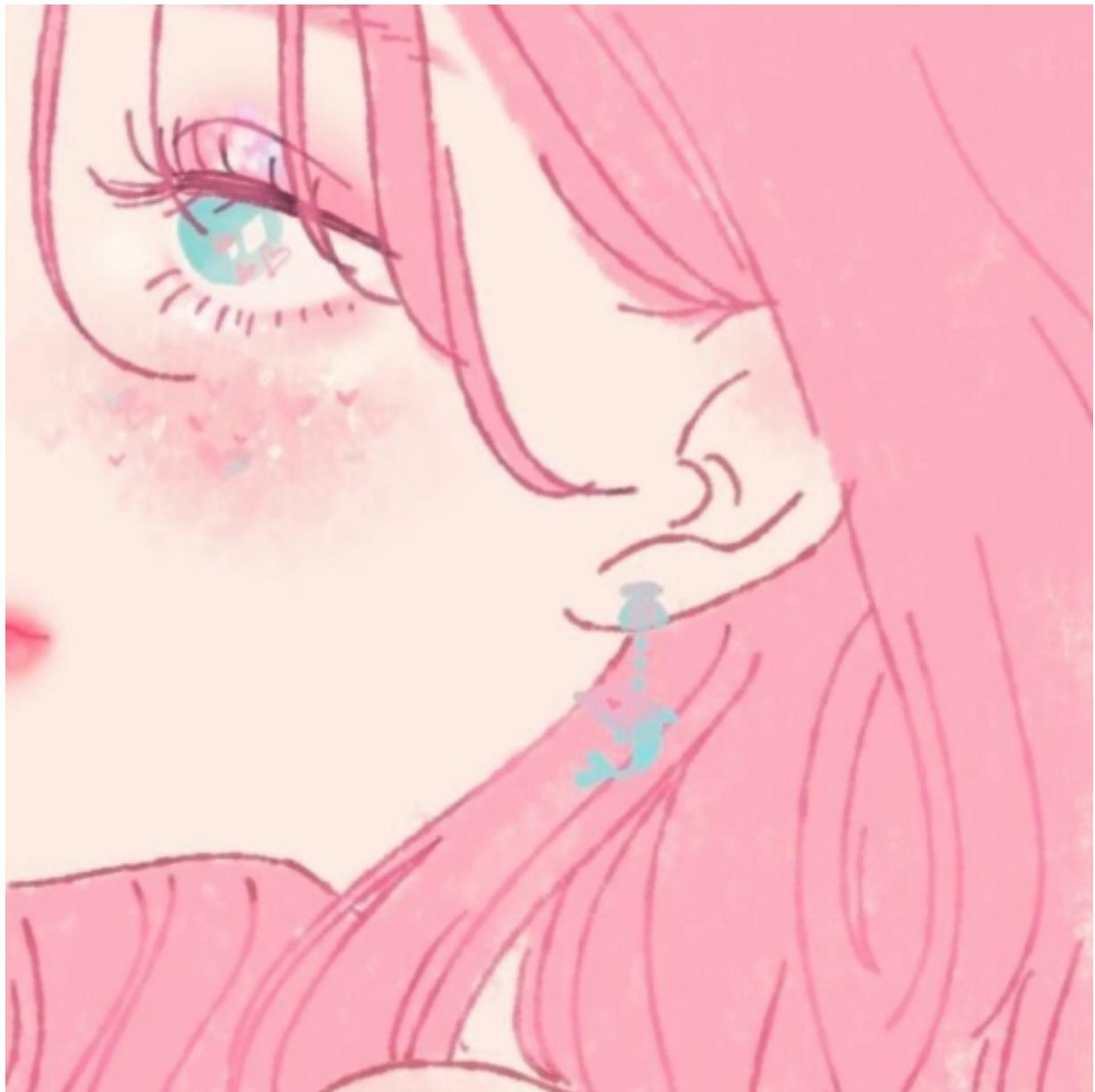


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# Chapter 63

\*\*\*

“Go back to your cage.”

Gaston coughed in vain, pretending to command the animal. It was then.

Grrrrrrr..... grrrrrr.....

“What are you doing, obey your master!”

Gaston said, more forcefully. He used his taming ability with all his might. The first to make eye contact with him was the male tiger.

The male tiger crouched down and began to run at Gaston in a single bound. It was so fast, Gaston thought he saw a flash of light coming at him.

“Ack!”

Gaston was crushed by the tiger in an instant.

“Recognize me, it’s me! Ugh, the pole!”

And then there was a roar. Screams erupted from the crowd.

The beast twisted its head, biting into Gaston’s neck and shaking him this way and that.

Flesh and blood splattered everywhere. Gaston kept screaming something as he was eaten.

But no one heard him over the screams of the others.

“Gah!”

“A human is being eaten!”

It didn’t end there.

This time, the other tiger started to move. It was the female tiger.

The female tiger first looked at the citizens surrounding her: they were too numerous, like a forest.

Panicking, she ran to the other side. She leaped, and leaped, and leaped.

It was toward the balcony where the Imperial family was standing.

“The tiger, ah!”

Princess Sylvia screamed, and the crown prince screamed even louder.

“Ugh, no, no, I can’t, my body can’t..... no!”

“Aaaah!”

It was then.

Tang—

A single gunshot rang out. Raul, his feet dangling over the balcony railing, had shot the tiger out of one of its eyes with

the shotgun he'd pulled from his arm.

"Poor thing, its last supper was that kind of corpse."

Clucking his tongue lightly, Raul looked down at the gun at his side.

"How, Grand Duke. How....."

The crown prince muttered.

"Rest assured, Your Majesty, the tiger is gone."

Raul said sarcastically.

Tak.

The tiger's body dropped to the ground in a heap.

The tiger let out an enormous roar and struggled, the sound mingling with the screams of Gaston as he was torn apart.

"Help me!"

"No! This is a nightmare!"

Terrified people began to flee. In an instant, the garden was in chaos. Nicole blended into the crowd and began to walk slowly. She adjusted the cloth around her face.

At that moment, Nicole felt someone watching her.

It was Raul on the balcony, looking down at her, a faint, characteristic frown forming in the corners of his eyes. But it was so far away, it almost seemed like he was smiling.

"Hurry!"

The Imperial family were grabbing their knights' hands and hurries off the balcony.

Raul didn't follow them but looked down for a long moment. Nicole lowered her head and turned away hastily.

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'This is not good.'

Nicole grabbed a carriage as soon as she was out of the chaos and climbed in. She made eye contact with Raul.

'He recognized me, even though I had my face covered.'

He's got a good sense. But she had to be there. She wanted to see what would happen to the stage she had so painstakingly prepared. What if it didn't work out.....

Nicole sighed and leaned her head against the wall of the worn carriage. Carriages like this, which paid by the mile, were common in the capital. Most were old but safe.

Hiiinggg—

Just then, the carriage stopped. Nicole frowned.

"I asked for a ride to the center of the capital—"

Usually, carriages like this had a small window between the carriage compartment and the coachman's seat so she could talk to the coachman.

The moment Nicole opened the sliding window, she made eye contact with the other person. Catlike gray eyes. It was Dagger.

"Hello, Noona. I got to see a lot of cool stuff today."

“Dagger. How did you get me into this carriage?”

“That’s my trade secret.”

Dagger said.

“And I have to ask: Noona, what in the world did you do to get the beasts to attack that bastard?”

Nicole stared at him, still.

“Just tell me, please. You have to put yourself in my shoes for trusting you and getting into such a mess, and I have to have something to say in case our Grand Duke notices something and wants to question you, right?”

At those words, Nicole remembered what had happened today.

<Dagger, do you trust me, and do you want me to keep quiet about your secret, your healing power, forever?>

<The two questions are in opposition to each other. How can I trust someone who threatens me?>

<Because the outcome will be exactly what Dagger wants it to be. You think of Gaston as your enemy, you hate him, and I'll let you kill him, so.....>

Nicole pulled a very small vial from her bosom. It was a jet-black bottle, tightly sealed.

<Feed what is in this to Gaston's beasts by any means necessary.>

<Gaston won't be able to leave the perimeter in a panic, the taming takes a long time, and his men will be all over the place.>

<You should be able to break in, and I'll draw Gaston's attention.>

And so, while Nicole held Gasto's attention, Dagger managed to sneak the drug into the food being fed to the beasts.

There was a catch. There was supposed to be a lion, but he wasn't feeling well and wouldn't touch the meat.

Eventually, in his haste, Dagger nicked the lion's claws.

The lion went berserk, roared, and was removed from the event. This made it easy for Nicole to get away from Gaston.

'No one will ever know what I gave the beasts.'

Nicole had been secretly growing various plants in the basement of Grace's house.

'In my last life..... my mother wouldn't let us touch anything but the family books.'

One of the family books described the weaknesses of each family's abilities and the medicines that could affect them.

'It's easy to say, it's an incredible power.'

For example, Gaston's ability to tame animals.

The very act of tampering affects the animal's mind.

As a result, most tamed animals don't live long. They die when their minds become diseased, a kind of mental illness.

'There was also a drug that would cause the animal to have a seizure the moment it was tapped.'

The drug Nicole gave the beasts was a kind of psychotropic seizure inducer.

The animals would go into a frenzy and do the opposite of what they were commanded to do. In other words, Nicole was causing a reverse reaction to the tapping.

“Noona, you have to tell me quickly, there’s no time, I’m risking my life.”

And at this moment, Nicole made a sobering judgment about Dagger.

‘Is this boy really a survivor of YvesChapel? Does he know who he is, and if so, can he be trusted?’

As far as Nicole knew, the only clan with healing powers was the defunct House of YvesChapel.

<Grace, does Dagger really have a daughter?>

<Dagger said he had a daughter?>

Grace laughed long and hard.

<That child is pitiful. Dagger, as they say, came from far away. In a place called the Tower of Asceticism, where political prisoners are held. Most children born there are never allowed to leave for the rest of their lives. If they do, they are taken away by the guards and sold.

<You mean human trafficking.....?>

<Because most of the children in the tower don’t have family names, and you know how important family names are.>

Grace said she knew a bit about Dagger. Dagger had joined the organization at a young age, just before she retired.

<Just then, I was out of the picture by the time he went from Leaf to Dahlia.>

<Although I had a feeling Dagger had a story.....>

Nicole wondered if Grace knew where Dagger came from. But Grace said she didn't know.

It was Raul's job to bring Dagger in, so Grace had no part in it. By then, Grace had been very busy creating a process to nurture talent. Dagger hadn't even benefited from that process.

<Typically, children raised in the tower lead unspeakably pitiful lives. Anyway, Dagger remembers the tower he came from, and apparently he went to it once afterward and found a group of children who had lost their parents, so he brought some of them to an orphanage in the capital to be raised. There was one in particular that Dagger thought was beautiful, and he called her his daughter.>

Grace said, dryly, that the child in Dagger's care must have been about five years old.

<So it's not his daughter, but more like he's her big brother since Dagger is still young, isn't he?>

<I mean, he's not too old to have a daughter, if I may say so.>

Grace smiled sheepishly.

It was the story Grace told her after her exam. Even if it wasn't for that, Dagger didn't seem like a bad guy. That was

Nicole's hunch.

And after all this time, Dagger deserved to know who she was.

"Let's go somewhere quiet for a while."

As if anticipating Nicole's words, Dagger went to the riverbank. The riverfront was deserted.

Nicole stepped out of the carriage and cleared her head.

"Dagger, before I tell you about today, I need to tell you something, and it's important."

"What is it?"

"I am the living eldest daughter of YvesChapel. The dead fiancée the Grand Duke was looking for, the one who died."

And the bigger the story, the bolder Nicole became. The glint in Nicole's eyes sent chills down Dagger's spine.

"Wait a minute, I heard all the people of YvesChapel are dead. Surely, since Freya YvesChapel killed her own children and took her own life..... She was afraid of the Grand Duke and the Imperial Family, so, of course, I thought it could be....."

"She is..... Freya is my mother's name, I'm one of those children she 'killed', and I..... stole someone else's identity."

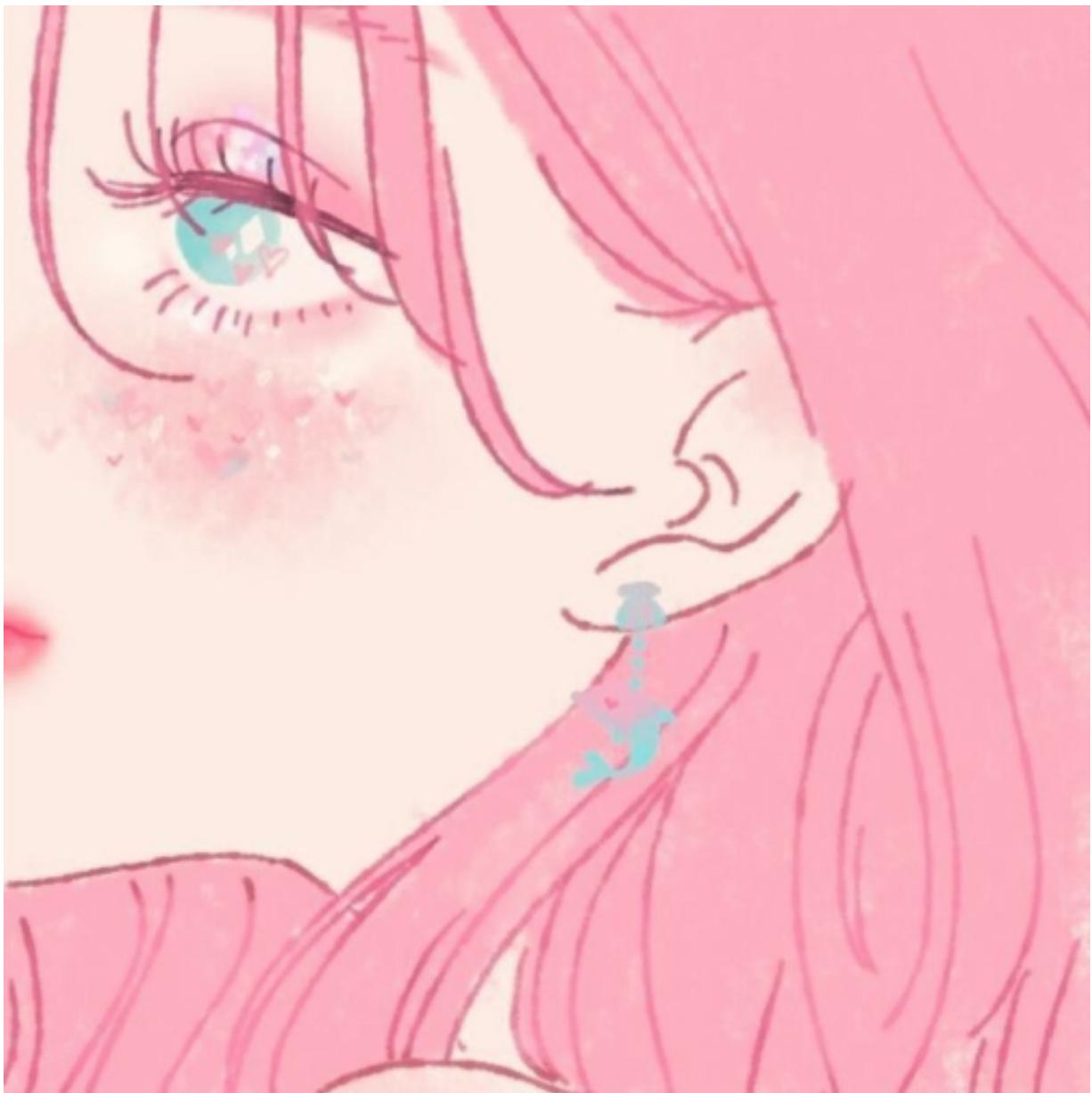
Nicole took a step closer.

"And if you have healing powers, you'd know which house you're from."

Dagger swallowed dryly.

[T/N: Literally I have goosebumps rn. I did not expect her to reveal her identity!]

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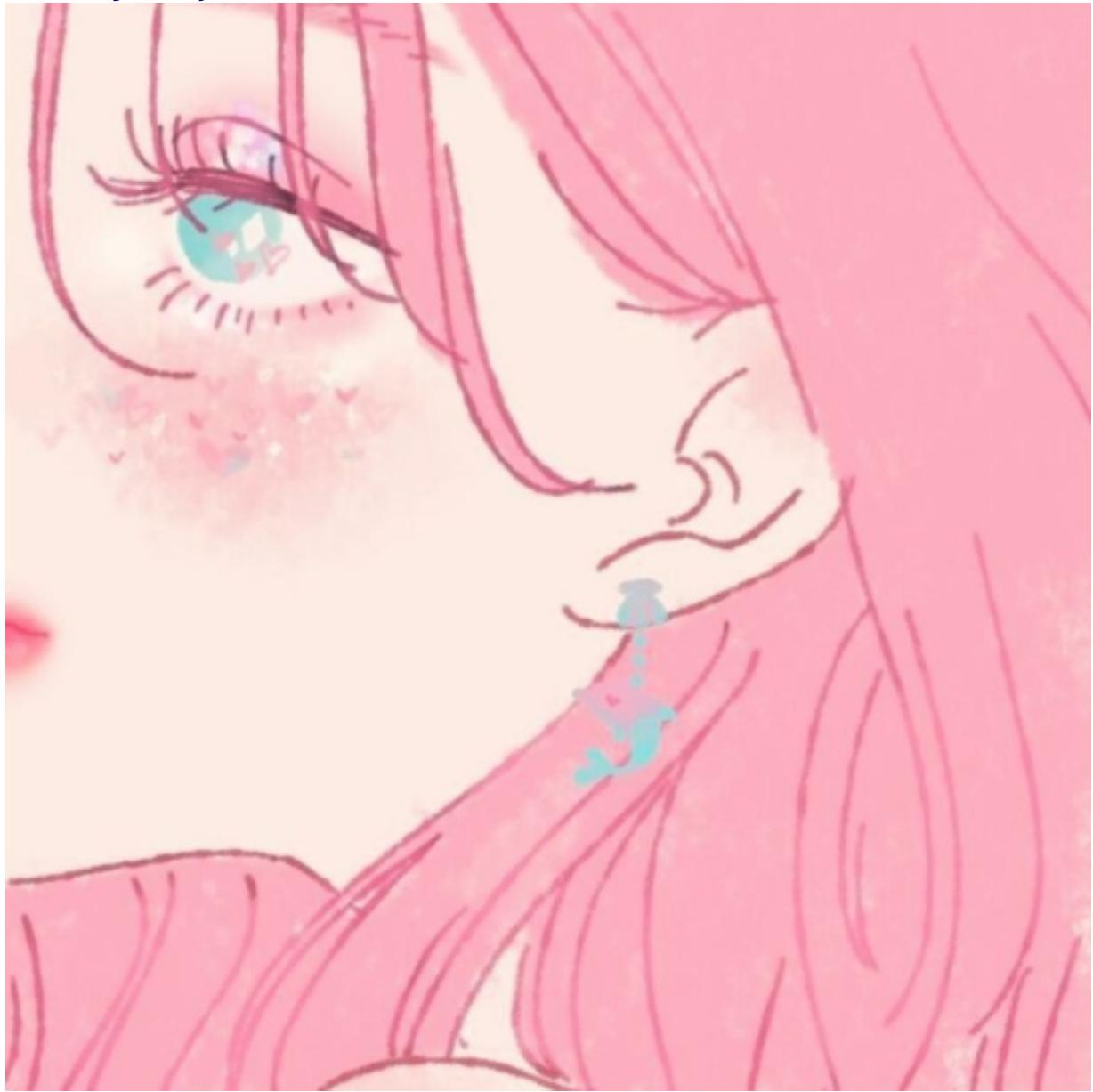


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# Chapter 64

(unedited)

\*\*\*

Dagger's story was similar to what Nicole had expected.

"I was born in the wake of YvesChapel's destruction, and the Imperial family scoured the land for anyone with YvesChapel blood, killing or enslaving them. But there were exceptions, those whose names did not appear on the House's enemies list."

"Dagger. The power of the YvesChapel only runs through heredity. Then Dagger's mother was....."

"Yes. My mother was illegitimate, and her powers never manifested."

Besides her mother and her siblings, Nicole had never met any other YvesChapel blood.

Not in her last life, not in this one, which is why it felt so strange.

Dagger was the child of her mother's youngest sister. She was her mother's youngest sister's child, albeit a half-sister.

"But she'd never met any of the YvesChapels in her life and though my mother, who gave birth to me, supported me, I grew up in other people's homes."

To the imperial family, to the Grand Duke, to the Marquis of Saratheve, Dagger's mother was of no value.

As a general rule, only capable people can produce capable children. Ability is inherited. That was the basics.

Moreover, illegitimate children were never recognized by the Empire.

She was a descendant, but not officially a person of YvesChapel.

Even if someone were to marry her, not a penny of YvesChapel's wealth could be taken from her.

"So that's how she survived."

"She's only survived. I wouldn't call it lucky, because she was never recognized as a member of the family, and when the family was destroyed, they were just as angry."

But she didn't resent YvesChapel: she was a simple person who knew her place.

Thanks to YvesChapel, she can live comfortably without having to make money for the rest of her life, and she was in a position where she doesn't have to refuse such a fate.

Luckily, the people she was raised by were also good people.

"She just wanted to live a normal life and not be greedy."

Dagger added about her.

But one day, the Imperial family came and took Dagger's mother away, which was probably more of a persecution or an act of anger, as she was of no political value.

"Anyway, my mother was living under the auspices of the YvesChapel at the time, so of course it was known that she was of the YvesChapel family, so she was taken to the Tower of Asceticism and worked there."

A tower near the border. It was halfway between a prison and a workhouse.

It was where political prisoners, those who had defied the emperor, and those guilty of blasphemy were held.

And Dagger was born in it, raised among the prisoners.

Yveschapel's lineage of power was passed down through a daughter.

So Dagger was born a normal child with a treasonous mother.

He would never leave the tower without someone taking care of him. Inside, he would be forced to do as he was told and live a poor, hard life.

"And when did you realize your powers?"

"It wasn't something I was born with or manifested as a child. I lived my entire life without knowing anything."

Dagger said softly.

"I've only had this ability for a short time, and I don't know how long."

Nicole paused.

"Do you happen to remember the day you got your powers?"

“It was last summer, around the middle of July..... ”

Dagger thought for a moment, then said the first day he felt a strange tingle.

Nicole felt her hands tremble. The day Dagger’s powers manifested was the day his mother died.

“Do you also remember .....how you became aware of your powers?”

“All of a sudden, I felt sick, and at some point, I realized..... and that’s when I was able to use my powers.”

“Is it possible that this ability could manifest in another member of the..... family if the one with the ability dies?

If true, this would be incredible.

But, like Gaston, some people lose their abilities.

There may be more secrets to the powers of the Seven Families.

If powers could be lost or transferred, did that mean there were different laws for each family?

It was full of unknowns.

“Now that you know all my secrets, tell me about yourself Noona. What happened?”

“Karen isn’t my real name. I took on the identity of someone else who died the same day.”

Nicole told the truth in short bursts. Dagger listened intently.

“You tricked our Grand Duke like that?”

“I had Grace’s assurances, and she’s the only person..... the Grand Duke can’t mess with, and trusts. He seemed to be convinced that I was a carefully cultivated agent, but only half-heartedly. He’s still suspicious of me.”

“Alas, I’m sure Grace is..... Because she was awesome in her prime.”

Dagger was convinced. Grace seemed to be an object of tacit respect among the agents.

“Dagger, does the Grand Duke know who you are?”

“That I am descended from YvesChapel?”

Dagger thought for a moment, then nodded.

“I think he probably knows, because when my mother died, he came to take me in, and I was still very young.”

Dagger was precocious as a child and took good care of the children born in the prison, until one day..... Raul came to him.

“At first I thought he was coming to kill me, I was completely terrified.”

But Raul didn’t kill Dagger, he took him away.

“So did you and Estok..... always know each other?”

“Estok and I grew up together in the tower, we’re like family, inseparable. I don’t know where he’s from or who he is.”

Raul had paid Dagger’s ransom. It was customary for children born in towers or prisons to pay to get out.

"And then the Grand Duke just walked away, like he was just stopping by on an out-of-town trip."

Estok escaped the tower that night, hiding in the Grand Duke's carriage with Dagger. He was spotted and chased away, but he walked and walked and walked.

Eventually, the knights tasked with bringing Dagger back to the capital picked up Estok with both hands and feet and hoisted him into the carriage.

They entered the Grand Duke's house as a set. Fortunately, Estok quickly found his talent and became a knight's apprentice.

"That's so Estok."

Nicole said in a low voice. Dagger nodded.

"Anyway, I've heard that the..... Seven Families mostly pass on their abilities through fertile bloodlines, but they're human, so sometimes mistakes are made, and people like my mom are born."

In aristocratic society, illegitimacy was something to be reviled, but it wasn't shockingly uncommon.

The Seven Families were reluctant to have children out of wedlock for fear of leaking their abilities, but it was not unheard of. In fact, Raul had a half-brother.

"The Grand Duke collects people like me, people who were denied at birth. People like me with nowhere to go."

"And those people become the main agents of the Sith?"

“Only if they have talent. I told you I was a Leaf. If they don’t have talent, that’s the end of it, but at least..... he helps them.”

Nicole was stunned by Raul again.

He was protective of this child who might be the last of the YvesChapel bloodline.

In fact, in her last life, Raul had taken in both of her siblings. She didn’t know what would have happened to them if they had remained in the countryside; there were too many people who wanted the children of YvesChapel.

“I have one more question for you. You’re not one of YvesChapel’s enemy, and you’re too young, so why did you hate Gaston?”

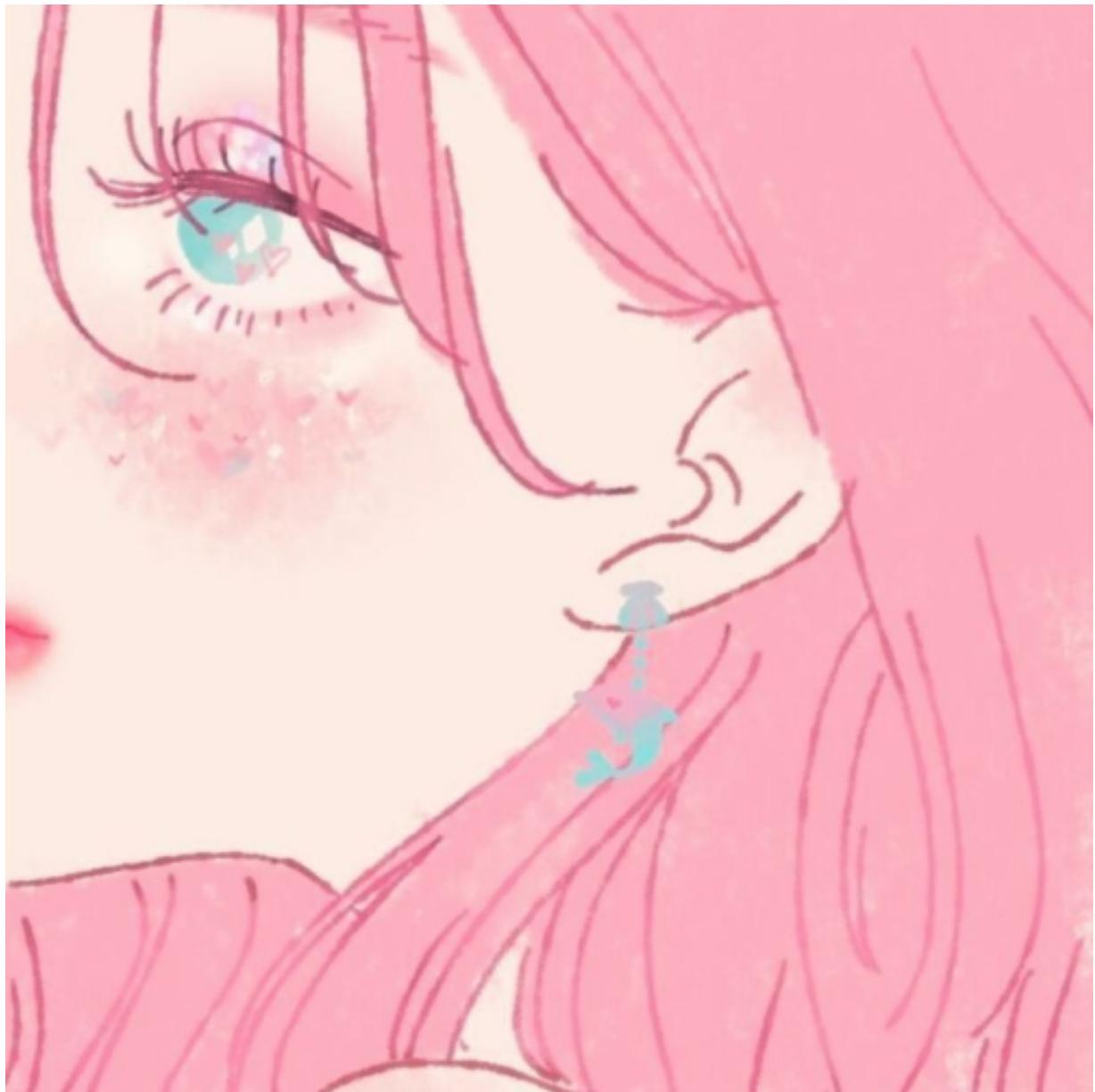
“Because he tormented my mother.”

Dagger said simply.

“I was born in the tower, and my mom did her best for me, even though she was trapped in a tower.”

Dagger then spoke of his history with Gaston.

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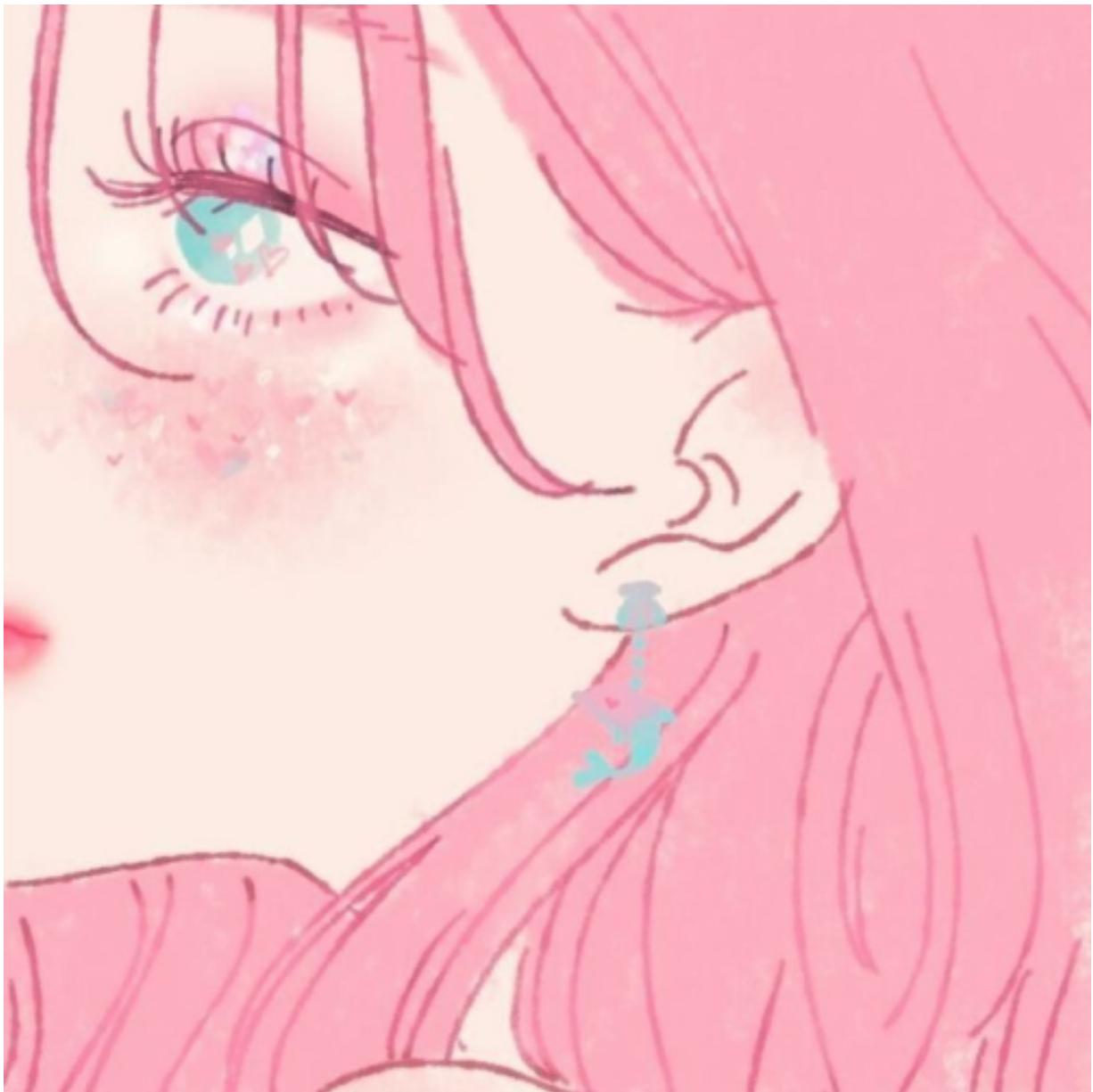


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# Chapter 65

It was five years ago that Dagger's mother died.

Gaston was a young man in his mid-twenties at the time, and from then on he knew that his natural abilities were tenuous, so he began to search for women of House YvesChapel.

After some searching, he heard that there was still a living member of House YvesChapel in a tower on the border.

Gaston immediately sought her out, but she was a prisoner with no healing or other powers. Moreover, she looked dull and tired.

Gaston's brow furrowed, as he had come to expect the women of House YvesChapel to be exquisite beauties.

<What a waste of time for a worthless bitch.>

Disappointed, Gaston beat her severely and insulted her. Then he left the tower.

"My mother was tormented by what happened. I guess he didn't realize that there was pain or shame in someone like my mother. He just took out his anger on her like he was crushing a bug. And I heard later that it was the Saratheves who were responsible for destroying the House of YvesChapel."

His mother was naturally weak. So when Gaston hit her, she got a bad case of the flu. She died shortly thereafter, unable to take her medication.

Dagger was left with an indelible grudge.

"And then there are all those people he killed in the name of religious rituals, children born in towers and prisons, and if they're unlucky, they're sold like rats and birds."

"I'm sorry, Dagger, Gaston died too easy for someone who earned so much resentment. If I'd known, I would have arranged a more miserable version."

"Are you kidding me? I'm feeling pretty good right now."

Dagger giggled and licked his lips.

Nicole told Dagger that she had killed Gaston with a potion she had concocted from herbs passed down through the YvesChapel family.

"Of course, Noona may despise me, a bastard child of a bastard, but....."

Nicole raised a hand and stroked Dagger's head. It was something she did without realizing it.

"I've never met anyone outside of my family, Dagger."

"....."

"And even if it wasn't, Dagger's a good superior, because you risked your life to tell me all your secrets, right?"

Dagger avoided Nicole's gaze, his ears reddening.

“It’s nice to meet you, and to share secrets that we’ll take to the grave with us.”

“For some reason, I liked you from the get-go. Maybe it’s the blood tug or something?”

“I don’t know about that, but I do know this: we’re going to be each other’s keepers now.”

Nicole said in a small voice.

“So..... Noona is like our family head.”

Dagger looked surprised that he’d said it out loud.

“At the same time, it seems we’re about to be thoroughly interrogated by the Grand Duke. There’s no way he wouldn’t notice anything odd. If you are ever forced to take a truth serum or get tortured, never mention my name. Oh, and don’t worry about me. I’ve been trained to resist truth serums.”

“Truth serum?”

“You’re undercover, you’ve done something suspicious, and they’re going to torture you into a confession, that’s the rule, didn’t you know?”

“.....I’ve never been trained for that.”

“Well, you’re going to get it this time.”

“.....I almost got stabbed to death. Would they really feed a truth serum to someone like that?”

“Of course. I highly doubt he would force you to take it. He will show mercy.”

She realized she'd have to talk to Grace about the truth serum since none of the YvesChapel's records said anything about how to resist it.

"But, Dagger. Aren't you going to tell the Grand Duke about your healing powers?"

Nicole honestly hoped Dagger wouldn't. She didn't want to draw Raul's attention back to House YvesChapel.

"No. I will never tell him. I can't help it that Noona caught me this time, but I'm not going to use this ability if I can help it."

Dagger said firmly.

"You don't trust the Grand Duke?"

"Quite the contrary. After all, I'm descended from the YvesChapel family, who were labeled traitors, and the only reason I'm safe..... Is because I'm a man and I have no powers, but....."

"If the imperial family found out about your abilities, they wouldn't leave you alone, and neither would anyone else, since officially all of YvesChapel's able-bodied bloodlines are listed as dead."

"So I want my master to know nothing, so as not to put him to the test. That's my loyalty."

Nicole felt like smiling. Grace had been somewhat right about Dagger being a good person.

"I really should be going now, Noona. It's about a twenty-minute walk this way to the city, and I'm going to go get

punished by the Grand Duke. I've actually been wandering around somewhere other than where I was posted today."

"Be careful not to get killed."

"He'd never kill me if he was really angry, he's a sadist who enjoys tormenting people alive."

Dagger repeated his advice to take care of herself, then hurried away.

\*\*\*

Nicole did not return to the Grand Duchy that night. Nor did Raul look for her.

'Am I going to be fired?'

Nicole was not without anxiety, but the good news was that she had someone who had her back.

Grace, one of the few people who could influence Raul.

"Come on in. I heard about what happened at the Summer Palace."

Grace saw Nicole creep in through the back door, her face hidden, and she rushed over and grabbed both of her hands.

She had been calm during the conversation with Dagger, but by the time she reached the house, Nicole's heart felt like it was going to burst. She was so tired she could barely stand.

Today she'd killed one of the most powerful men in the country, and she'd done it by turning him into a miserable, shredded skeleton in the teeth of a beast.

"I'm just..... a little tired, and my body aches."

And her painkillers were wearing off. She desperately needed her own emergency painkillers in her room.

Grace gave Nicole a warm welcome.

She had her maids bring her hot water, a place to rest, and food. Nicole was finally relieved and confided in Grace.

"I thought you were up to something, and you went beyond my expectation"

Grace still had eyes and ears she could use— people she had planted.

It wouldn't have been hard for Grace to see that Nicole was behind the Summer Palace incident.

"Is this something to do with the herbs you're secretly growing in the basement of my house?"

".....Yes. I drove the beasts temporarily insane."

"It was the Saratheves who were instrumental in the destruction of House YvesChapel. What do you want, revenge?"

Grace asked bluntly. But her eyes were filled with concern for Nicole.

"Revenge? The desecration of YvesChapel happened before I was born. I know nothing of power struggles between families. Revenge is a luxury for me."

"So, why did you end the Marquis of Saratheve?"

Nicole closed her mouth.

"I just want to live, and I want to protect those around me, and for that, I'll stand up to anyone. The Marquis of Saratheve was..... after the YvesChapel family, and if that man is still alive, me and my brother..... might be harmed one day."

"Take care of yourself, I'm sure Raul has already gotten some idea of what you've done."

"But there's nothing he can do about it since he has no proof."

Nicole disobeyed Raul's advice to stay put and hide in the mansion.

She could get in trouble for that. But..... Nicole used a beast to kill Gaston?

He can't find any evidence of that.

"You know that evidence doesn't matter if Raul is really determined to get rid of you, right?"

".....I know that."

Grace gave a small sigh and said.

"Raul owes me, after all, I raised him as a child, so if he really wants to kill you, you can use me as a shield."

"Grace....."

"Just one sentence."

<Grace wishes to receive the payment for your debt from childhood with my life.>

Nicole shook her head at Grace's words. Nicole hoped Grace didn't want to settle that 'debt' through her.

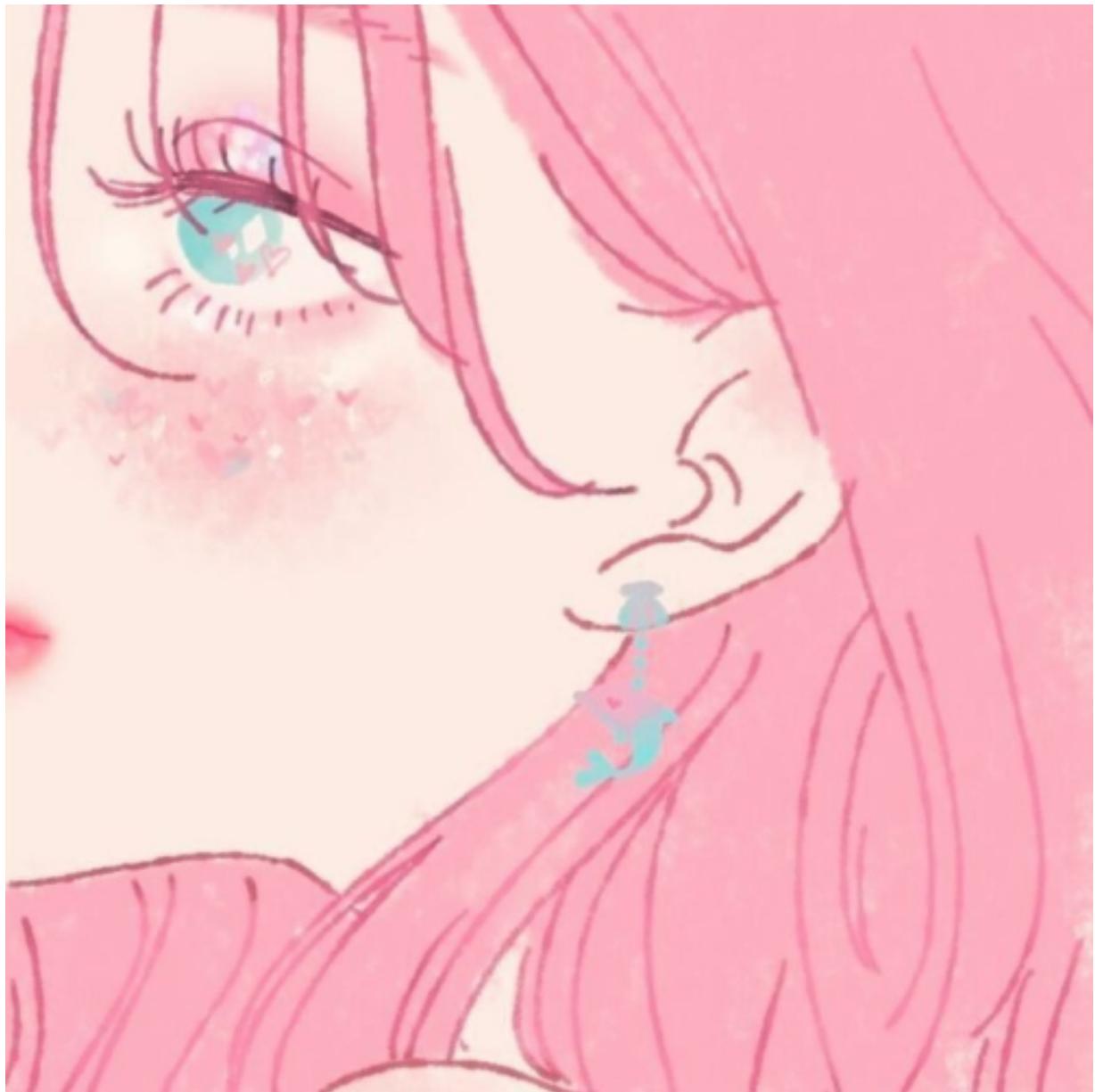
"Grace, don't worry about it. I can take care of myself, and nothing bad will happen."

Nicole ended up comforting Grace several times that day.

Nicole finally made it to bed, and she never returned to the Valentine's estate.

It was her first act of rebellion, and she feared the repercussions. Nicole's heart sank, wondering what would happen.

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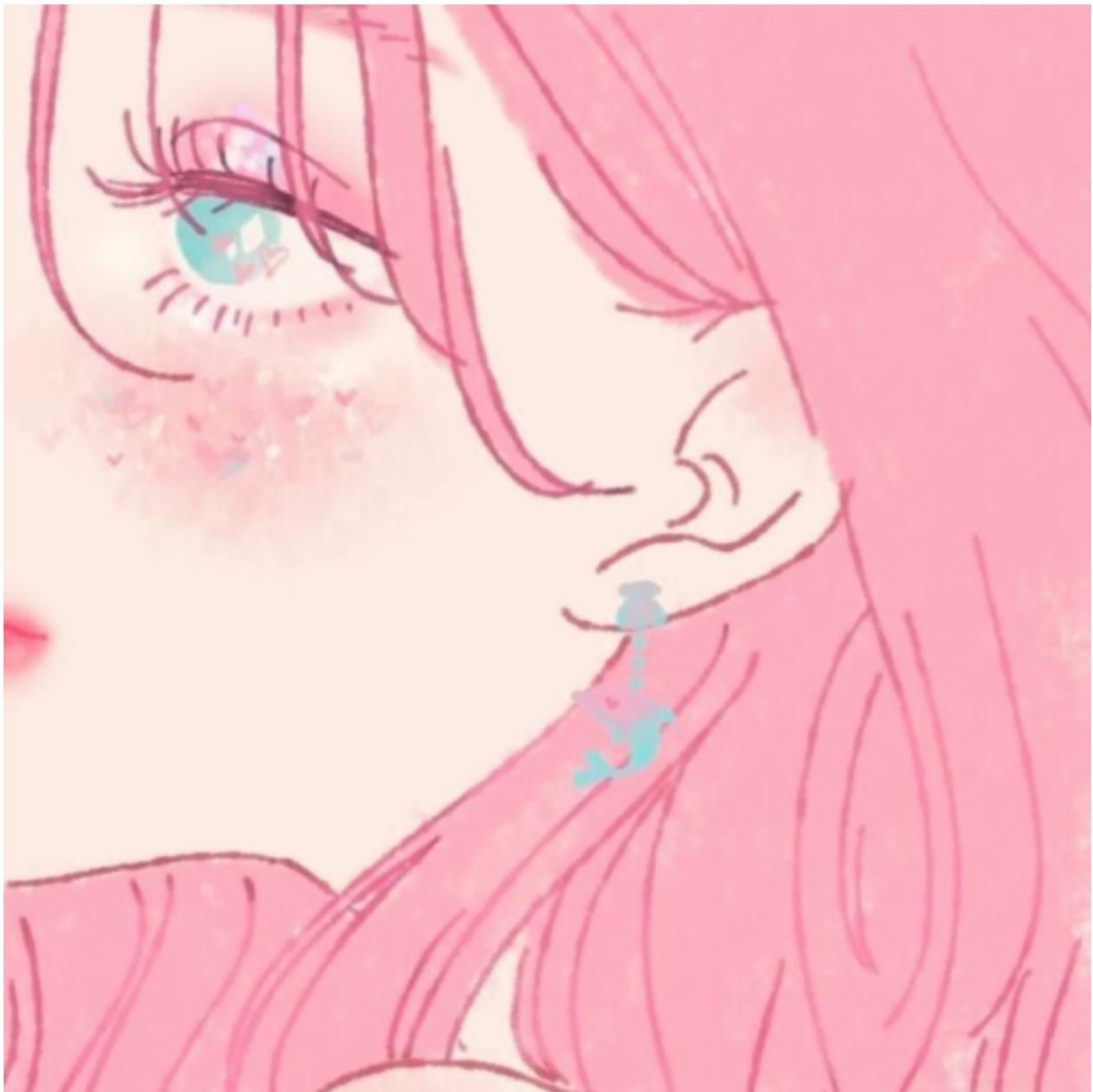


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# Chapter 66

\*\*\*

The world was abuzz with the death of the Marquis of Saratheve.

The Marquis of Saratheve's death was not without its doubts, but those doubts were soon forgotten.

It is because the details of the Marquis of Saratheve's donation to the social event, which he generously gave, were published in the newspaper.

The Imperial family was so ashamed that they would not even mention the Marquis of Saratheve's name, and the reputation of the once-prestigious Marquis of Saratheve fell to the ground.

'It must be Raul's doing.'

The Marquis of Saratheve died in disgrace, without the least bit of honor. Even at the funeral, few nobles visited for fear of offending him.

Nicole hid quietly in Grace's house for a few days. But time passed and Raul didn't look for her.

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick.

She touched the counter and thought to herself.

Should she turn herself in for punishment first? Or, if Raul pushed her hard enough, should she be brazen enough to take the credit?

'After all, my suggestion made this a big deal, and Gaston is dead as a result, so I can claim the credit.'

But that wouldn't work with Raul.....

While she was pondering this, someone from the Grand Duke's family arrived.

"His Highness is looking for the cat that ran away from home."

Nicole's first glimpse of the agent was of a featureless face. This is a Shadow, too. Nicole had a hunch.

"We don't have cats in this house, only people."

"I thought you might say that. Then I will answer like this, 'It showed no loyalty to the owner of its life, so it doesn't seem like a loyal dog. It's no different from a cat.'"

Nicole blushed at last. She was going to try to keep her composure in front of Raul this time, but..... already felt like she'd lost from the start.

\*\*\*

"So, how was the show of the Marquis of Saratheve being eaten alive? It was your work, shouldn't you have enjoyed it?"

Raul said. Nicole was dragged into the Grand Duke's office and stood in front of Raul, who looked at her as he absentmindedly flipped through the papers.

"I don't..... know anything about it. It was an accident, wasn't it?"

"Was it?"

Raul asked sweetly.

".....Yes."

Animals and people are different. Presumably, the animals would have been disposed of immediately, and..... tests would have turned up nothing. Unless they ate a known poison, it's hard to find something in their stomachs.

"Dagger didn't say that."

Raul said. Nicole's eyes fluttered at the words. She avoided Raul's eyes.

"Dagger is just my boss, and I don't know what he's doing."

"Hmmm....."

Suddenly, Nicole began to worry about Dagger. While she was hiding out at Grace's house, was..... Dagger okay?

"Where is Dagger..... now?"

"Why, so you can pay my respects if he's dead?"

"You didn't kill him."

Nicole said in a small voice.

".....Why would you think that?"

"Because Dagger is too good of a worker to die in such a ridiculous way, and besides, I heard you took him in as a

child, so he must have cost a lot of money to raise."

Raul's lips quirked at that answer.

"If you can move your tongue so well, why can't you look me in the eyes?"

Nicole clamped her mouth shut again.

"Dagger insisted as he had withheld the confession drug that he had done nothing wrong. I'm sure I never ordered him to go to the summer palace, but he showed up at the summer palace on his own accord."

"....."

"So - you're the mastermind behind the Marquis of Saratheve's show, aren't you? You used me to set it up."

"The Grand Duke can use all of us because our lives belong to the Grand Duke, and so do mine, that's all."

Nicole took a step back.

"No exceptions. You have to take the confession drug too."

Grace told Nicole what to do about the confession. Nicole just hoped she could handle it.

"Do you mean right..... right now?"

"I will feed it when I want to feed it to you. Including the interest for not feeding it to you right now."

Raul said.

" ..... interest?"

“Yes. If you don’t pay your debt right away, you get an interest.”

Nicole looked at Raul for a moment.

“What am I supposed to do to pay the interest?”

“I’ll keep an eye on you when I want to.”

“You can do that now if you want.”

“You’re quick on your feet, but not so good with words, bold but nervous.”

Raul smirked sarcastically.

“I’ll spy on you myself, when I want.”

“.....Do as you please.”

Nicole realized that Raul was flirting with her, like a mean guy, and she knew very well that it didn’t mean anything.

“And what else did you do wrong?”

Raul said like he was treating a child.

“I went where I wasn’t supposed to go, because I was curious about what was going on at the Summer Palace, and I went to spy on it. It was my fault, and I think I deserve to be punished.”

Nicole said. Dagger had already risen through the ranks of the Shadow Agents and was a member of Raul’s entourage.

Nicole, on the other hand, is an apprentice agent who hasn’t even been given a name yet.

If they were guilty of the same offense, their dispositions would be quite different.

Raul looked her in the eye and spoke in a frank tone.

"Actually, I did not intend to deal with the Marquis of Saratheve now."

"Because he's an unsightly piece of work for the Grand Duke?"

"Yes."

Raul said.

"But it's also true that it's refreshing to see him disappear before my eyes."

"It was ..... luck."

"Luck? You really think so?"

Raul raised the corner of his mouth slightly.

"Anyway, I have a suspicion about your involvement in this, but no proof. By any stretch of the imagination, I'm the only one who looks like a lunatic, so I have no intention of dismissing you."

Nicole was inwardly relieved, but she didn't show it.

"But you should be punished. Same as Dagger and Estock."

"Estock?"

"Did you think I didn't know he was an accomplice too?"

"....."

Nicole was silent. Estock seemed to be really close to Dagger. Not to mention they'd grown up together in the tower. It seemed he'd gone out of his way to keep Dagger's secret this time.

"What's the punishment?"

"I punished him by making him stand in front of my office for 72 hours, and I took a pay cut."

Nicole figured Raul would be lenient once he'd had enough; he'd have to discipline his men.

But that's when he's physically fit.

"You didn't even give him a break for .....72 hours?"

"I gave him a minimum of rest. If he collapses, I give him medicine to get him back up."

Nicole looked at her stomach; she was injured, and in fact, still hurting. Even if she was a patient person, she was pretty scared.

"I guess I should be punished the same way."

"I'll take that into account since you're injured. I'll cut your time short."

Raul said.

"But on one condition."

Raul said. He rang the bell and summoned Bastard.

Bastard came with an apologetic look on his face, an old, uncomfortable-looking wooden chair, and a rope wrapped around his arm.

\*\*\*

Bastard set the chair down in the center of Raul's office.  
Then Raul commanded softly.

"Sit."

Nicole sat down carefully, conscious of her stomach.

"Estock was never able to sit still as a child, and whenever he was told not to do something, he would double or triple down on it. I had to train him to make him usable, like taming a less-than-human monkey."

Nicole knew what Estock had been like before.

Rumor had it that if Estock lost a duel, he would continue to chase and pounce on his opponent.

If he didn't have a sword, he'd swing his limbs, and she'd heard he'd bite people with his teeth. It would be no easy task to train such a beast.

"Did you ..... hit him?"

"No."

Raul said.

"I tied him upside down and hung him."

Bastard handed him the rope.

"To me now, you are the equivalent of Estock as a child."

Nicole felt shame. Raul's warning had embarrassed her, and she was afraid she was really going to be hanged upside down.

"I said I'd look the other way. Don't be so scared. At least you seem to have some basic intelligence, unlike Estock."

Raul said.

And with his gloved hands, Raul manually pinned Nicole's arms to the chair and tied them together.

His arm strength was too much. Nicole felt like her whole body was being squeezed into the chair. Her stomach churned strangely with every touch.

An uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, as if this man was going to bite her at any moment. It was an uncomfortable gut-wrenching sensation.

"I'll release you within reason. Twenty-four hours maximum. Try to hold on."

"Ugh....."

Nicole clenched her fists. Then she nodded reluctantly, feeling ashamed.

"Spread your legs and tie them to the chairs on either side."

Raul ordered. Nicole did as she was told, spreading her legs under her long dress and pressing them against the chair legs. Her legs spread and the strange sensation intensified.

"If you move, I'll tie your legs together as well."

".....yes."

Nicole managed to reply in a muffled voice.

This was punishment. Raul was treating her more like a child, trying to make her think.

“It’ll be better than you think, don’t worry.”

Raul held out his hand, and this time Bastard thrust a black silk cord into Raul’s hand. It was about half the width of her hand.

Raul closed Nicole’s eyes and gently wrapped the string around her. Nicole’s vision was blacked out by the silk cord.

“It’s time for you to go to the interview room. There are many people waiting for you.”

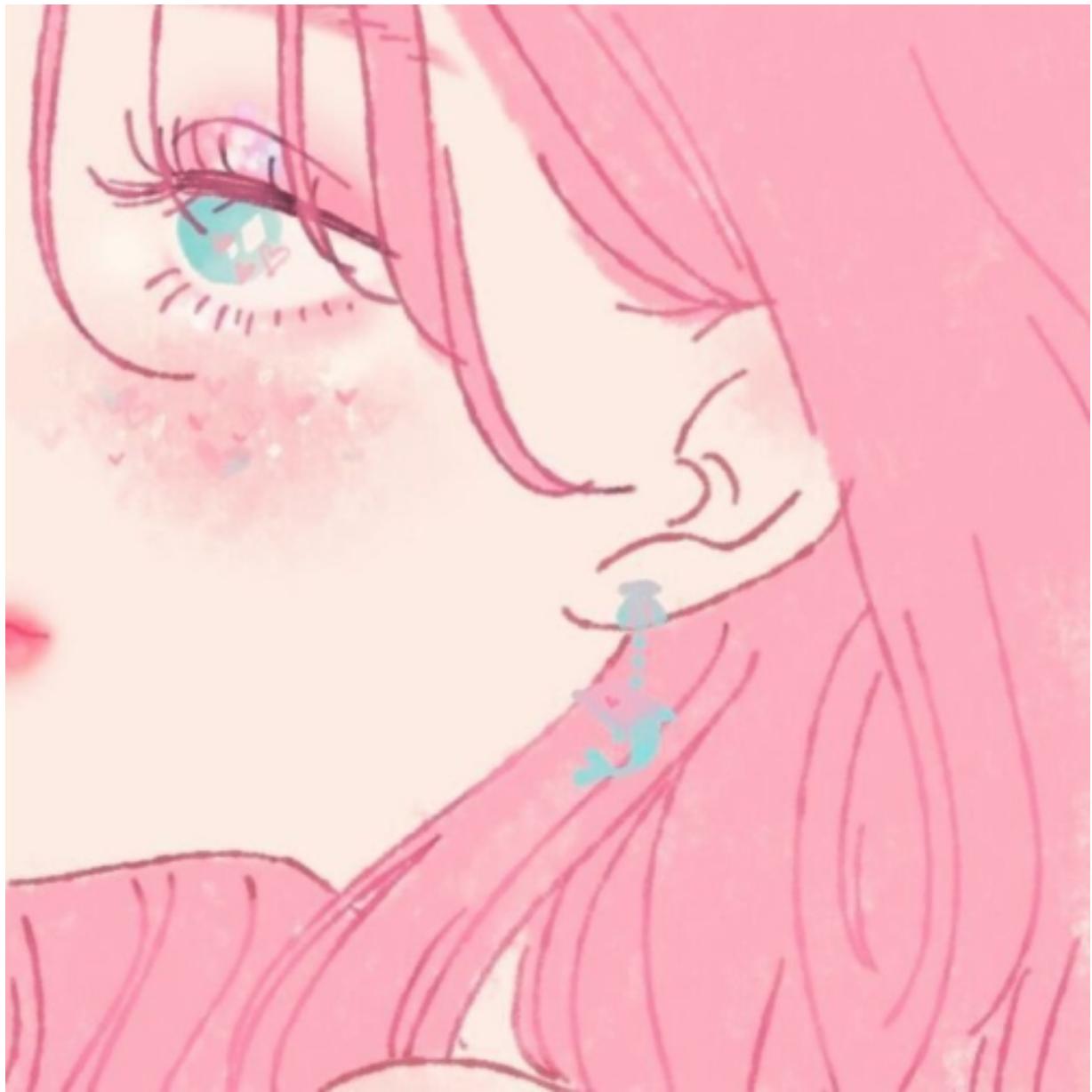
She could hear Bastard speaking to Raul. Already, Nicole’s ears prickled and her skin crawled.

Raul left the room without answering. She heard his footsteps.

Nicole was thrown into silence and darkness. This man was intentionally leaving her alone.

Nicole shook her head, breathing loudly into her lungs.

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# Chapter 67

Nicole was chained up in Raul's office. Her eyes were closed and her senses were heightened.

Then another useless thought came to her.

The feel of Raul's lips, the moment he had touched her in her past life.....

'I get so weird around him. I must be crazy.'

Nicole bit her lip.

She'd taken the painkillers she'd made before coming, but her head was still throbbing.

'When are they coming?'

A few nerve-wracking minutes passed, and she's wondering if they were really going to leave her like this.

Her chest rose and fell with each breath.

At the same time, her fingers and toes twitched and curled. She was getting more and more nervous, and her fear was growing.

Fortunately, Raul's purpose was a simple warning, and the wait was not long.

\*\*\*

Shh. The blindfold over my eyes came loose. My blurred vision cleared and came into focus.

Raul was standing across from her, looking at her with interest.

“Are we done?”

Nicole breathed out. Nicole was embarrassed by the euphoria she was feeling at that moment.

Fortunately, she hadn’t been left alone for long. An hour or two. Nicole guessed.

“Have you ..... reflected?”

Raul said nonchalantly.

“Yes. Thank you for your generous disposition.”

Nicole avoided Raul’s eyes.

“That’s all for today. Look forward to the rest. Punishment is more fun when it’s a surprise, right?”

Nicole’s eyes went black. She hoped this was the last time she’d ever be punished with this kind of shame.

This man is mean. If she begged him, “Please don’t do that,” he would do it.

But right now, she didn’t even deserve to beg him.

“Aren’t you busy, it seems like you had a lot going on just now?”

Nicole plucked up the courage to speak.

“For my subordinates, I naturally have to make time. There’s also the next order after the punishment.”

“Next..... order?”

“You deserve an award. Don’t you think?”

Nicole realized she was still looking up at him with her hands tied. Just then there was a small knock on the door.

Raul motioned for them to come in, and Scimitar entered the room.

The Scimitar approached Nicole and untied her arms. The wound in her abdomen was painful. She tried to get to her feet, but the Scimitar stopped her.

“You’re wounded and tense, and it’s not a good idea to move right away.”

Nicole was relieved to hear that. After a moment to catch her breath, Scimitar helped her to her feet.

“Guide her well, and don’t let her get away again. I have a feeling she’s going to have an accident if we take our eyes off her for a second.”

“Yes.”

Scimitar replied. Raul strode out of the room with a nonchalant expression.

\*\*\*

“How much..... time has passed?”

“Just under two hours.”

Scimitar replied.

Nicole's guess was correct.

'That's pretty forgiving for him.'

She'd thought he'd be the kind of guy who'd tie her up for 24 hours.

"Can you walk?"

Scimitar asked nonchalantly, squeezing Nicole's arm.

Nicole was secretly surprised; in her past life, all of Raul's Sith agents had hated her because she was a flaw in their god, Raul.

"You need to go to the Sith headquarters for a while. You'll have to walk down the stairs, so take your time."

"Okay."

Leaning on Scimitar's arm, Nicole walked slowly down the stairs.

They arrived at a door leading to the basement. It was a place she had never set foot in before.

It used to be an evacuation route and served many purposes, but she was told it was now closed.

Scimitar opened the door to the basement. It wasn't difficult, just a swish, and a complex of stairs and passageways emerged.

Scimitar led Nicole down. Nicole stumbled and started walking after her.

Scimitar led Nicole down the stairs. Down, down, down.....

"The basement of the Grand Duke's house is connected to our Sith headquarters, and the Sith spend a lot of time in it."

Nicole and Scimitar walked down the passageway side by side. Bright lights illuminated every inch of the passageway.

'I had no idea there were rooms like this underground.'

As they reached the end of the passage, a new hallway opened up. It was flanked on either side by unidentified doors.

Nicole guessed this was the basement of the performance hall.

"The knights' offices and performance hall, which isn't very big..... How is the basement so large?

As if reading Nicole's thoughts, Scimitar spoke up.

"Both the Grand Duke's mansion and the buildings attached to it are ancient structures, and it is said that the basement of the Grand Duke's mansion had a labyrinth called a dungeon. The basement is much larger than the buildings above it, though very few have been converted for use. In any case, this vast underground space belongs to the Sith."

Strangely enough, the air was clear underground.

Apparently, these subterranean labyrinths, or labyrinths, were built in ancient times to keep the air clean. Nicole had heard of them long ago.

Nicole paused and looked around.

".....That's interesting."

Nicole said, a little throaty.

“Are you in pain? Do you want me to give you some painkillers?”

“Uh, no. I’m fine, but..... Why are you being so nice to me?”

“This job was reckless, but it paid off. A competent ally is always welcome, and a loyal one at that.”

Nicole’s throat tightened. In her past life, Nicole had been the Grand Duchess, albeit a fake one, but she realized that her position now was far better. At least as far as how the Sith treated her.

“Scimitar.”

Nicole stopped and looked back at Scimitar.

“Does the Grand Duke usually punish his errant subordinates individually?”

“Estock and Dagger are younger, so he teaches them directly, but for the others, he tends to punish them through their superiors. The Shadows in particular.”

“.....”

“So be careful how you handle yourself. He’s not hard on his subordinates, but he’s not completely lenient either. Attention is a double-edged sword, and besides, you’re from one of his subordinates.”

“.....Thanks for the advice.”

Scimitar’s simple favor eased Nicole’s mind.

Scimitar stopped and opened one of the many doors.

The room was small, all white inside. Nicole's eyes widened as she peered into the room.

"Ugh, uugh!"

A man was tied up. He had a sack over his face.

"Welcome."

Behind the man, smiling brightly, was Estock, greeting Nicole.

Today he was dressed in the black robes of the Knights Templar, and beside him stood Dagger, dressed in the same colors.

Looking at them like this, both were slim and pretty, making it difficult to distinguish if they were male or female.

"Now, do you remember him?"

Dagger pulled the sack up. Nicole took a reflexive step back as she recognized the man's face.

'That's the guy who stabbed me.'

The one who'd been chasing her. It was the smelly man, one of Gaston's men.

"By the look on your face, I'm guessing you do."

"I'm telling you, I can't be wrong."

Dagger and Estock looked at each other smugly.

Nicole felt a little dizzy.

"The Grand Duke specifically asked me to bring him here. He cannot forgive someone who has injured a valued subordinate."

Scimitar said gently.

".....He gave you the order himself?"

"Of course. And he told me to tell you, <Your master does not make a man of this level into your nightmare.>."

Nicole's heart skipped a beat. This is..... This is the kind of man he is.

He treated his possessions the way he always had. It was like in her past life.

"It's fortunate that there are knives that cut well."

Nicole said in a low voice. She was referring to his entourage, of course.

"As long as *Noona* is our ally."

"We won't let them get away with what they did to you."

Dagger and Estock said.

"You are our shadow, an ally who can hide in our shadows, and as long as Miss Karen is the Grand Duke's man, we will protect you."

Scimitar said. Nicole looked at them and gave a small nod.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

A stifled yelp came from the man who had noticed the situation late. Dagger and Estock put his sack back on.

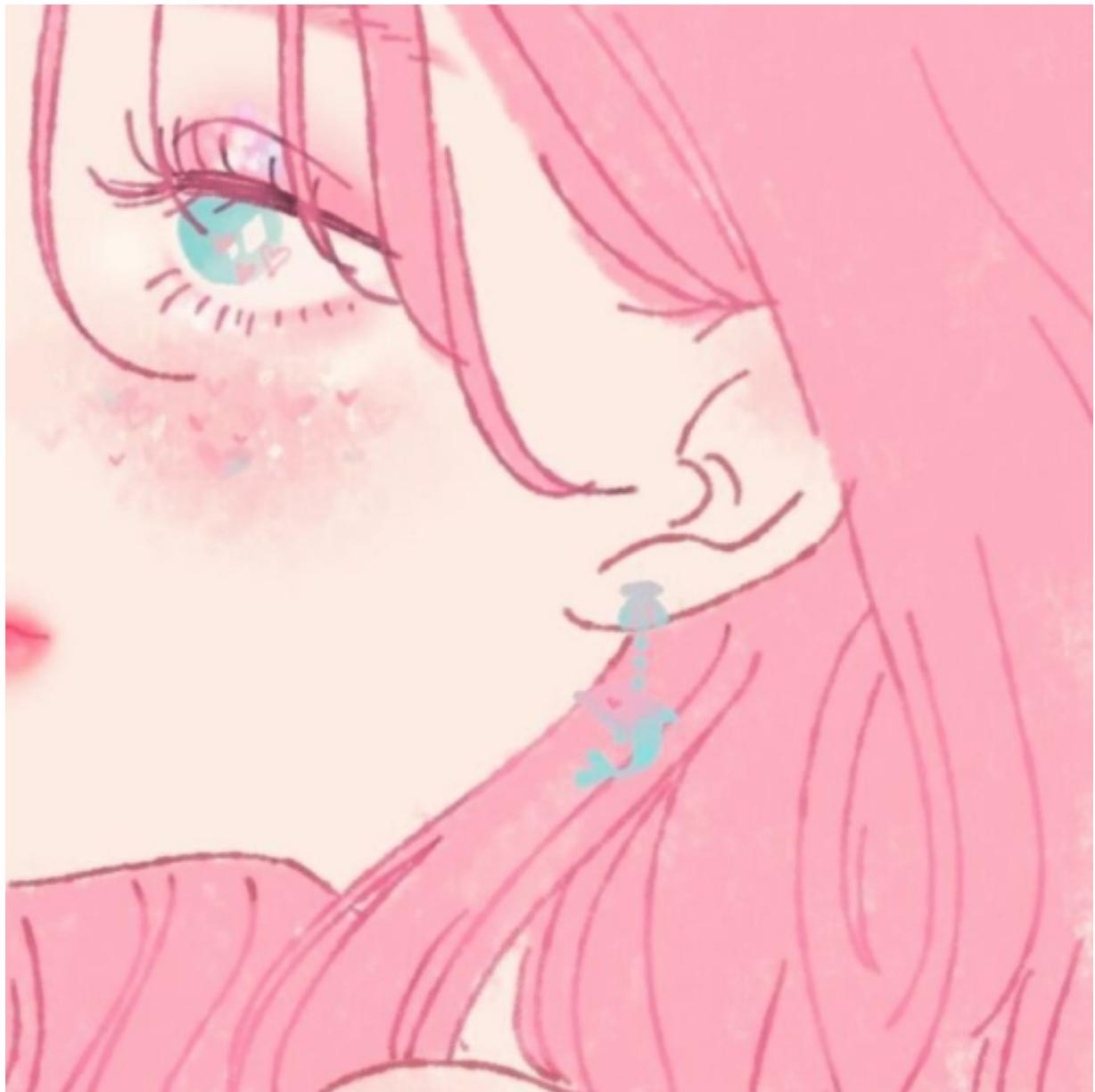
As they lowered their eyes, Estock drew his knife across the man's throat. In the blink of an eye, the man's struggles ceased.

Nicole bit her lip as she watched the blood trickle down. Dagger and Estock looked at her, their eyes shining with approval.

'I think I need a sedative, not a painkiller.'

Nicole thought. Her new colleagues were too dizzying to meet without a sedative.

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# Chapter 68

“It’s a special bonus for this job.”

Nicole was lucky she didn’t have to watch the killing all the way through. Scimitar was kind enough to cover her eyes.

Soon afterward, Nicole was taken to another room. This time, it was an ordinary office. Nicole was inwardly relieved.

The stark white office was immaculate. There was an unexpected figure sitting there.

‘Raul’s butler.’

Nicole had seen him a lot in her past life.

He came from a family that had been butlers to the Grand Duke for generations, and he had followed in his father’s footsteps and become a butler at a relatively young age.

He was dignified and always carried himself with the posture of a butler from a prestigious family. He was tall and had a solemn expression that made him look like a funeral director.

But he was looking at Nicole so gently.

‘How could this man look like this?’

She thought to herself, she’s going to get a lot of surprises today.

“Who are you?”

Nicole cleared her throat and spoke.

“I’m a butler to the Grand Duke. The name I was given in Sith is Raspy[1].”

**[1] This is the literal English translation for this (라스피). Never heard of such a flower 😊**

Raspy was also a flower name. Nicole pictured the purple flower in her mind.

It didn’t fit him, with his dark, gloomy mood.

“Besides, I’m the butler to the Grand Duke, so you’ll be more likely to call me by my real name. My real name is Lars.”

“Then what.....”

“Lars will suffice. It’s my codename given to me after my real name anyway.”

“.....Yes. Mr. Lars.”

She knew Lars’ name, of course, but Nicole had called him simply Butler for most of her life. So Lars was a Shadow.

It wasn’t a surprising twist. Lars was an incredibly competent butler, but there was always a sense that he was hiding a secret.

“Let’s cut to the chase, then. This is a prize from the Grand Duke.”

Lars said. He slid a slip of paper in front of Nicole.

"This is the amount of money that will be given to you as a monthly stipend."

The note read 60 gold coins. Upon closer inspection, the bottom of the note was blank for Nicole's signature of receipt. It looked like she was supposed to fill out a receipt to show that she had received the paycheck.

'Sixty gold coins.'

It was a lot of money, even for Nicole, who didn't know much about worldly things- money or material things.

'In my last life, when my father was away from home for a long time, selling herbs and medicines, he told me how much he made.'

Apparently, he made as much as three gold coins.

'He said it was enough to get our family through the winter if we saved it well.'

She also vaguely remembered the ledger Grace had been looking at.

The cost of maintaining Grace's capital mansion was 30 gold coins a month, including labor.

'Grace's mansion has several hired hands, and that's twice as much as the house costs, and it's enough money for my family to live for twenty winters.'

It would be enough for them to get settled and bring Jay to the capital. For the first time in her life, Nicole felt greedy.

"Is the amount of money not enough?"

"No, it doesn't, I'm just a little..... surprised."

“It’s a nominal salary, but it’s more like a dignity allowance. There will be a bonus for every mission you go on.”

Lars slid another note in front of Nicole. One hundred more gold coins.

“I hope you’ll put them to good use.”

There was also a small velvet box. Nicole opened it curiously. Inside was a pair of delicately crafted bracelets.

At the end of each thin, gilt-rimmed bracelet was a large pink gemstone.

“What is this?”

“A pink sapphire. It’s a precious color, and the Grand Duke himself chose it.”

Inside was a note scrawled by Raul.

<I hope my reward and punishment mean something to you. Congratulations on the success of your first mission.>

She’s seen the Grand Duchess’s jewelry many times in my life. Of course, she could only look at them, not touch them.

In any case, even to her discerning eye, this was no ordinary object.

“Do you usually give gifts like this?”

Nicole asked, eyeing it.

“The Grand Duke gives one to each of his people on their first successful mission. Estock and Dagger received one after they earned their names and completed their first mission.”

Nicole calmed herself for almost giving meaning to useless things. Still, the man made a fool of her.

"I'm guessing this bracelet costs a lot more than the money you gave me."

"Our Grand Duke tends to take his time with his courses, he doesn't like dessert, and he always saves the most precious for the end of the main course."

Nicole soon realized why Lars had said that.

The main dish was a stack of papers. Lars laid them out in front of Nicole, one by one.

There were five of them.

"All are houses in the center of the capital. The Grand Duke is unhappy with Miss Karen's continued stay at Ms. Grace's house."

"That is, why....."

"The Grand Duke's subordinates should eat the Grand Duke's food and sleep under the roof of a house provided by the Grand Duke - that's his philosophy."

Lars said politely.

"So take your pick of the house you like best, and it will be Miss Karen's in two days."

Nicole flipped through the house papers; in the back were the receipts from when the house was purchased.

The price of the house was usually between 500 and 700 gold coins.

Even as a country girl, Nicole knew that houses in the capital were the most expensive in the entire empire.

"I'm really going to have a house that belongs to ..... me?"

Nicole suddenly understood everything. There was a reason candidates risked their lives to become Shadows of the Sith, and to be given a fortune like this just for being a Shadow.

Money and jewelry were great, but nothing compared to home.

Even a vagabond like Karen could only do so much if she had a home to call her own. In the capital, expensive real estate was a status symbol, a sign of wealth.

"In case you didn't know, since you've been living in Grace's mansion, unlike the other candidates who entered the academy by other means."

Lars said.

"As it is, if you 'retire' the normal way, with enough merit, the house will be yours outright, as well as your pension. But if you betray us, or do something to disqualify you as a Shadow, that's a different story, because that's a dishonorable retirement."

"Then....."

"You'll have to pay back everything you've ever gotten, including penalties."

But that's for 'while you're still alive'. Nicole immediately recognized the words Lars had left out.

'Brutal.'

It was brutal. But for now, she was glad for the reward she'd earned.

"Which house would you choose?"

Naturally, it was to my advantage to choose the most expensive house.

The capital was divided into districts, from the 1st to the 19th.

Generally speaking, the closer you were to District 1, the closer you were to the center of the capital.

'Districts 1 through 7 are obviously out of the question, and-'

That was where the mansions of the great nobles were located. Of the houses Rath had offered, the 11th and 13th were the most expensive.

Nicole naturally had her eye on the 13th.

It was the furthest from Grand Duke Valentine's. But it was close enough to Grace's house.

But she wanted to take a closer look at the paperwork, because location isn't the only factor in deciding on a home.

Nicole hesitated for a moment before Lars urged her on.

Knock knock.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

"Estock wants to talk to you, are you finished yet?"

Dagger poked his head through the open door. Lars coughed harshly.

“Dagger, you’re not supposed to barge in when your superiors are in a meeting.”

“I’m sorry, but Estock is going to barge in if I don’t, and he’s been going on and on about how he likes Miss Karen and how he’s going to make her buy him a drink because he got her a perfect score on his test.”

Estock sensed everyone’s concern, and suddenly Lars’s face relaxed. He gave a small nod of his head.

“I’ll go see to Estock for now.”

Nicole seized the opportunity.

It would give her time to think, and she suspected that Dagger had come to see me for a reason.

“Do you mind if I take my time? I don’t know much about the capital yet, so it’s hard to make a decision.”

“I’ll give you ..... until the end of the day.”

Lars said.

“And..... By the way, can I go back to Grace’s mansion when I get home today?”

Nicole said with difficulty. She needed to check on her secret plants, and she wanted to be by Grace’s side as much as possible.

Lars gave her a scathing look, wondering if she could be so distracted after being scolded.

It was for the reason she had been punished today. Nicole was staying at Grace's house while she was under orders to stay hidden.

"A few days will be fine, but as soon as you find a home, move there. The dead Marquis of Saratheve was a big shot, and after a job like that, you're usually given a three-month gag order, which means you're not allowed to leave the house. Remember, it's for the safety of the Shadows."

".....I understand."

Satisfied with Nicole's answer, Lars rose from his seat.

Before he left, he looked into Nicole's eyes and said.

"Your methods were reckless, but you are doing well. Our master is not one to give rewards for nothing. Now, if you will only take your name, you will fit right in as a member of the Sith."

"A name..... Why haven't I gotten it yet?"

"Because the Grand Duke hasn't given it to you yet."

That would be proof that Raul really does accept Nicole as a subordinate. It might be easy to get material things from a man like Raul, but it was hard to get something meaningful.

Nicole had a hunch.

"Are you okay, Dagger? I heard you were punished."

Nicole looked worriedly at Dagger as soon as Lars left the room.

"Oh. What, standing on my feet for a long time, that is? It was hard, but nothing that would kill me."

Dagger thought for a moment, then added gloomily.

“But I wouldn’t want to do it twice.”

Nicole gave a small laugh. That was all he had to say.

“Well, technically, I dragged you into this, Dagger, so thank you.”

“It’s the word of my master, so I must follow the command.”

Dagger glanced around unnecessarily, then spoke as if confiding a secret.

Nicole felt relieved.

Dagger was already giving Nicole something of a secret loyalty, or camaraderie.

“But is Estock really looking for me?”

“Of course it’s an excuse. He’s at the rehearsal, and he’s only there because he’s afraid you’re going to rush into choosing a house. You haven’t picked one yet, have you?”

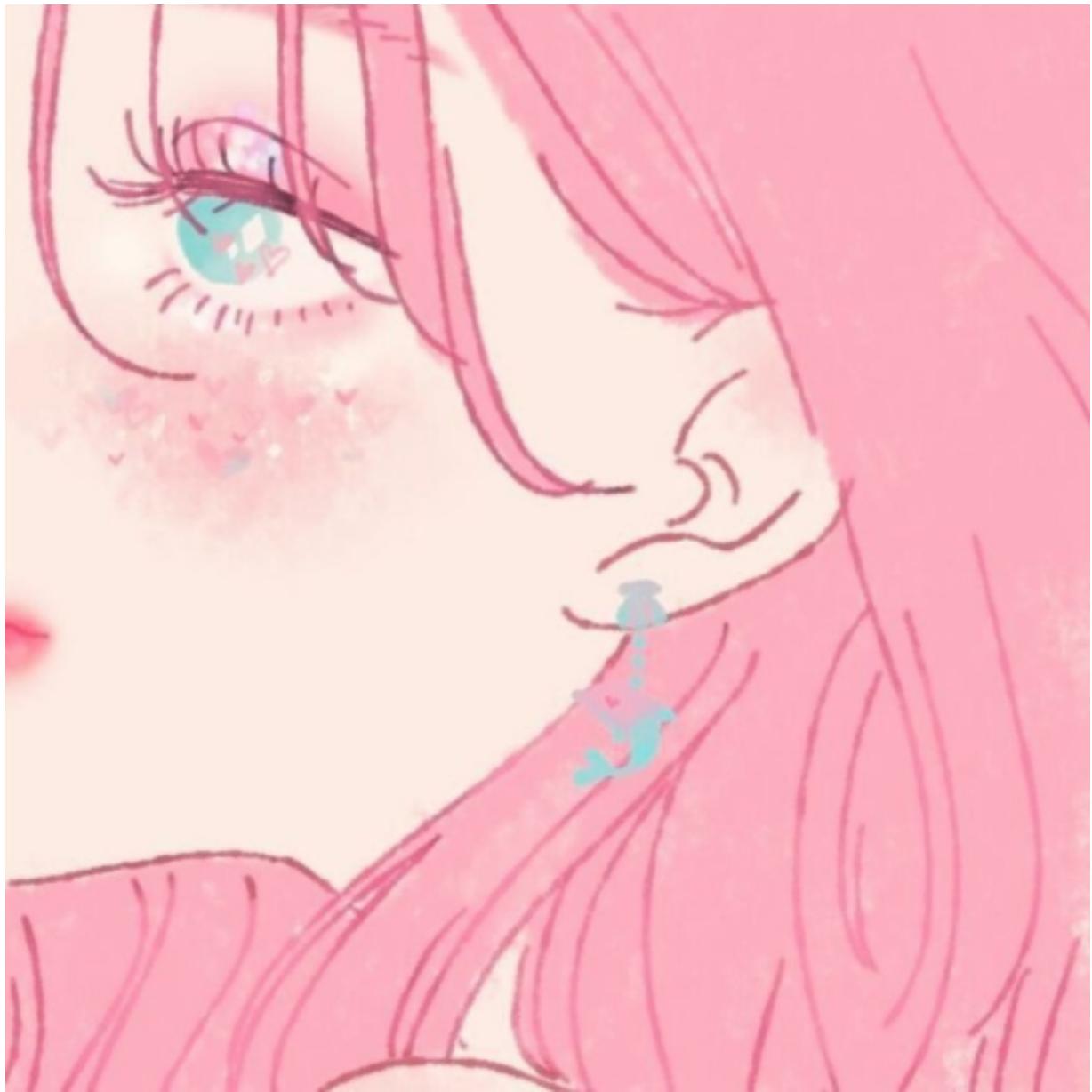
Nicole nodded.

Come to think of it, Raul had once driven Dagger away using Estock as an excuse. What on earth is Estock’s treatment among the Sith?

“So, I’m here to give you some good information.”

Dagger chuckled. He gestured for her to bend down to her ear.

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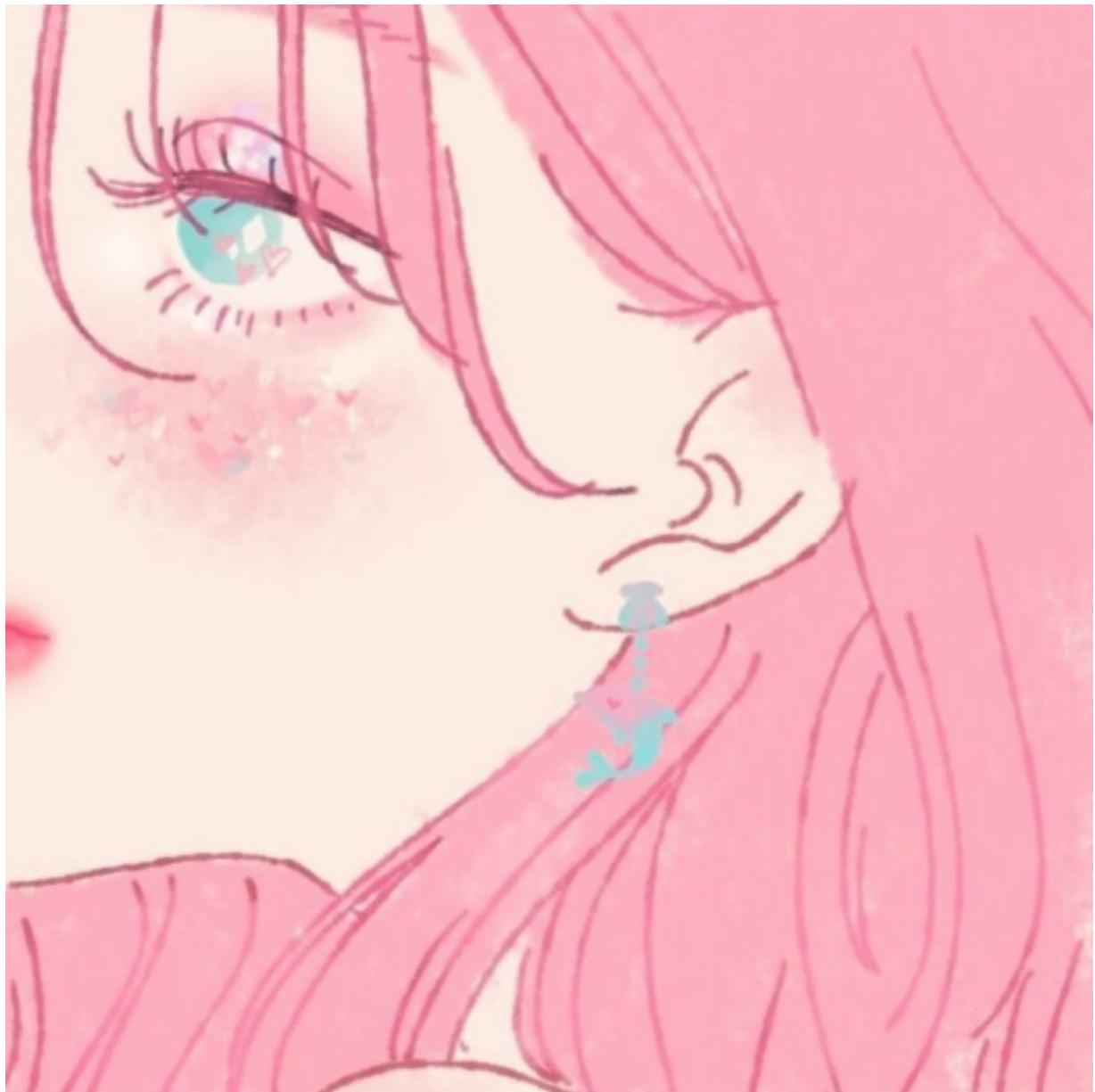


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# Chapter 69

Dagger's advice to Nicole that day was simple.

<Take the house on Aylock Street, 19th Ward. Nicole.>

It was an odd suggestion: the house in the 19th arrondissement was, at first glance, the least valuable on the list. The purchase price on paper was also the lowest.

But a closer look reveals that each house was bought at different times.

Dagger's house of authority was the oldest house among the five candidates. The house prices in the capital generally rise, but sometimes they fall and fluctuate.

This means that it could have been a bargain depending on the market conditions at the time.

'Dagger's intelligence is impressive. I had no idea the house on Aylock Street was an ancient relic.'

Nicole thought. Aylock Street was one of the capital's worst-policed slums.

However, the 18th arrondissement next to it was a typical middle-class neighborhood. The house in the 19th Ward was right on the border of the 18th Ward, which meant that it was just barely within the jurisdiction of the 18th Ward's police force, so only the neighborhood around it was well-policed.

'I didn't know how to look at the references in the manor's register.'

The mansion's registration certificates all had a serial number. All the numbers starting with 01 are for mansions built in ancient times.

Dagger knew she was going to get the house, and he'd scouted out potential locations in advance. It shouldn't have been a difficult task for Dagger, who has a strong backbone even in the Shadows.

Nearly five hundred years ago. When this capital was nothing but a land of outlaws and demons.

Many of the first mansions built in those days were the handiwork of Count Sotia.

The Counts of Sothia were a group of talented individuals who forged tools and designed specialized magical devices.

Many of these mansions had special features, or even if they didn't, their prices were higher than others.

<The secret chamber in the basement of that house must be something to see. You said before that you wanted a secret chamber if you ever got a house, Noona.>

Nicole confided in Dagger about many things. Even about her secret plants.

Dagger took those words to heart and began to scout out potential homes for Nicole.

'But in the end..... It's the one closest to the Grand Duke's house.'

Nicole decided that she could live with that, since her job as a shadow would require her to be in and out of the Grand Duke's house frequently.

The next day, after settling on a house, Nicole was escorted by Dagger to take a look at it in secret.

Having Dagger as her immediate boss was good in more ways than one. Dagger volunteered to escort Nicole and got her permission to go out.

Nicole was under a three-month gag order and couldn't leave without permission.

The shabby house was very old and abandoned. The garden was desolate. But the two-story house was bigger than she expected.

It looked like it had originally been a mansion for someone with a lot of money.

"It's nice as it is, but I think it could be beautiful."

Nicole said after looking at the house for a while.

"And as I said, that's not all this house has going for it."

Dagger led Nicole downstairs.

The basement had a secret room that was larger than expected.

"Apparently, this house used to be the home of a prominent pharmacist a long time ago. Back then, pharmacists dealt with a lot of illegal drugs, for experimental purposes, so....."

"This is a secret lab, that's amazing."

Nicole marveled.

When the empire first left the holy city of Fadebel and moved here. The empire had gone to great lengths to settle into its new capital.

There were a lot of rules and a lot of things you couldn't do.

However, there are always people out there collecting illegal items or conducting forbidden research to avoid detection.

The houses were built in the early days of the Empire, so there were many secret rooms. Security was good.

"But this house was given to me by the Grand Duke's family. Can I grow herbs in secret in such a place?"

"He doesn't touch his subordinates' houses. In the first place, a normal boss doesn't even inspect his subordinates' houses. When you take over the house, you'll write a contract with the Grand Duke, and it will say, 'We will not monitor your house, your personal life, or your family unless you cause a big problem'."

"..... That's so like him to put that in a contract."

"Well, he'd make you sign a contract that said the opposite, that he could confiscate it at any time, too, that guy."

Dagger shrugged.

After all, it was coming from Dagger, a Shadow and Nicole's boss, so he could be trusted-as long as Nicole didn't do anything to make him suspect betrayal.

"Besides, there's one advantage: this house is terribly dilapidated, what does that mean?"

"It means it's going to take a long time to renovate."

"Exactly, and in the meantime, you can use the renovations as an excuse to stay at Grace's mansion. It's hard to be a hermit in this house for three months."

Nicole was genuinely touched by Dagger's consideration. He was a young man with a lot of heart.

"Dagger. I heard you have kids you're taking care of."

"How did you know? Well, it's not a secret."

"Let me meet those children someday. I want to help them too."

Dagger looked a little surprised, but said he would.

Nicole began fixing up the house with the help of some of the tight-lipped contractors Grace had introduced her to. With the money from the Grand Duchy, she didn't have to skimp on repairs.

Then, quietly and secretly, she prepared to move the plants, one by one.

She spent the next month and a half immobilized in Grace's house.

Instead, she wanted to go to the temple and see if her father had written again.

After receiving the lace ribbon for the last time, Nicole wrote a heartfelt letter to her father.

But she couldn't because she had to watch her behavior.

Except for a little frustration, the day passed peacefully.

\*\*\*

December. As Nicole was working as a clerk in a general store, a hideout for Sith agents.

Isabel was living a very different kind of life at the Shurim estate than Nicole. She was pretending to be an aristocrat.

“You’re so pretty, you must be the most beautiful woman in the neighborhood.”

“You’re welcome, *hoho*, I’m only getting more flattery.”

“It’s true, everyone says you’re beautiful.”

The two maids laughed with Isabel. Isabel sat in the first powder room she’d ever had, getting groomed.

Of course, the makeup skills of these country maids, with no real social circle, weren’t the best, but Isabel was so beautiful that she looked good no matter what.

“You’re doing a good job. Keep it up and I’ll hire you.”

As the youngest of the maids went to get Isabel’s new shoes, Isabel whispered in the back of the remaining maid’s head. The maid nodded, a little frightened.

The Shurim estate was a backward place, and there was no other way to make a living unless you farmed or worked in the shop.

There were many women in town who wanted to join the manor as maids. The prospect of working short hours in a nice house, wearing neat clothes, was very appealing.

Isabel had been manipulating and deceiving her maids as if she had the power to hire them, and she was ruling like a

princess.

When she was finished, she dismissed the maids. Alone in the room, Isabel looked in the mirror.

‘Ha, today is a big day.’

Today she had an important appointment. To meet a long-lost friend.....

Just then, there was a soft knock on the door. It was Leos, the only son of Mr. and Mrs. Blanc, the owners of the house where Isabel lived.

“Isabel.”

“Alas, Leos. What’s wrong?”

As soon as he arrived, Isabel’s expression turned sweet. Isabel knew that this shy, sweet young man was the reason she was sitting here.

So she took every opportunity to flirt with him.

“I heard you’re going to the Great Temple again this afternoon, and I was wondering if I could come with you, if you don’t mind.”

“No. When I go, I pray for a very long time. I don’t want to be the kind of woman who keeps a man waiting for a long time, and for a metropolitan noblewoman like me, it’s standard courtesy to be considerate.”

“You have a big heart, Isabel.”

But Leos noticed something odd about Isabel: she was always breathtakingly beautiful, but today she was putting too much effort into her appearance.

'I wonder if she's meeting someone today.'

Sensing his anxiety, Isabel ruffled her hair on purpose.

"Actually, Leos, there's something..... that's been bothering me every time I go to the temple lately."

"What's that?"

"It's the way people look at me. It's rumored that I'm Leos' fiancée, and the Blancs are very prominent in the area. Of course, it's not true that I'm Leos' fiancée..... but I'm worried that I'll give you trouble if I go around looking shabby, and people who know I'm from the nobility and they keep staring at what I'm wearing....."

Leos's heart melted like snow at those words. Isabel was a pure and virtuous woman.

Now that she was living with Leos, she was attracting more and more attention. It would have been shameful had she not been a noblewoman from another part of the country.

'I must take charge of her and cherish her for the rest of my life.'

Naive Leos vowed to himself. Isabel smiled invisibly.

"I don't remember the name of my family, Leos, nor the place, but it must have been something like this, for I have some abstract memories of the time when I was a young lady of a noble family....."

".....Isabel."

"You've given me back everything I've ever lost. This beautiful mansion. The warm people. It's all like a dream,

like heaven. I can't thank you enough, Leos."

Leos was touched by Isabel's words.

"As a noble, I'm sure you're used to living in more luxury, and yet you call living in the middle of nowhere paradise.

Leos wanted to do anything for her.

"Do you lack anything? If there's anything you want, just tell me."

"I was happy enough just having you call the merchant from the city last time. This sparkling hand mirror and powder are all so pretty."

"Well, then, I'll call on him again soon, and I'll send a telegram to....."

Then there was a loud, raspy cough.

"Well, Leos, it's a cold day, so why don't you go up to your room and ask the servants to light a fire?"

If he gets another cough, we're in trouble."

Suddenly, standing in the open doorway of the powder room was Leos' mother, Heather.

".....Ah, Mother."

Leos composed himself. He ducked his head, ashamed of himself for being so absorbed to Isabel.

"Miss Isabel. It's nice to go shopping, but Miss Isabel has already bought enough cosmetics and clothes since she's been here. Country life is all about parsimony, and there will

be plenty of opportunity for new purchases when the next season arrives."

Heather nudged Isabel gently. Isabel's expression was strangely rotten.

'Meddlesome old woman.'

Isabel called her that in her mind. At first, the whole family was only kind to Isabel. She was unavoidable like the tongue inside one's mouth.

But gradually, Heather became wary of Isabel and tried to play the prospective mother-in-law.

'She's getting on my nerves.'

Isabel suddenly saw a small knife on her dresser. It was a fine one, the kind you'd use to scoop out powder or sharpen a pencil. Isabel lightly flicked away some of the eyebrow powder that had settled on it.

Perhaps this house was in need of a makeover. Heather was already old enough that she could die at any time and not be missed.

Isabel grinned like a fool as she thought to herself.

"Of course! You're right, Madam Heather, I already have so much."

And perhaps she would have more. The family fortune would be hers, too.

Isabel blinked her eyes with natural grace, hiding her inner thoughts.

[T/N: She's such a psycho 😐]

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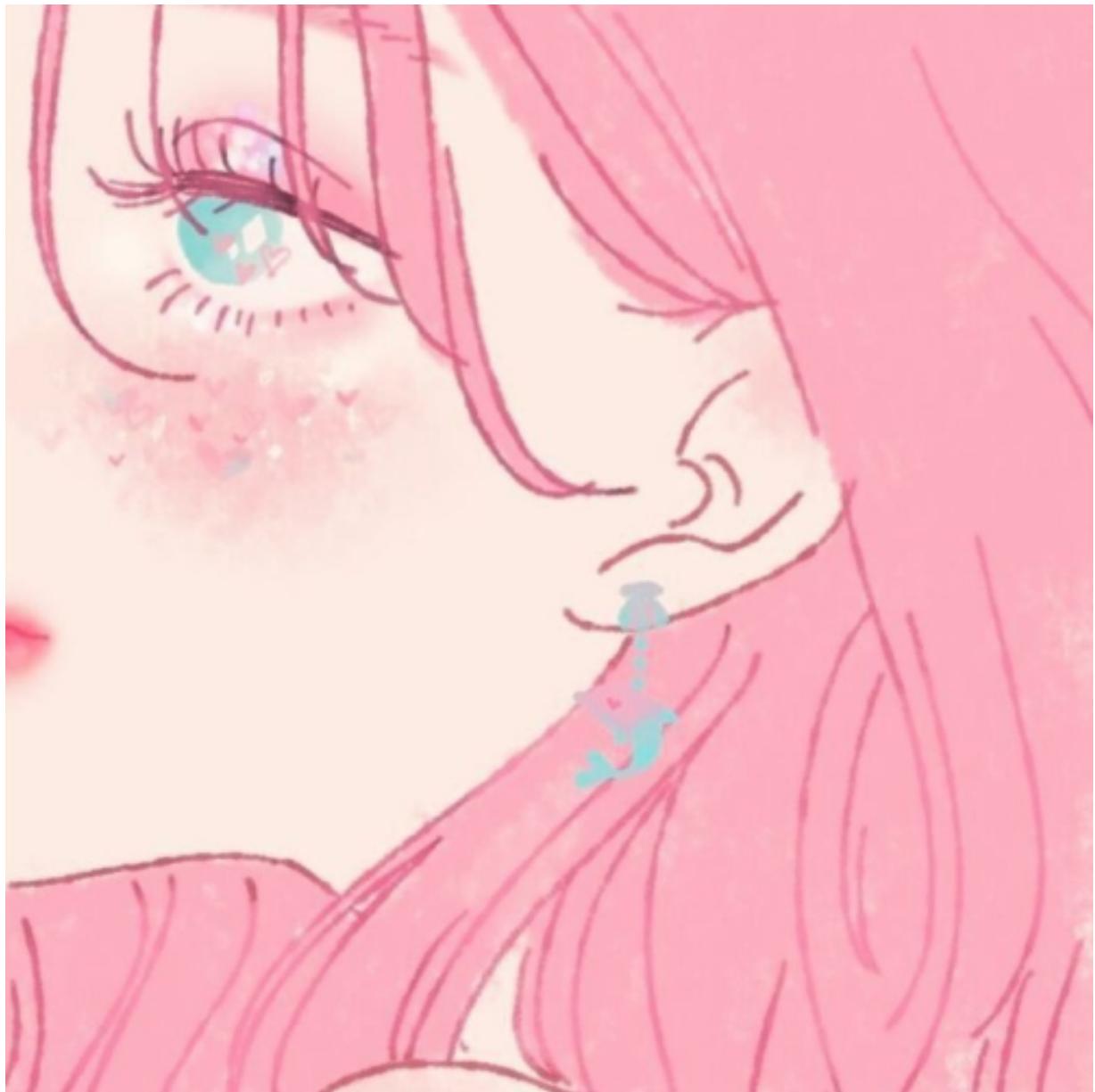


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# Chapter 70

Heather looked at Isabel, who had stopped by the pharmacy again today to pick up a bunch of medicines for her sickly son.

As much as Isabel is annoyed by Heather, Heather hasn't liked Isabel lately.

'This girl, Isabel, is clearly not of noble birth. I wonder if she really has amnesia?'

Isabel had obviously been taught table manners and good manners. But even so, she was obviously raised in poverty. She was just too pretty to recognize it at first.

Heather glanced into Isabel's room. Unopened boxes of gifts she must have bought at Leos' urging were strewn near her dressing table.

'This girl is so desperate for luxury.'

Even if she had lost all her memories, if Isabel had truly come from nobility, she would have had a lavish upbringing.

But every time Leos presented her with a new item, Isabel's eyes lit up.

..... like she'd never seen anything like it before.

'Something's wrong.'

But it was hard to put a finger on it, and Isabel was being very sweet.

<Madam Blanc, come and make tea with me.>

Especially the master of the house, Lord Blanc, Leo's father, was already mesmerized.

With both Leos and her husband smitten with Isabel, Heather was at a loss for words.

And that wasn't the only problem.

'At first, I brought her home thinking that my Leos needed a mate, but.....'

Heather loved her son so much that when Isabel started to look a little less than stellar, she felt like she couldn't give him up.

'I'll just have to keep her and get rid of her in the spring, maybe find a suitable temple.'

Heather hid her feelings and spoke politely to Leos.

"Don't forget to take your medicine. I've left a new supply in your room."

"Yes, Mother."

Leos answered obediently, then looked at Isabel and smiled gently.

"Goodbye, Isabel, and I'll see you at dinner."

"Goodbye, and I'll keep you and your family in my prayers."

Isabel replied, smiling slightly, then turned to Heather as Leos left.

"Madam, did you make another trip to the apothecary? You always make your own medicines, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I remembered something from my time at that monastery."

"You did? What kind of memories?"

Heather, who was about to leave the room after paying attention to Isabel, paused.

"I..... I think I learned a little bit of pharmacy at the monastery where I was hiding out, because I remember chopping up various herbs and making medicines."

"Well, ..... that's a good sign, keep focusing on those memories."

Heather tried to be nice, but the next moment, Isabel said something unexpected.

"Speaking of which, why don't I make some of Leos' medicines? Something very light and nutritional....."

"You can't do that!"

Heather exclaimed, startling Isabel.

"You're going to make my son's medicine when your memory isn't even accurate. Do you think his health issues are some kind of joke?"

"No, he- I definitely remember that..... Really....."

Isabel stammered. Heather's face was suddenly ghostly.

"I'm sorry, madam."

Heather gave a small shake of her head.

"Miss Isabel can't stay here forever, and I suggest you focus your efforts on finding something more practical, like the address of the monastery where you lived."

".....I was just thinking of making something like a warm medicinal tea that would be good for his health, since Leos is still on pills and nutrients all day long."

"My son's health is my business, Ms. Isabel, and you should take care of yourself. Speaking of which, December is a very cold time of year, and it's not good for you to go out so often. You should set an example for the servants."

"Yes....."

Isabel nodded, seemingly in despair.

Heather left the room with a chilly look on her face.

\*\*\*

"Hng....."

Isabel's expression changed as Heather left the room.

'There's something a little weird about this house.'

It's been five months since Isabel has been living in this house, and she's been a good girl at first.

But Isabel was not a very patient person. After three or four months, her true nature came out and she started to get

greedy for more and more things.

But there was something strange about this family she was indebted to.

For one thing, the Blancs were richer than Isabel realized.

'It smells like money, this house. And I can smell it like hell.'

Isabel would have spent the family fortune to her heart's content if Heather, the hostess, hadn't put the brakes on her, saying that in the countryside one must be frugal.

But no matter how much she observed, she couldn't figure out why they were rich.

The Blancs called themselves a family of retired merchants. But merchants are supposed to be shrewd and calculating, and they didn't seem to be.

Nor did they seem like nobles with a lot of money inherited from generation to generation.

They didn't seem to be worried about the cost of living and seemed to believe that they would be well off in the future.

Second. Leos and Heather's relationship was a bit odd.

At first, Heather seemed like a benevolent hostess, but then she became restless with his every move.

And.....

'They don't look alike, Leos and Heather.....'

Heather used to make tons of medicine for him in the winter when he was sick.

And even when he wasn't sick, she fed him nutritional pills every day. It was weird.

It's not usually a good idea to overmedicate, and even the best nutrition can backfire if you overdo it.

'I need to find out more of the secrets of this house, so that I can control everything in it.'

Isabel's life was much more luxurious than the mountain home where she hid with her family.

But she wasn't satisfied, and she had a vendetta against Nicole.

Even now, she smiled during the day, but at night she would think of Nicole over and over again, spewing hateful words.

'If I become a family, using the property of this house wouldn't be a sin, would it? Originally, don't family members share everything?'

Leos was already completely infatuated with Isabel. He was going to propose to her next year.

Isabel smirked at the thought of such a future.

\*\*\*

Isabel rode in the Blanc family carriage to the Southern Temple.

The carriage doors opened and Isabel, wrapped in a thick cloak, stepped out.

Eyes that admired her beauty. It was something Isabel had never experienced in her life.

'Maybe it's because I've been a good girl, but I've been having a lot of fun lately, even though I'm no longer a good girl!'

Isabel thought back to a month ago. After Isabel had sent ribbons and Forsythia pretending to be her father, Nicole had written back.

<I'm working in the capital, and if this goes well, I might be able to bring Jay to the capital.

Where is Father hiding? Tell me where you are.

I can't meet you in person yet, but if this job goes well, I'll be able to see you again in two years. If you need money, just ask.

Please keep yourself well hidden.....>

The letter contained a large sum of money. Isabel snatched it up this time.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

Isabel giggled as she opened the letter, but this time she didn't reply.

Nicole was busy, too, and there were no more letters. Maybe Nicole had sent a letter and it hadn't arrived yet.

This mailbox was not a conventional post office, but rather, it operated according to the procedures of a war machine. Instead of a conventional post office, the mailbox operated under the procedures of the Great War.

As secure as they were, the problem was that they were slow. Letters took at least a month to travel.

Isabel didn't really know how the mailbox worked, but she knew how to use it.

'So what I did instead of replying to her was.....'

After opening the mailbox, flipping the tag attached to the mailbox to show the red color means "There is a letter to send."

On the other hand, if the blue side of the card was visible, it meant that there were no letters to send.

In other words, the mailbox could be used as a simple letter depository. Isabel's target wasn't Nicole this time.

Isabel wrote a letter and dropped it in the Southern Temple mailbox that read:

<Father, this is Isabel, your favorite daughter.

If you read this letter, I'd like to meet you at the Southern Temple.

The date would be December 13th.

The place is in front of the building for the adults of the Star's Castle, at the very edge of the garden in the Southern Temple.>

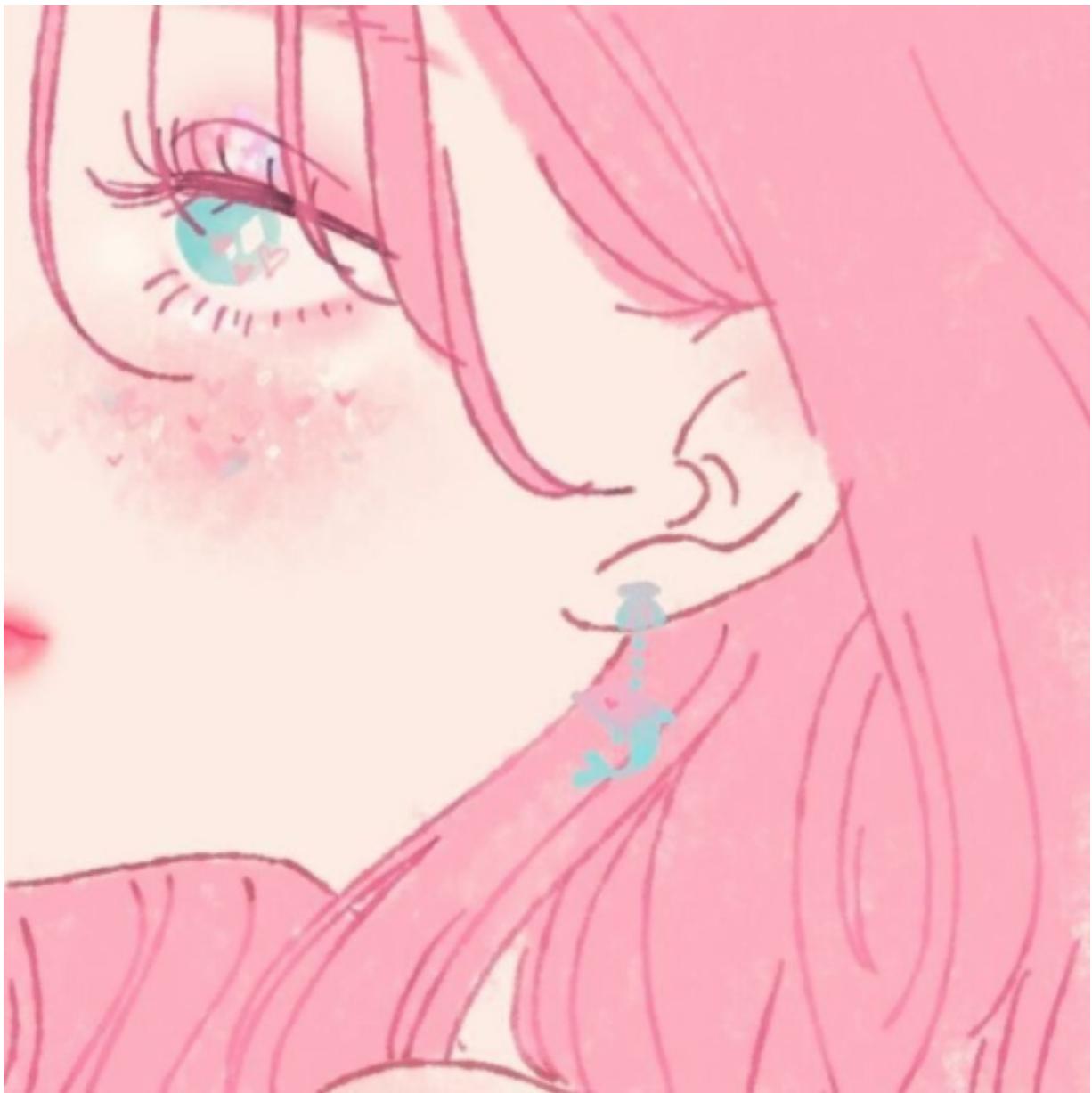
Today is December 13th. It was the day Isabel was to meet their father, Matisse, wherever he might be hiding.

'I'm sure he'll come, he's a big family man.'

Isabel thought as she headed to the sparsely populated meeting place.

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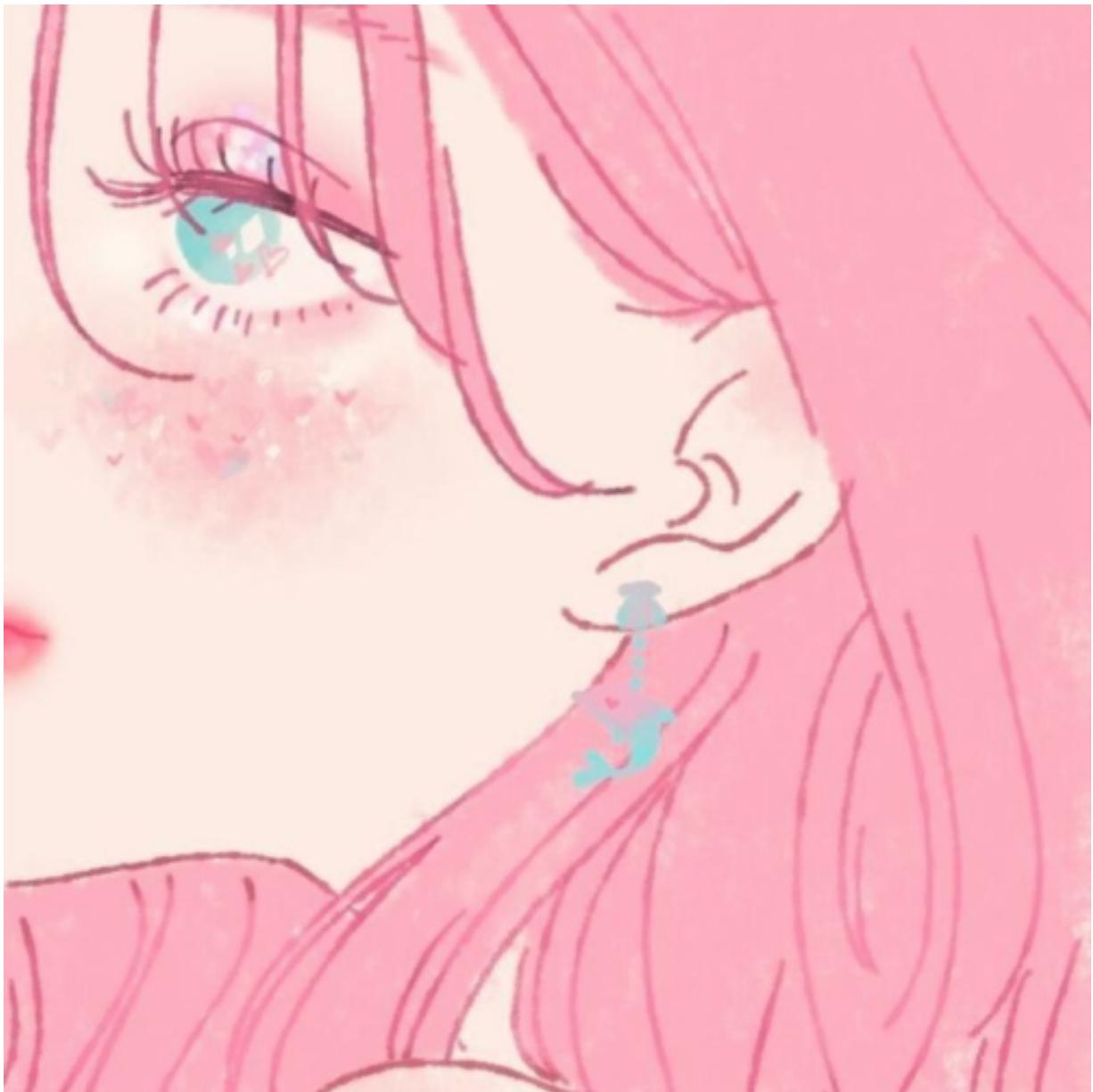


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# Chapter 71

\* \* \*

“Child, it’s cold. When are you coming inside?”

Isabel adjusted the collar of her newly tailored luxury coat and clasped her gloved hands.

‘Does that fool Nicole know everything about Father’s secret?’

Lately, Isabel had been thinking a lot about Nicole. Being deceived by someone she had always considered a foolish minion.

This was an embarrassment that Isabel couldn’t even speak of.

‘I need to go to the capital and destroy Nicole. To do that, I’ll need Leos’ help.’

Leos was a good host to Isabel. Such innocent and kind men were rare. She could use him as she pleased and then discard him.

‘But first, I need to remove Heather to have Leos completely under my control. That woman has a tight grip on her son.’

Trying to meddle between Heather and Leos wasn’t easy.

Being a pure person also meant being straightforward. At first glance, it seemed like Heather loved Leos deeply, and Leos felt the same way.

'Certainly, the stage of brainwashing with words is over. What I need now is... a venomous creature.'

Isabel searched her bosom. Inside, there were a few notes personally written by Isabel.

These were drug recipes Isabel had restored as she remembered. Among them was... a secret deeply held within Isabel's heart.

Isabel's house hidden in the forest where she lived with her family.

In that house, there were quite a few pharmaceutical books.

Among them, there was a book that Freya had locked securely, preventing anyone from reading it. The book was stored in the secret drawer of the study.

<Those books are forbidden. They even contain instructions on handling venomous creatures, so they're dangerous. You don't need to see those books.>

Freya had uttered these words even after days of her insistence and pleading when she was bedridden.

When Mother and Father were healthy, Isabel refrained from touching those books out of respect.

However, since last year, Freya's health had deteriorated rapidly.

Father often roamed outside the house, which allowed Isabel to secretly administer sleeping pills to Freya and steal the books by unlocking the door.

There were a total of four books referred to as forbidden, and their author was unknown.

There was nothing special on the cover. Instead of titles, numbers from 0 to 3 were written.

‘At first, they seemed like ordinary books.’

However, the knowledge contained within was truly remarkable.

‘A powerful drug that can turn even the most mentally strong and famous priest into an addict in just one day. And there’s a deadly poison known as the “Black Demon” that turns a person into a weapon of assassination by making their entire body toxic, killing through sexual intercourse....’

Among them, what fascinated Isabel the most was book number 0.

Number 0 contained detailed information about venomous creatures, in particular.

Ancient venomous creatures. Mysterious beings that slumber for decades until awakened by their master’s care.

Isabel’s attention was drawn to a particular passage at the end of one of these books.

It was a creature known as the ‘Glassworm.’

<... There is a venomous creature called the Glassworm, also known as the Drinker’s Worm.

This venomous creature has the power to control a person's mind and move as it pleases, making it an all-powerful agent.

The Glassworm is born from the flower bud of a unique plant called the Glassflower, and this is a secret of the demon world... >

The intermediary through which Glassworms are born, the Glassflower. It is named this way because it has leaves with pointed and transparent shapes resembling glass shards.

What's crucial is the cultivation method.

Those who cultivate Glassflowers must feed their own blood in small amounts to the leaves of the Glassflower every day.

The leaves of the Glassflower have the property of absorbing human blood.

The time it takes for the sprout to bloom into a flower varies for each, but typically falls between 60 to 150 days.

During this period, if diligently fed with blood every day, a flower bud forms, and within it, the Glassworm emerges.

'I still vividly remember the first time I learned about Glassworms.'

Isabel shivered after stealing and reading that book.

This was because Glassworms could, in essence, enslave the person they had infested, making them their own servant.

More precisely, they could manipulate the person's 'mind' after weaving into their memories.

Those who raised Glassworms could turn the host into their own puppet.

The host would believe only the words of the owner and even their likes and dislikes would be in accordance with the owner's wishes.

The catalyst for the birth of a Glassworm, the Glassflower.

The reason for this name is that the plant has leaves with sharp and transparent ends, like shards of glass.

What's important is the method of cultivation.

Those who grow the Glassflower must feed a small amount of their own blood to the leaves every day.

The leaves of the Glassflower have the property of absorbing human blood.

The time it takes for the bud to bloom varies, but it's generally between 60 and 150 days.

During that time, if you carefully feed it blood every day, a flower bud forms, and within it appears the Glassworm.

'I still vividly remember the first time I learned about the Glassworm.'

Isabel shuddered after sneaking a read of that book.

This is because the Glassworm can make the person who raises it, i.e., the host, their slave.

More precisely, they can manipulate memories and control the 'mind.'

The person who raises the Glassworm can turn the worm's host into their own puppet.

The host trusts only their master's words and even follows their master's likes and dislikes.

There was a lengthy explanation as to how the Glassworm came to possess such unique properties.

According to legend, a long time ago, the demons living in this world used the Glassworm to make humans their loyal subjects.

The demons did not care about human feelings. When they needed loyal human subjects, they planted a worm in their hearts. Those who had this 'glass shard' called a Glassworm planted in their hearts found their minds torn apart, believing and following whatever their masters said.

Isabel shuddered as she read the content.

'To think one could control people at will! Ah, how thrillingly wonderful!'

Isabel had always been interested in the human mind. Her enjoyment of meddling was also influenced by this.

The human psyche is always filled with dark aspects and desires. When you nurture these small desires, people tend to think whatever they please.

For example, Freya and Nicole.

Freya felt guilty towards Nicole, while Nicole felt hurt by Freya.

Despite this, because they loved each other, they could resolve their conflicts by being sincere.

However, it was also possible to manipulate words and actions so that only hurt feelings were expressed, not love.

This was Isabel's way of meddling between the two of them.

Isabel had always been interested in this as a hobby, but to think that she could turn a living person into her puppet.

'I can't let my siblings see this. This knowledge is mine!'

Isabel stole the book and carefully hid it in the deepest part of her room, her secret laboratory.

Every night, she read the contents of the book and committed them to memory. Unfortunately, the book probably burned when the house was set on fire.

"In hindsight, it's a bit of a pity. I should have taken the book with me, but Karen set the fire too quickly."

However, she wouldn't have been able to run away with the book anyway, since Grace caught them right after.

In any case, all the books in the house would have been burned.

'Since I took the book and hid it in my room, that fool Nicole wouldn't even know that such incredible knowledge exists. She wouldn't even know about the book's existence!'

Isabel let out a sly laugh. She felt a slight sense of superiority over Nicole.

Although she had lost the book, fortunately, Isabel had memorized many recipes.

While staying at the Blanc mansion, she wrote down the contents of the book from memory and hid them in various places.

"And finally, it's time for the Glassworm. Leos would be even more fascinating if I could fan the darker aspects of his psyche."

'How much fun will it be? How should I manipulate him to make him a more intriguing piece?'

"For example, what if I commanded him to hate the one he loves? Or to love only me?"

Isabel decided to plant the Glassworm in Leoss, who was deeply into her but was not as easy to win over as she had thought.

Leos was handsome, so there would be a sense of fulfillment in making him her puppet.

"And most importantly, the seed of the Glassflower..."

Isabel knew who was in possession of that seed of the Glassflower.

After all, it's the person she's set to meet today.

Rustle.

At that moment, the sound of someone approaching was heard. Isabel, who was turning around, felt the corner of her lips rise.

Isabel had heard her father's footsteps for many years. How he walked, what his demeanor was when he became urgent.

"Father!"

Isabel turned her head. The man standing across from her pulled back his hood.

Clear blue eyes and an incredibly beautiful face.

A handsome man, resembling Jay, stood there. He had Nicole when he was just twenty. Now in his mid-forties, he looked astonishingly young, no more than mid-thirties to anyone who saw him.

He was Isabel's father, Matis.

"Isabel."

He said. Isabel laughed inwardly.

Now the card called 'Father', Nicole's absolute weakness, was in her hands.

'Ah, things are about to get more interesting.'

For now, should she act pleased to see her father?

Isabel thought it would be quite easy. At least the pleasure she felt right now was genuine.

Because Isabel would be asking a lot of him in the future.

"I really missed you!"

\* \* \*

February.

It had been two months since Isabel reunited with her father at the Southern Temple.

The entire capital was buzzing to welcome the New Year.

Nicole's new home was nearly completed.

'I'll have to move soon.'

Raul had gone to inspect his lands in the provinces, leaving the capital vacant.

Every year, there was a founding ceremony in January, so New Year's festivals and commemorative events in the capital usually took place in February. It was tradition.

"I'm planning to go to the Great Temple today."

Nicole spoke softly.

"Is that okay?"

Nicole was leaning against the window reading a book. Grace, who was standing across from her and looking out the window, turned her head.

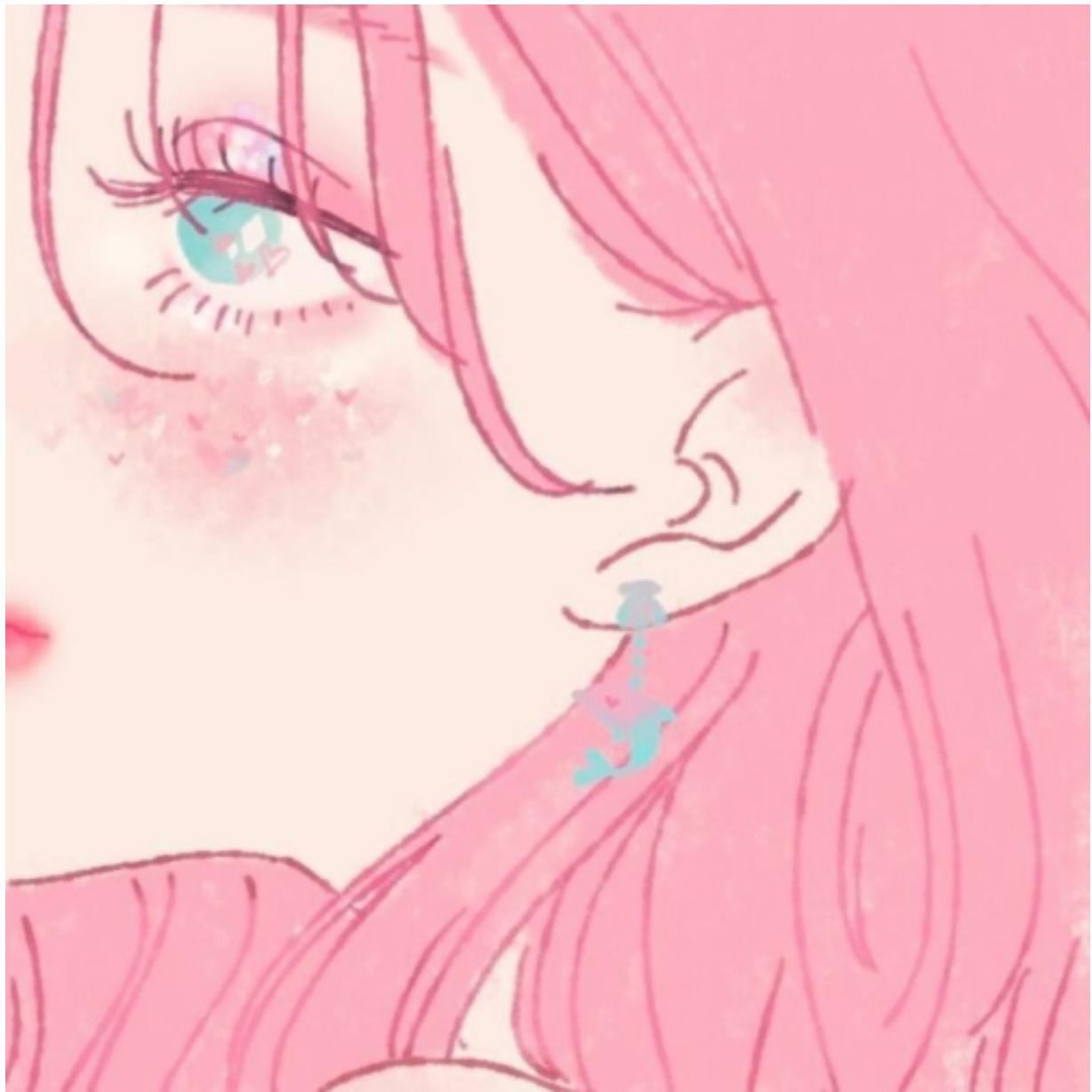
"Going to the Great Temple is ultimately to check on my father. It's better to go there discreetly when the Grand Duke has ordered me to stay inside the house. Officially, I'm still inside."

Nicole moved very carefully. If she recklessly contacted her father, it could ruin all the work she had done so far.

'I have sent money, but I wonder where he is or if he's doing well.'

Just thinking of her father made her heart ache.

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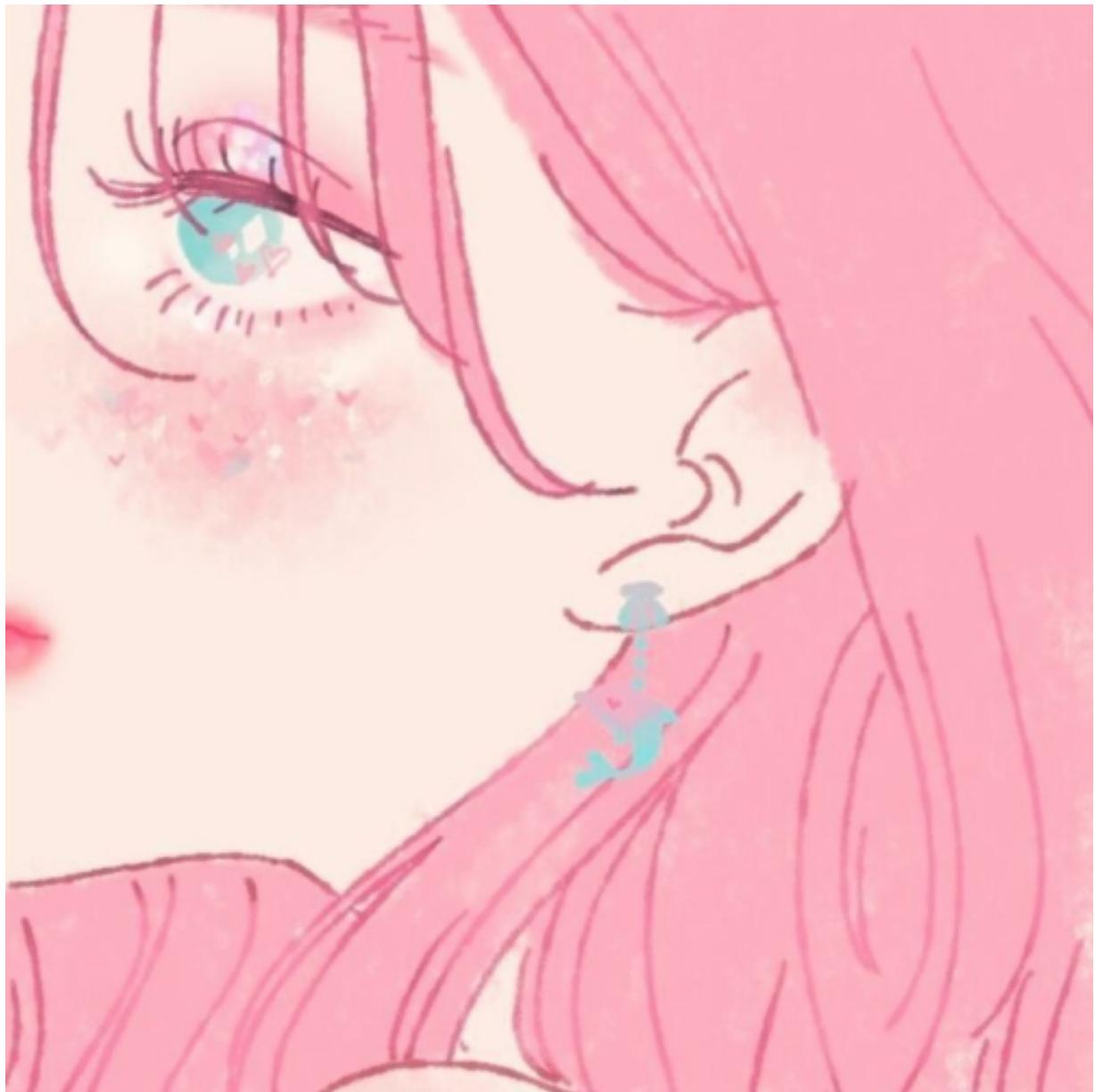


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# Chapter 72

“Don’t worry too much. If your father is the person you know, he won’t be caught easily. Don’t act impulsively and make mistakes. Also, no matter how much your heart wavers, never send detailed information in a letter.”

“...I’ll do that.”

In her heart, Nicole wanted to run as soon as she can to meet her father.

However, Grace diligently helped Nicole control her emotions from the side.

In the process, Grace and Nicole began to think of each other as daughter and parent substitutes and grew closer over time.

“Should I be afraid of the next mission?”

“What is there to be afraid of? There’s nothing to fear now.”

After receiving the last reward and punishment, Nicole couldn’t meet Raul for a month and a half.

Since the probationary period had ended, Nicole thought that next time, they would probably not meet at all and she would be pushed into a tough job.

‘One thing that concerns me is that I still haven’t received a name.’

It was said that to truly become a Shadow, one had to receive a flower's name, or rather, a code name.

But if she shows her concern to Grace, it will make her worry.

"There will probably be a lot of people at the temple today."

"Didn't they say that to hide a tree, hide it in the forest? There will be a lot of people at the temple today, so it's better to go on a day like this."

Grace nodded her head.

"What did they say to do when going to crowded places?"

"They said to disguise ourselves as female priests."

"You remember it well. When you wear the same uniform, your face won't attract attention. People will first notice the person's clothing."

"They said we shouldn't dress as palace guards or elite guards. Since we might get caught for impersonation."

"That's right. On the other hand, there are various sects of priests besides the Divine Sect, so it's safer. We can pretend to be priests engaged in missionary work."

Grace, satisfied with Nicole's understanding that needed no words, spoke.

On that day, Nicole painted her lips a light pink and dressed as a priestess of the Goddess of the Moon.

Her pure white priestess robe had a short cloak and hood, making it even better for concealing her identity.

Raul arrived in the capital earlier than scheduled.

Inside the slow-moving carriage, Raul was silently gazing out the window.

Bastard was sitting across from him.

Suddenly, the carriage passed by the front of the Marquis Saratheve's mansion.

It had already been a month and a half since the death of Marquis Saratheve.

Once a powerful noble family that ruled the capital, the Saratheve mansion was now empty and looked dilapidated.

"In the end, you've secured the sole military authority in the capital with Marquis Saratheve's death."

"The imperial family will probably do whatever it takes to prevent that. They'll raise someone new under their control."

"If they observe and see someone as a threat, they'll simply crush them."

Raul nodded his head.

"I'm glad I don't have to see that Saratheve's bastard face again."

"You've removed a thorn in our side. Maybe Karen is a symbol of luck. It might be a coincidence, but the target died on her first mission."

"That's the problem. She's like a bomb of a woman."

Raul furrowed his brow.

"I sent her for reconnaissance, and she blew up, taking out the target?"

A woman with light golden hair and beautiful blue eyes. Karen.

Over the past month and a half, Raul had kept her locked up in his house, under the pretext of hiding.

In Karen's first mission, a high-ranking figure died. So, it was a natural procedure.

Now, that woman had to stay out of his mind until she was assigned the next mission.

Strangely, Raul had thought of her several times. Even her image of sitting tied up in his office, struggling to breathe.

'Do I have such a hobby?'

Raul was suspicious of her.

Often, thoughts of the remote village of Lanphor and the way she looked at him there came to his mind.

Raul had wanted to interrogate her about the forest fire incident.

At that time, she looked at him with eyes that seemed to plead for her rescue. There was no other way to describe it.

Strangely, that urgency had seeped into his heart.

"That girl is beyond compare. No matter what I say. She seems confident that I won't harm her despite being scared."

Raul was conscious of the sensation of his hand against the window.

And then, he recalled the day not long ago when he had tied Nicole in his study.

That day, Raul had stared into Nicole's eyes before tying her up.

In that moment, Raul understood why she was constantly challenging him.

He felt an impulse.

It was an impulse to push her against the wall, bite her lips, and tousle her hair.

He wanted to slip his fingers beneath her tight dress and caress her soft skin with care.

It was a feeling without any real meaning. However, it was a feeling that undeniably existed.

"Do you still not like Karen, by any chance?"

Bastard glanced at Raul.

Raul replied casually.

"If she keeps challenging me like that, I can't guarantee anything."

"Excuse me?"

"Do you like her?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

“Pretending to be clueless, I’m talking about Karen, that woman.”

“She’s not someone I have personal feelings for.”

Bastard was surprised and cleared his throat.

“That’s the correct answer.”

The problem is that being the correct answer.

Raul absentmindedly gazed out the window while cursing silently in his mind.

Usually, people made way when they saw a Grand Duke’s carriage, but there were unavoidable congested areas.

Each time, the carriage was packed tightly near the bridge.

This was the road leading to the Great Temple, so the carriage was always pushed forward like a flood.

Raul pulled back the curtain.

At that moment, he spotted something outside the carriage.

A sudden gust of wind blew.

The hood of a female priest’s attire, crossing the road, was blown away, revealing clear blue eyes.

‘Karen?’

It was indeed that woman.

“Stop the carriage.”

Raul said, getting off the carriage impulsively.

She was crossing the bridge leading to the Great Temple.

'I warned her, but she still hasn't come to her senses.'

The day he called her and scolded her was a literal warning, a scare tactic.

The next time, he warned her that he wouldn't tolerate impulsive actions. But seeing that carefree woman, it seemed like the warning didn't have any effect.

She looked around and then headed towards the empty corridor.

It was still early in the year, so the day was cold, but there was a line of people coming to pray at the Great Temple.

However, the building behind the main temple of the Great Temple was a relatively unpopular space, home to forgotten lesser deities.

Passing through those areas, one would find the accommodations of apprentice priests.

'Why is she going there?'

For the first time in a while, Raul wanted to test his surveillance skills.

She walked cautiously along the long corridor.

Like a hunter stalking a deer deep in the forest, he followed her from a distance.

She reached the end of the corridor.

She removed some decorations from her clothes.

She had a hood on her head and was wearing a short cloak with the temple's emblem.

When she removed the hood and turned the cloak inside out, the double-sided cloak's appearance changed.

The outer side of the double-sided cloak was priest attire, and the inner side was a regular lady's dress.

She had a white dress underneath and, after changing clothes, Karen looked like an ordinary young lady.

Raul felt like he had witnessed her changing clothes.

"You've come?"

When Karen knocked on a small door, a very young apprentice priest came out.

The priest smiled brightly upon seeing her and then ushered her inside.

It was forbidden for apprentice priests to have casual contact with women.

He considered leaving but decided to stay for a moment out of curiosity to see what she was doing.

\* \* \*

"Please state your identification code."

"Yes."

Nicole, a little excited and blushing, whispered her identification number and password in a low voice, as if afraid someone might overhear. It looked as if they were engaged in a secret affair if someone were to see them.

“I’ll guide you right away.”

The apprentice priest in charge of the Great Temple’s secret mailbox also recognized Nicole. They had exchanged greetings a few times during her visits here.

Fortunately, the apprentice priest also remembered Nicole.

“I hope there’s a letter you’ve been waiting for. This mailbox is used by many people with stories to tell. The Goddess said that concealing the virtuous secrets of many is a good thing.”

Nicole nodded slightly in response to the apprentice priest’s words.

The apprentice priest told Nicole to wait for a moment, then carefully opened a concealed door in the wall. Inside, there was a double door.

The apprentice priest entered a password, unlocked two locks, and only then called Nicole.

Nicole entered the dim mailbox room and checked her mailbox number.

After the apprentice priest opened the mailbox for Nicole, they politely said,

“I’ll leave you to check it at your leisure.”

“Yes.”

Nicole replied to the priest and opened the mailbox as soon as he left.

Inside the mailbox, she noticed a single sheet of paper.

'There's a reply!'

Nicole's eyes widened, and her face brightened.

- *Like sunlight melting on summer leaves.*

*My heart is always directed towards one place. I miss you.*

*I am very healthy.*

*If you provide a way, I will find a way to secretly come to the capital. It doesn't matter how long it takes.*

*I swear, while looking at the stars in the sky, that I will meet you again someday. Not only you, but also the other precious people in my life...*

*I hope for a reunion in this lifetime.*

Her father's handwriting was very elegant, with a habit of curving some of the characters.

'If he's sending a letter like this, he must be doing well.'

She had observed it many times, but the handwriting was undoubtedly her father's. Worried that someone might get hold of it, her father didn't even write his name.

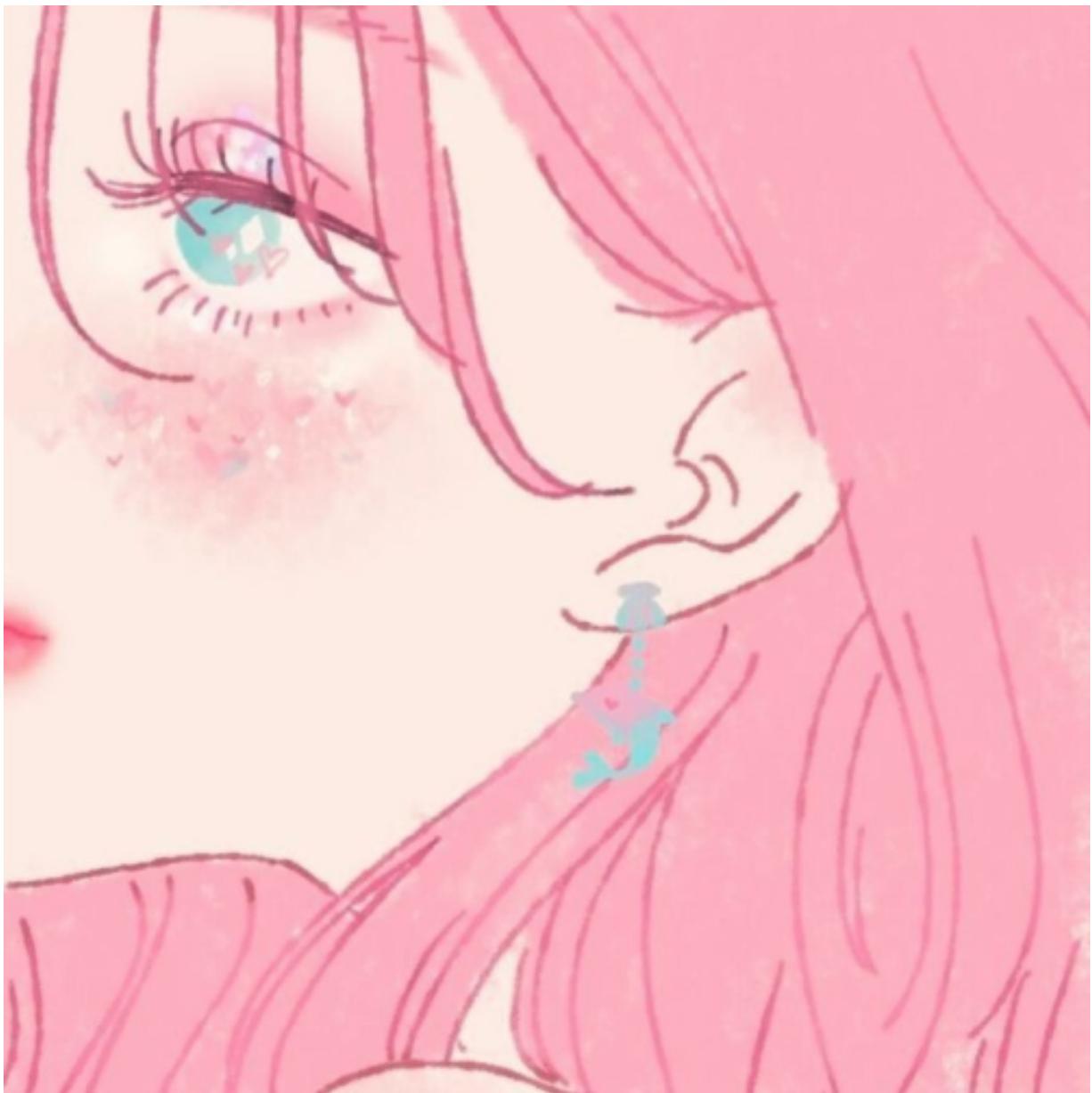
It was a very wise decision. The letter didn't mention Nicole, Jay, or Isabel by name.

'I'm relieved that Father is safe.'

Nicole thought to herself as she left the mailbox room. Her face was a bit flushed, and thanks to that, she was in a state she couldn't have imagined happening that day.

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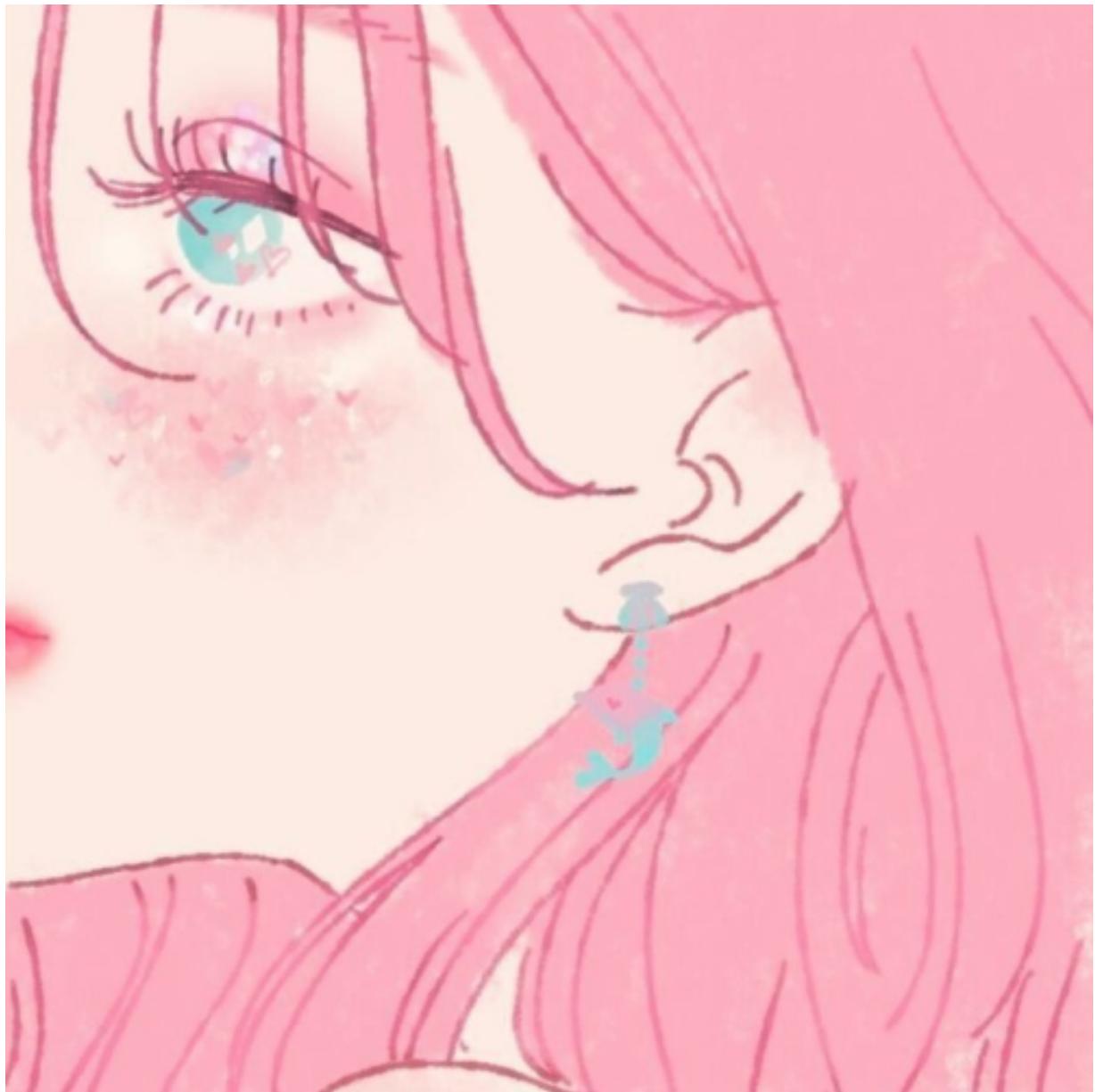


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# Chapter 73

The apprentice priest asked Nicole if he could close the mailbox. Nicole nodded her head.

He locked the mailbox and said to Nicole,

“Have you heard the news you’ve been waiting for? It’s turned out well.”

“...Thank you.”

Grace said to give silver coins to the priests at the Southern Temple when asking them to do trivial tasks.

After all, the priests were people too, and there was no harm in rewarding them for important tasks.

Nicole discreetly offered some silver coins, but the apprentice priest politely declined with a shake of his hand.

“No, it’s really alright.”

“But...”

“Why don’t you make a donation to the Great Temple instead? Many people come for the memorial service.”

In February, the Great Temple was always bustling. It wasn’t just because of people coming for New Year’s prayers.

It was said that the God would console the souls who had died unfairly and were wandering before the arrival of spring each year.

That's why during this period, it was mostly those who had lost their family members prematurely who came to pray.

Hence, it was heard that even entering the main hall of the Great Temple required waiting in long lines.

Nicole also wanted to pray for her mother.

In the small temple outside the city, at Sienna's altar, she also secretly paid her mother her respects.

But offering prayers at the Great Temple held a different significance.

"I also have a strong desire to pray at the altar. But it seems crowded with people, so I don't think I can. I'll make sure to make a donation next time, as you suggested."

People who wanted to pray during this time were usually those who had lost their family or loved ones early.

The priest, understanding the meaning, sighed.

"I see. Well, during this time, there are always people lined up at the altar... The donation box is under the altar."

Then, as if giving a discreet tip, the priest said that there was also an altar prepared in the adjacent room.

Usually, ordinary people used the large altars set up in the Great Temple for the deceased.

They offered flowers there and prayed with their families.

However, very high-ranking and wealthy individuals entrusted money to the temple and had small altars set up.

They then commissioned the priests to perform memorial services annually.

“Isn’t that for other people’s altars?”

“God has forbidden the extravagant personal altars adorned with gold and flowers within the Great Temple to prevent luxury. So, in cases like this, several people usually contribute money together to set up the altar. You can offer flowers and pray there. Of course, you can also pray for your deceased family members. By bestowing blessings upon so many people, it will surely be of help to the lady, too. God warmly embraces even the humble departed souls.”

Nicole nodded at those words.

“My father... He must know that my mother has passed away. Maybe he knew because he saw the body... But the fact remains that my mother is gone. I wonder how sad he must be.”

Nicole thought about her father. Freya was originally deeply religious. On lonely nights, she used to pray all night for her children.

“Thank you. I’ll go and pray.”

The mailbox room was hidden inside the small chapel, with an adjoining middle door.

The priest opened the door to the adjacent room and guided Nicole. He smiled warmly.

"Take your time to pray, and feel free to visit the temple at any time. I'll be waiting in the adjacent room. You never know when you might need further assistance."

The priest's attitude was overly kind. Nicole found it a bit unusual, but she reasoned that it must be typical for people in the Great Temple.

"Thank you once again."

As the priest closed the door, Nicole was left alone.

'It's quite spacious here.'

Nicole slowly looked around. It was a much larger and grander hall than the adjacent room.

On each wall, there were smooth white altars made of marble. Sculptures representing the deity were placed atop these altars, adorned with various flowers.

'Indeed, altars for the wealthy are different.'

On the other hand, even among the affluent, there were undoubtedly a few who had sadly lost someone dear to them.

It wasn't customary to cover one's face when offering prayers. She looked around and removed her hood.

'Mother, I received a handwritten note from Father today. Judging by the content, it seems he's safe. It would be great to know exactly where he is... But even if it takes a little time, our family will surely reunite.'

Nicole unfolded the note and blushed shyly.

She brought it close to her face, as if kissing it, and then tucked it into her bosom.

'Ah, let's offer flowers for Mother.'

Nicole looked around. In front of the largest altar, there was a large vase filled with fresh flowers, all of them grown in the Great Temple's greenhouse.

Among them, there was an out-of-place flower - bright yellow forsythia.

'Mom liked yellow flowers.'

Nicole had never been able to express her affection to her mother during her lifetime. In fact, she had resented her mother even though she understood her feelings.

If she ever had another chance, she would pick a handful of spring flowers for her and tell her that they were all her favorite flowers.

Holding a handful of flowers, Nicole approached the nearest altar.

'What is this place?'

Nicole wondered. While the other altars were also quite grand and large, this place seemed different in nature.

Moreover, the other altars had the names of families written on them, but this one had none.

'This... Somehow, it's similar to the altar Grace used to commemorate her daughter. Instead of names or records...'

There were two silver cups placed there, just those, standing alone.

Nicole hesitated for a moment. However, she thought it wouldn't hurt to offer a prayer for the owners of this altar, as the priest had suggested.

'The flowers have withered.'

There seemed to be more wilted flowers on this altar compared to the others, as if no one came specifically to tend to it.

Nicole unhesitatingly plucked some roses that were almost withered, their stems hanging limply. It was fortunate that she had worn leather gloves.

She adorned it with forsythia flowers on top. That was when it happened.

"What are you doing right now?"

"...!"

Nicole turned her head. Without her noticing, Raul had approached and was looking at her. The change in her pupils was only for an instant.

\* \* \*

From the beginning, the fact that Karen had spent her hiding period at Grace's house was a privilege in itself.

However, Raul's acceptance of it was a sign of respect for Grace.

However, the beneficiary of that respect-based privilege was here now, once again defying his words.

'Furthermore, she exchanges notes with a young priest and acts familiar... '

The temple's ceremonial priests, especially those responsible for noble funeral rites, were renowned for their impeccable appearance.

Among the noblewomen, it was trendy to engage in discreet romances with such young priests.

Moreover, since priests were forbidden from marrying, they were even more popular as romantic partners.

Raul knew what this hall was used for.

Only those who had made substantial donations were allowed to discreetly set up commemorative altars in this hall, and only approved individuals had access.

Raul had the privilege of unrestricted access here whenever he pleased.

Raul remembered that the door Karen had entered led to this hall he was familiar with. That's why he had quietly entered this hall. At that moment, she was in conversation with a priest. From Raul's position, they were out of sight, and he could only see the young apprentice priest.

She stepped into the hall, where not just anyone could enter.

The apprentice priest was clearly flirting with Karen.

Furthermore, her audacity didn't stop there. After the priest left, she happily retrieved a note from her bosom and read it. It clearly looked like she had received the note from the priest.

<It seems that Miss Karen is luckily not a repeat offender. I heard she met Lady Grace and turned over a new leaf? But

it seems she was quite a troublemaker before...>

Shadow's agents are investigating her background. Las, who was sent from her hometown to investigate her, said casually.

"What are you up to? W, why are you here?"

Raul casually looked at Nicole, as if she were the odd one out.

"I told you, I'll be keeping an eye on you."

Nicole looked at him with suspicion at his words. Since when, and how many times?

'No, Raul said he wouldn't be surveilling the household either...'

No matter how strict he is, he wasn't ruthless enough to spy on his teacher's house.

"Moreover, you stole flowers from my parents' commemorative altar."

Thud.

At those words, the flowers Nicole was holding fell to the ground.

"I didn't know. The priest—"

"Did the young priest who easily fall for women told you to?"

Raul said with a patronizing tone, as if speaking to a child.

“Because there were no names of the deceased on the altar...”

Nicole replied softly.

“Of course. I had it secretly made for the priests to offer prayers.”

“Please don’t blame the priest. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have used someone else’s altar without permission.”

Marriages of agents who received names from Sith were solely subject to their master’s permission. The same went for relationships. They had to report if they wanted to engage in an intimate relationship with someone, as there might be someone targeting Sith’s agents.

Raul genuinely found her annoying, considering how she constantly aroused his curiosity with such theatrics.

“For whom were you trying to pray?”

“It’s for Grace’s daughter, Sienna.”

In reality, Grace had sent Nicole to the temple today, providing her with a ready-made excuse in case she was caught sneaking out by the nobles of the Grand Duke’s household. If they discovered her secret outing, she was instructed to claim that she had come to mourn Sienna at Grace’s behest. Nicole was sincerely grateful to Grace for this.

Sienna’s name made Raul uncomfortable, and his expression turned cold.

“And... I also wanted to pray for the original owners of this altar. I shouldn’t have used someone else’s altar so

recklessly... Of course, I never imagined it would be a memorial altar for the Grand Duke's parents."

"Did you really intend to pray for my parents?"

"Yes, I truly did."

"Then go ahead and pray," Raul said, his tone stern.  
"Quickly."

Nicole blinked and, under Raul's watchful gaze, closed her eyes to begin her prayer.

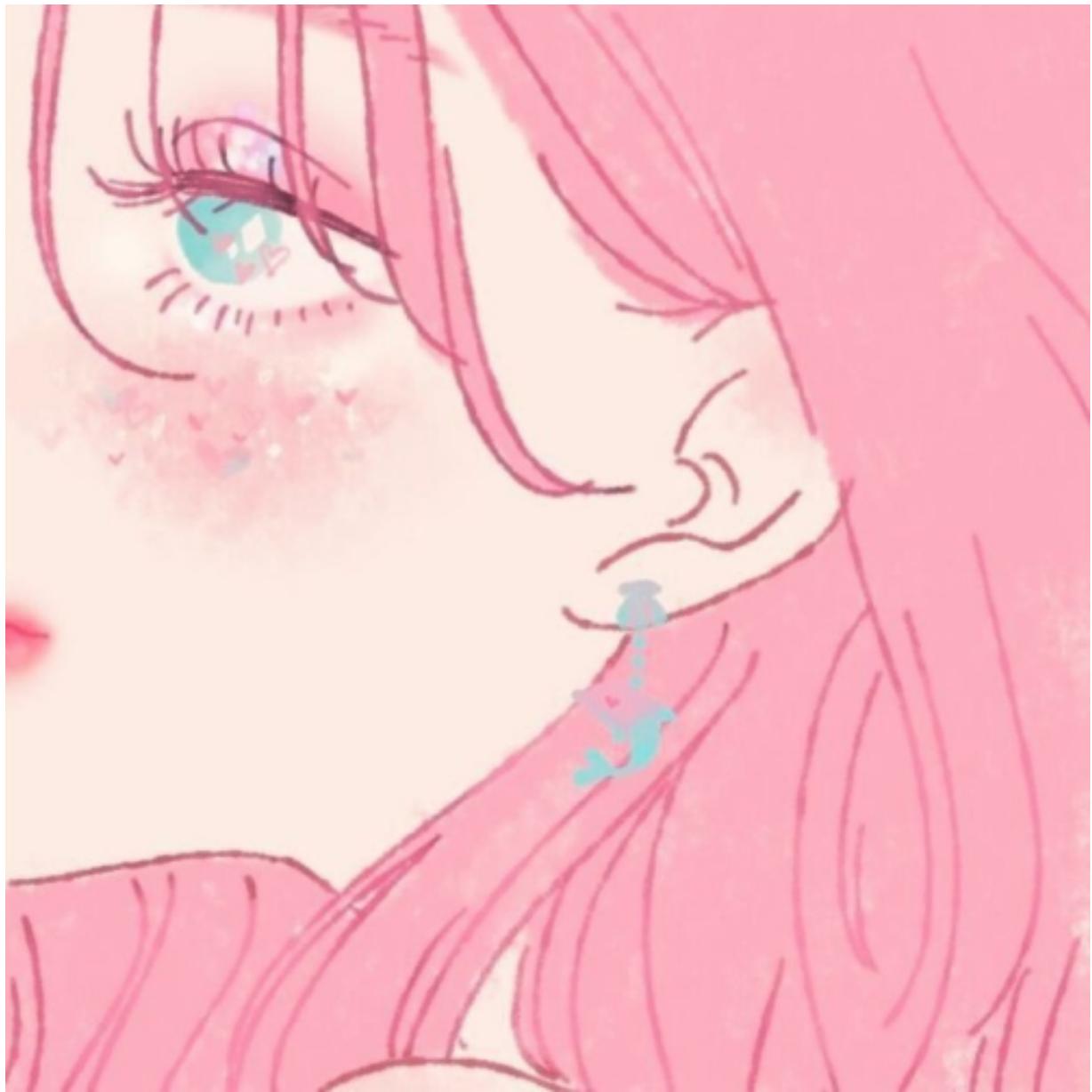
Raul observed her slowly as she prayed, his gaze penetrating. It felt as if the afternoon sunlight was gently tickling her face. His gaze felt sharp.

She happened to be wearing a white dress today. It was thin, but as her body caught the sunlight, it seemed to glow even more.

Nicole, under Raul's scrutiny, felt her hands trembling slightly. Raul noticed her trembling.

Throughout Nicole's prayer, Raul couldn't divert his gaze away from her.

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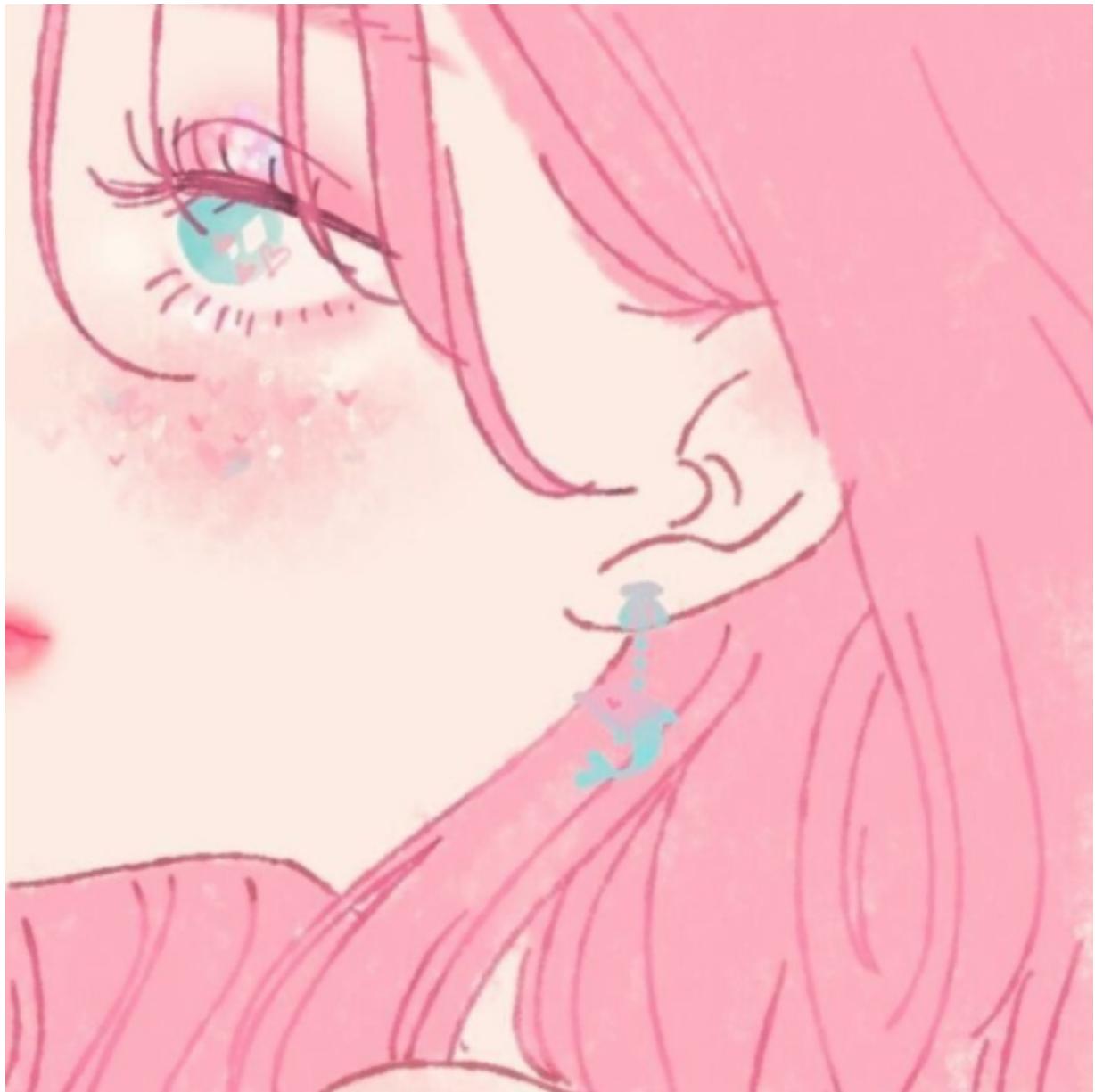


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# Chapter 74

\* \* \*

“Is this enough?”

Nicole opened one eye slightly and looked at Raul.

“...I’ve prayed. Should I do more?”

“Did you do it sincerely?”

Raul smiled as if finding it amusing. Strangely, it seemed that this man’s mood had improved slightly.

‘He’s really a strange person. I didn’t understand him in my past life, and I still don’t now.’

Nicole thought to herself, feeling both fearful and nervous about him.

Suddenly, a memory resurfaced. It was from a very long time ago, buried deep in her memory... Perhaps trivial, but who knows.

It was their third year of marriage, and their relationship had reached its worst.

One day, Raul called Nicole after several months. He told her to dress up.

'Get up, we're going to my parents' memorial altar. Their graves are in a holy place, and it's too far. It's late, but as my wife, go and pay your respects and pray. At least once, don't you think?'

Nicole chuckled briefly..

Her mental condition had been worsening, so she became insanely angry at Raul's words.

She threw all the flowers Raul had prepared out of the window and screamed wildly, venting her anger.

<I hate the parents who gave birth to you. I'd rather die and offer myself to your parents' memorial altar. If they had given birth to a devil like you, they would have liked that more, wouldn't they?>

Raul grabbed Nicole's arms in that state and calmed her down gently. His eyes briefly revealed restrained anger.

<Show some respect. I'm the man who hasn't killed you and let you live. Isn't that right?>

'Thinking about it now... Raul lost his parents even before he grew up. I was harsh to someone like that.'

Suddenly, Nicole's face turned hot, and her heart ached.

"I sincerely prayed. And I didn't steal the flowers; I was trying to get rid of the withered ones. If you want, I'll come here every day to pray at this altar."

"You're unusually calm today."

"You can think of it as flatetry if you want. Wrong is wrong."

Raul nodded cheerfully.

“Alright.”

“Are you forgiving me?”

“After I inspect the contents of the note in your bosom.”

Nicole’s movements froze exactly.

“What do you mean by the note?”

“The note in your bosom. The one you were reading just now, and it seemed like it brought you happiness as you kissed and hugged. You’re currently breaking the rules, secretly going out, and exchanging notes in secret. Don’t you think it’s a situation that I should be suspicious of?”

“....”

“Come on, Karen. You should hand it over with your own hand. I’m your master.”

Nicole tightly closed her eyes. She tried to keep the note, but her hand slipped, and the note fell onto her chest.

“Are you telling me to take it now, that note?”

Raul said, looking incredulous.

“Give it to me with your hand.”

Raul extended his hand. Nicole, her face flushed, grabbed the note and tossed it backward.

Thud.

The note fell to the floor. Nicole, in a hurry, stepped on it with her shoe. Raul lowered his body toward Nicole.

He was no longer looking at the note.

Raul was looking down at Nicole. His massive shadow loomed over her head.

Nicole's buttocks touched the altar. She held her breath.

Once again, their eyes met.

"You're strange. You're quite challenging."

"...."

"But you know, looking into your eyes right now is more interesting than the note. I wonder what trouble you'll cause next time."

"I'm sorry. But the content of the note really means nothing."

Nicole felt her trembling hands as she avoided Raul's gaze.

Raul's hand approached, gently gripping Nicole's chin and turning her face. As if unable to avoid eye contact.

"If you think about playing with a priest, stop it. You belong to me from head to toe. In this life, you've dedicated yourself to me willingly."

"...Yes."

Overwhelmed by his commanding tone, Nicole replied softly with a timid voice.

Raul's gloved hand descended near Nicole's neck, as if it flowed down naturally. It was a very smooth movement.

“Otherwise, your master will have no choice but to strangle you. I let only obedient seeds, whether they be flowers or thorns, take root in my land.”

- *Playing with a priest.*

Nicole realized that Raul had an absurd misunderstanding. And that amplifying that misunderstanding was her only way out.

Nicole nodded as if she were being cautious.

“I won’t do it again. I... I’ll only follow my master’s orders. I won’t receive notes anymore.”

Nicole felt sorry for the priest. However, Raul wouldn’t punish the priest just because he had communicated with one of his subordinates.

“Alright.”

Raul nodded his head.

“If you ever need to be in a relationship, I’ll designate your partner, so wait until then.”

“Huh?”

“...I’m talking about your duties as an agent.”

“...Yes.”

Nicole turned her reddened face away from him.

“And from now on, don’t avoid my gaze. If you want to stand tall as my confidant as you said, you mustn’t treat people as monsters.”

He said soothingly.

“....”

Nicole barely raised her pupils to look at him. His pupils were a deep purple, a rarity throughout the entire empire. The praise showered on those pupils made them more mysterious and captivating than she had thought. Once their eyes met, it was impossible to look away.

‘What should I do?’

Nicole felt like a fool every time she had a long conversation with Raul. She really didn’t know why she acted this way.

<Hm, uh... Feels, good...>

The next moment, Nicole remembered their night together. The thrilling tension. The strange heaviness that pressed against her chest. Her knees lightly gave way.

It felt like he would push her against the wall at any moment.

Biting her lip lightly, tousling her hair, grinning mischievously like a rascal, he looked at her...

<Ah, I knew it. You would turn out like this too, right?>

Right now, lifting her skirt, sliding fingers onto her garter belt, spinning it around before slowly tearing her underwear, pushing her against the wall, fingers...

‘Like in our past life....’

What am I thinking right now? Nicole was suddenly surprised.

“Why are you like this? What are you thinking?”

“I am... I am from the slums of the Holy Land. People like me have never seen someone of high status like Your Grace, so that's why. It's just that I'm nervous.”

“That's unfortunate.”

Raul said.

“I thought you were thinking the same as me.”

Nicole looked at Raul in surprise. She felt like she was going to have a nightmare tonight.

“Anyway, do you know about your criminal record?”

Nicole almost bit her tongue. The examination today was even more intense and profound.

“I have never been to prison.”

Grace alone confirmed that for her. Karen had been arrested several times for minor offenses.

However, considering her young age, and the city near the Holy Land where she came from had poor public safety.

That meant the jails in that area were always full. So, Karen managed to avoid prison each time. It was a great relief.

‘They said most of it was presumed to be theft....’

According to the investigation, Karen was active as a pickpocket while living near the slums. Nicole decided to make an excuse that fit Karen's identity.

“I’ve broken the habit. I won’t do anything bad anymore. The situation back then was really...”

“That was your first arrest. Do you really not remember why you were arrested the second time?”

Raul leaned in and whispered in Nicole’s ear.

“Public indecency. You’re really something, aren’t you?”

Nicole wanted to disappear from the world. And she thought,

‘No, Raul often looks down on people. But when it comes to sexuality, he is rather innocent. He’s not the type to dig into me with vulgar comments.’

Because this man was too arrogant, even if he is arrogant. Therefore, that arrest record must be real.

‘What on earth did this woman named Karen do? Did she take off her clothes and dance in public or something?’

Nicole quickly grasped the situation and managed to speak calmly.

“That was... accidental... it just happened.”

It was the right answer. Raul looked at Nicole with a mix of contempt and bewilderment. Fortunately, it seemed to have gotten through.

“Do people usually do such things by accident?”

“There were also some misunderstandings. Women like me get arrested for even minor things. As you know, I changed after meeting Grace. So, it won’t happen again. I was a bit crazy... that’s all.”

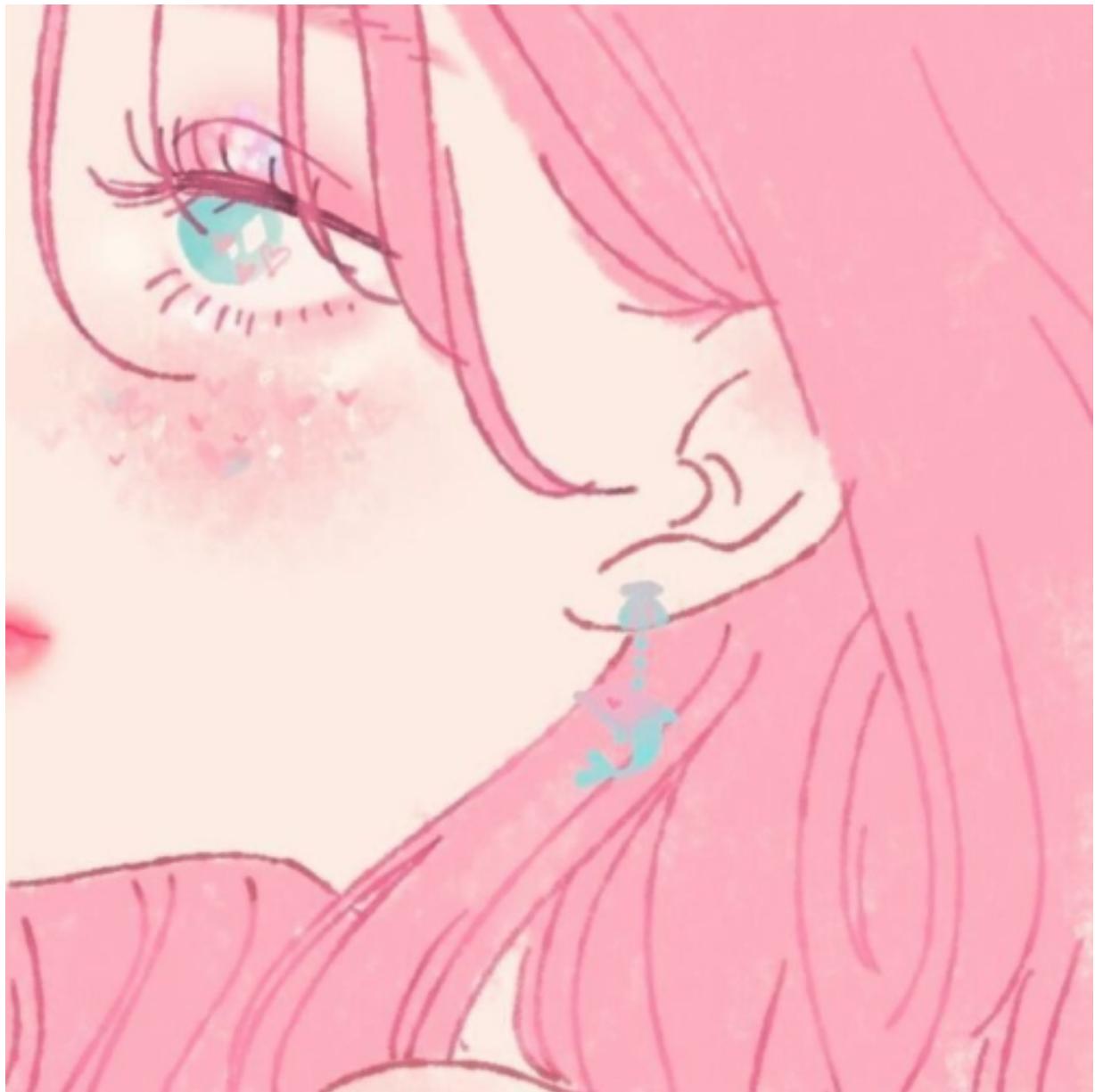
After saying that, Nicole realized that she had just become a woman who exchanges notes and plays with priests.

"I really came today to run an errand for Grace. I had no intention of playing any bad tricks with the priests. I'll dispose of the note right away."

"Alright. You can stop making excuses for today."

Raul chuckled. Before she knew it, Raul's hand was placed on the altar behind Nicole.

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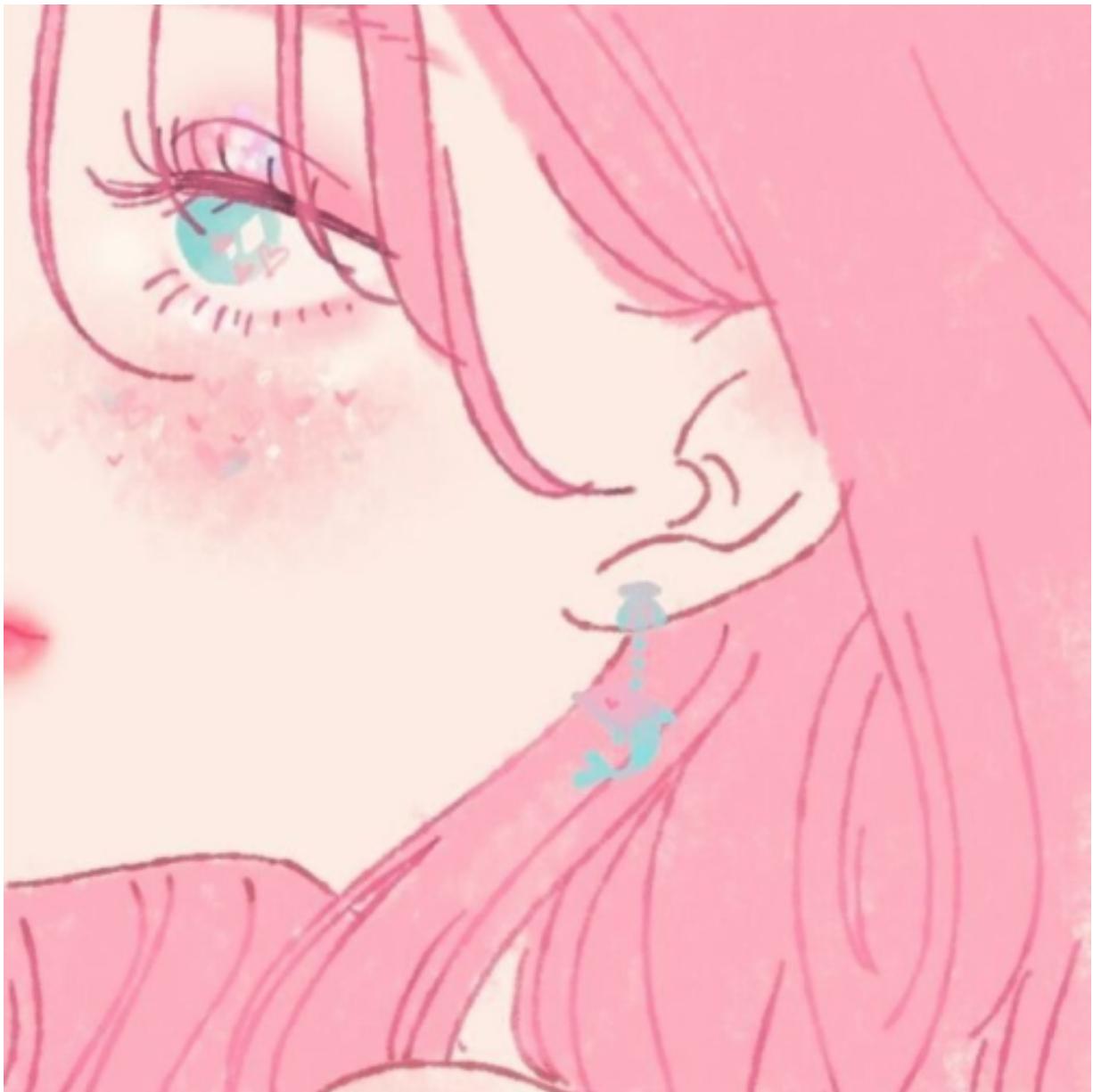


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# Chapter 75

“.....Thank you.”

“You’re already catching my eye quite a bit. Be careful. Just having Grace fuss around you is tiring. Grace is currently the only thorn in my life.”

Nicole had also seen Raul and Grace being cold to each other not long ago.

Grace coldly ignored the letter asking her to send Nicole back to the Grand Duke’s household, and sent a reply to Raul with the tone, “Try taking a disciple from her teacher.”

‘Originally, Raul’s teacher was... Grace, wasn’t it?’

Could it be that he thinks she’s taken his place? Nicole wondered if Raul was jealous of her.

“You asked earlier... if I had prayed sincerely, right? I did. I believe Grace is misunderstanding the Grand Duke, and that misunderstanding will soon be cleared. Because... the Grand Duke is not someone who would abandon his teacher.”

Nicole spoke a bit impulsively. But she was sincere.

Nicole acknowledged that in her past life, she had significantly misunderstood Raul.

‘If Raul didn’t genuinely care for Grace, he wouldn’t be treating her so kindly now.’

Anyway, he is someone who can do most things as he pleases. Yet he defers to Grace. Nicole now understood how significant that was.

"How presumptuous. How do you know that?"

Raul spoke as if he couldn't believe it.

"I know because you said I was bothersome. Not just anyone can go against the Grand Duke. Given that I've managed such a feat, it's only natural that I'm perceptive."

Raul was becoming increasingly intrigued by this woman who spoke softly, but piercingly. Until recently, she couldn't even meet his eyes, but now...

Creak...

Just then, the door opened with a heavy sound. It was Bastard who opened the door deliberately loudly.

"Your Grace, you can no longer afford to delay. The next schedule is..."

"Understood."

Raul said.

"Also, record that this woman left without permission."

Bastard looked at Nicole as if surprised, then nodded.

"Stay put and don't cause any trouble until I call for you."

Raul brushed past Nicole.

The door to the hall closed with a heavy sound.

Nicole sighed and held her chest, then took one last look at the note before closing her eyes tightly and burning it with one of the candles.

'Thank goodness I wasn't caught.'

"Have you met with Miss Karen?"

Bastard said. Raul nodded.

"If you intend to make it a personal relationship, it's better to exclude her from important matters."

"I'm not so desperate as to lay a hand on a subordinate. Besides, a woman like that is troublesome."

Why create such a strange atmosphere then...

Bastard couldn't quite bring himself to say that.

Raul enjoyed control, and the woman named Karen seemed to have surprising patience and resilience. Raul appeared cynical, while Karen seemed composed. Above all...

'A pair of sadist and masochist, it seems.'

Bastard was shocked by the bizarre thought he had.

But there was no way to sugarcoat it. Raul fired at her, and Karen, despite trembling, did not reject it.

It was already known that Raul was a unique individual, and strange people tend to be drawn to each other.

"Karen, has that woman received drug training?"

Raul was worried that if agents were captured during a mission, confidential information would be leaked.

The royal intelligence agency used special hypnotic drugs. To prepare for such cases, those 'who had names' and above must undergo drug resistance training.

"She was scheduled to receive it after the probation period was over."

"Then prepare for confession drug training. It's been a while; I should participate as well."

"Directly?"

"Yes."

".....Understood. Confession drug training may be uncomfortable, but it's not particularly difficult. What will you do after the training ends? Naming a flower isn't that hard, and the garden isn't that full anyway. Should I tell the superiors to come up with an appropriate name?"

Raul paused for a brief moment and impulsively said,

"Forsythia."

".....Forsythia, you mean? There are many codenames left by predecessors. Like Rose or Violet, relatively common names."

Bastard thought the naming quite random as he recalled Karen. In fact, Rose would have suited Karen better.

Raul remembered her stealing forsythia in front of the temple.

The moment she saw Raul, her eyes widened, and the handfuls of forsythia she was carrying fell from her arms. She looked like a cat caught stealing fish.

“She deserves a rustic name. She’s a flower thief; she should at least face that kind of penalty, shouldn’t she?”

And so, Nicole became the first Forsythia owned by Raul.

\*\*\*

“This is something even I didn’t know.”

Nicole, who hastily returned to Grace’s mansion that day, talked about ‘public indecency.’

As soon as she arrived in the capital, Grace had her subordinates investigate the reputation of a woman named Karen.

However, hardly anyone knew Karen and her brother Jen; such orphans were abundant in the slums near the sacred site. Their arrest records had long been expunged.

“This woman named Karen really is....”

Grace clicked her tongue. Then, she said she would send someone to discreetly investigate.

Luckily, the matter was resolved quickly. This was because many people were arrested for public indecency on the same day as Karen.

The second time Karen was arrested was on New Year’s festival day.

On that day, it seemed a fight had broken out between two gangs of pickpockets. A large part of her clothing was torn. Yet, Karen continued to fight.

That day was an important New Year’s event. Specifically, it was a festival at the sacred site to give thanks to the deity.

Everyone who started fights on such a day was arrested.

The police were exasperated as they hastily recorded the reasons for the arrests.

If there were no marks, then it was ‘assault,’ and if it looked like they were hit a lot, it was ‘disorderly conduct, obstructing official duties.’

It was like this. Karen, who was scantily dressed, was accused of public indecency. Furthermore, she bit and hit so many people that she was also charged with assault.

However, since so many were arrested, people like her were released without even going to a detention center. Karen was one of those lucky cases.

Hearing that, Nicole wanted to click her tongue.

‘I wonder how Raul sees me as a woman.’

She wasn’t particularly remarkable in her past life either. However, she wasn’t someone who had lived recklessly.

Grace also had a bewildered expression.

“This Karen person doesn’t seem like an ordinary woman. She was so wild in fights at such a young age?”

“I hope no one remembers her.”

Nicole said softly.

“Don’t worry. Women’s faces change a lot as they grow up. Moreover, you and Karen have similar builds and hair colors. You can just insist that you’ve become prettier. From the start, if you do well, the Sith side will launder your identity. So Karen’s past is even less important.”

“.....”

“You just need to be careful around Raul. He has good instincts.”

“Yes.”

Nicole nodded her head. After hesitating for a moment, Grace spoke.

“You said Raul was at the temple, what did it seem like he came for?”

On the day Nicole had gone to the temple, Grace hadn’t said much. It seemed that while Grace was concerned about Raul, her resentment toward him hadn’t entirely faded.

“It seems he left his parents’ altar at the temple. However, it didn’t look like he visits often...”

“An altar without a name or plaque. That’s just like him.”

“If it’s his ancestral Grand Duke, that’s a very noble lineage. So why would he set up an altar so secretly?”

“It’s because his father died in disgrace.”

Grace said softly.

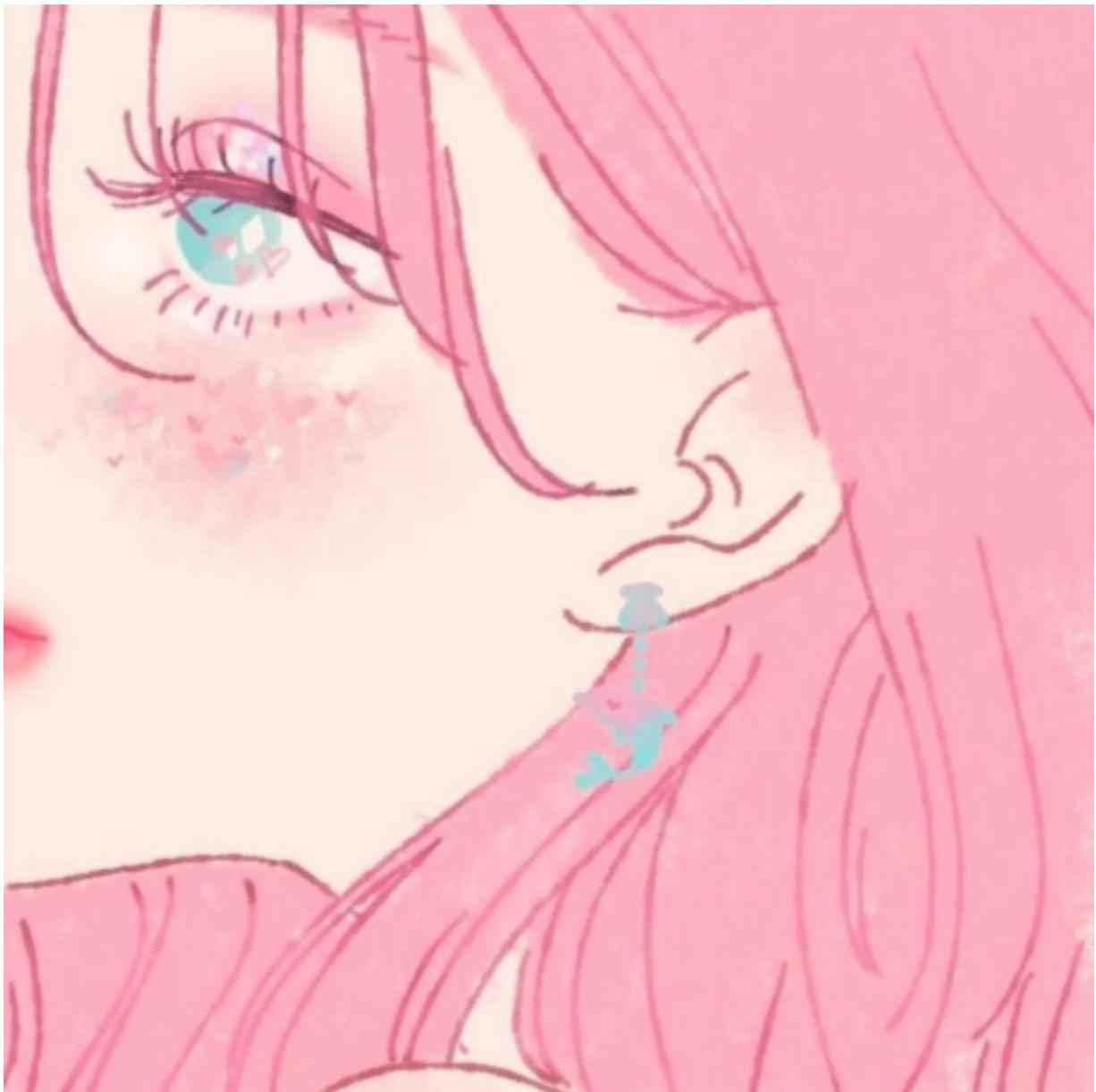
“A disgraceful death?”

“Have you ever heard about the sacred land Fadebel?”

“It’s the land of the gods and the place where the seven noble families with abilities migrated to. Isn’t it also the land where the empire originated?”

Nicole answered as she had been taught.

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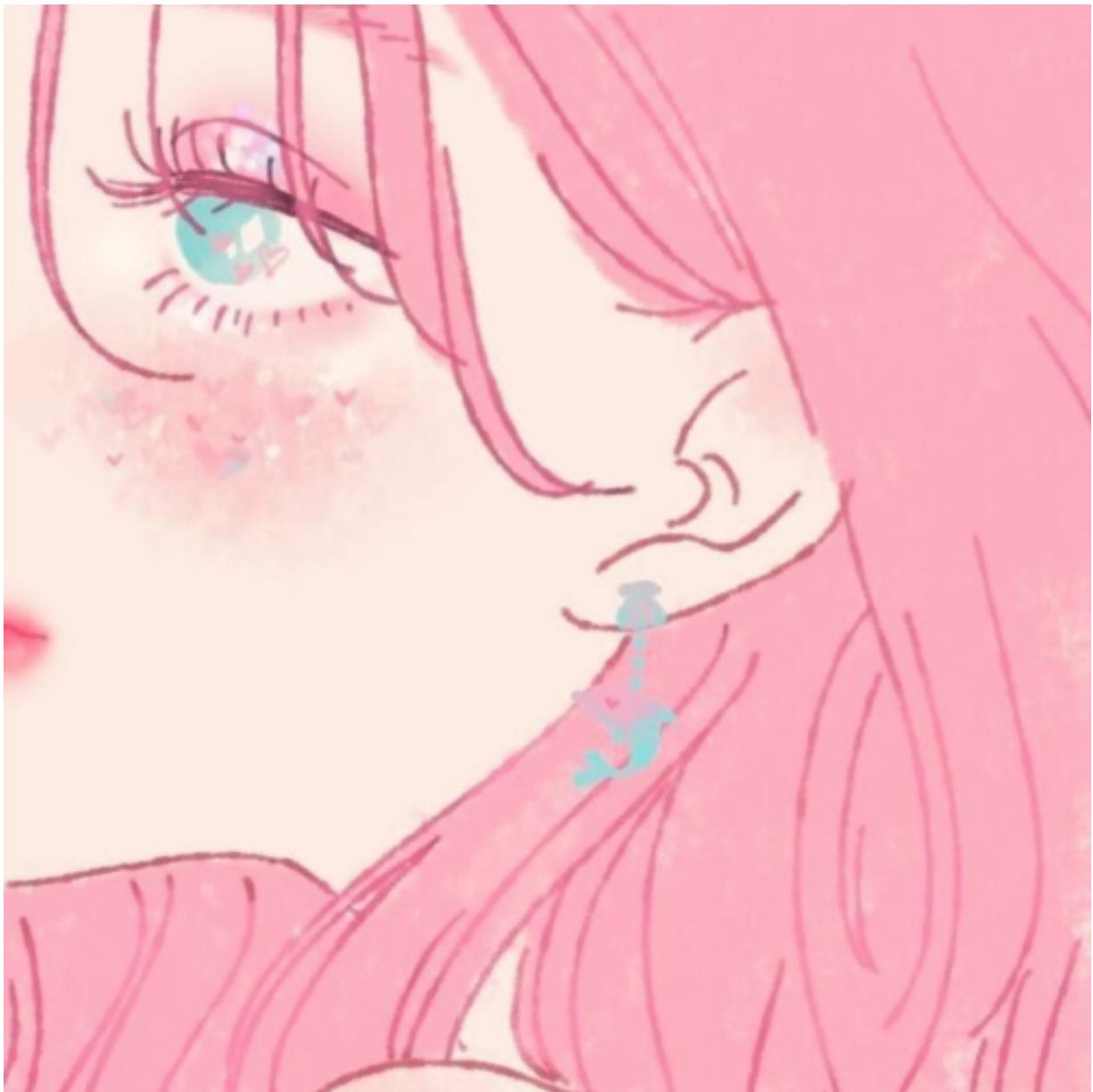


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# Chapter 76

“Yes. It is now a sacred place. The sacred land of Fadebel was originally known as the land of the gods.”

Hundreds of years ago, this world was a land where monsters ran rampant.

The surrounding countries were less affected, but Fadebel, being a land of strong magic, had more monsters living around it than anywhere else.

Thanks to that, the beings now known as demon gods. The land chosen by the demon gods was Fadebel. In fact, it is said that the demon race lived here hundreds of years ago.

It was the fate of the people of Fadebel to be hunted by monsters. As a result, its development was much slower than other areas. Instead, it is said to have produced many great warriors.

The imperial family that has been calming and ruling Fadebel is now in power.

Afterwards, the imperial family changed the capital and subjugated many small countries to form the current empire.

Thanks to its characteristic as a land of strong magic, Fadebel was now being called a sacred land.

“There are many ancient heritages in Fadebel. Many mazes and magic devices are said to have been created by the demon race. That’s why there are many forbidden acts that should not be done.”

“.....I’ve heard about it.”

“But there’s a rumor that the previous Grand Duke made some mistake and ‘touched something wrong’, causing the people of Fadebel to be involved in an accident.”

“I’ve never heard of that before in my life.”

Nicole’s eyes widened. It was a story she had never heard of in her previous life.

“It’s natural, as it’s a fact that the imperial family covered up a long time ago. At that time, the imperial family needed the Grand Duke politically. They thought the Grand Duke’s disgrace was the imperial family’s disgrace.”

Grace said bitterly.

“Anyway, I heard that because of that, the Grand Duke was completely deprived of the ownership of the territories around Fadebel.”

In her previous life, Nicole’s knowledge about the Grand Duke was all secretly gathered and learned from servants and other people.

She didn’t hear about the things Raul didn’t like to mention.

‘So that happened.....’

“Did the previous Grand Duke also die in that accident?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the kind of thing that even Grace can’t get any information about, right?”

“Information directly concealed by the imperial family is tiring to touch. Those people may be worse at gathering information than Sith, but they’re better at tampering with evidence than anyone else.”

“I see.....”

“There was another rumor. It was a rumor that spread throughout the sacred land at the time of the previous Grand Duke’s death. It’s said that the current Grand Duke killed the previous Grand Duke. He was called Rositau in his childhood in the sacred land. This word means ‘seed of the devil’ in ancient language.”

Nicole was silent for a moment.

“He wouldn’t do that.”

“I think so too. Why would Raul do such a thing? But the sure thing is that the Holy Emperor’s family, who currently controls the Holy Land, has banned Raul from entering. You asked before, didn’t you? What is Raul’s real goal?”

“Yes.”

His goal is to reclaim the Holy Land, which is his inheritance. Because that land originally belonged to the Grand Duke.

“I know that the Grand Duke’s territory was originally the Holy Land. But isn’t that land now transformed into the Southern Temple?”

“It’s on lease. Most of the land is still under the name of the Grand Duke.”

She knew that the Grand Duke's family had a huge territory in the provinces, but she didn't know that even the Holy Land belonged to them.

"Is it possible to get the Holy Land back?"

"Well... Raul wants it. And Raul is my disciple. I know my disciple. He can do it. Probably, definitely."

Grace said with a chuckle.

\*\*\*

That night, Nicole couldn't fall asleep easily again. Someone she had already lost. A past she couldn't return to.

'It's scary and difficult to meet him.'

However, Nicole realized that she was happy to see Raul after a month.

It was strange when she met Raul.

She felt like her whole body was touching the ceiling and then falling to the floor, and she was inexplicably afraid and excited.

'Why am I only feeling this now?'

Feelings she should never harbor were stirring within her. It hurt in a different way than her previous life.

She was drawn to him.

\*\*\*

*Excerpt from Isabel's diary.*

*Date: Imperial Year 233, February 13.*

*Title: Isabel's Fun Experiment Log 1*

*<Record: Glassflower Harvest>*

*<Glassflowers grow faster than I thought.*

*I heard it takes from 3 to 10 months depending on the ability of the person who feeds them blood every day!*

*Of course, I, Isabel, am a genius.*

*The flower buds have formed. I'm looking forward to what's ahead!>*

*Date: Imperial Year 233, March 13*

*Record: Isabel's Fun Experiment Log 10*

*<Note: It's been 4 months since I started growing Glassflowers>*

*<Yesterday, I harvested the Glassworms that had hatched in the glass. The Glassworms really look like pieces of glass, transparent and beautiful. I had a bit of a hard time raising them hidden in the dressing room.*

*Now, it's time for a fun experiment.>*

No one would have known. The seed of the Glassflower was something our father had been hiding and carrying around.

It was a bit of a struggle to snatch the Glassflower from father, but there are gains and joys at the end of the hardship, right?

Anyway, now father is in a state where he can't converse with me, isn't he?

Poor father... But it might be better for him to be at ease than living such a painful life. After all, one's death is salvation.

\*\*\*

"Haah....."

Isabel put down her pen with a satisfied expression.

She was giggling.

Isabel had made all the preparations to use the Glassworm on Leos.

Before that, she thought she needed to take care of one thing that had been bothering her for a while.

'Finally, now that that woman Heather has left the house, it's a good timing.'

The Blanc family had a fair amount of relations with the nobles in this region.

Just then, the daughter of a high-ranking official who had recently taken up a post nearby fell seriously ill. It seemed like she had caught a fever.

Heather, the mistress of the Blanc family, had a fair amount of knowledge in medicine. So she had left the house for a night to nurse the official's daughter.

'Leos is in a state of having suffered once and barely fallen asleep.....'

When this happened, Leos would cough all day and then sleep as if he were dead.

As such incidents were so frequent, the people in the mansion didn't bat an eye.

Taking the opportunity, Isabel rummaged through Heather's room. And she found Leos's prescription.

<Hmm, I knew something was strange.....>

Isabel tilted her head. Looking at the prescription, some of it was medicine that caused coughing and made the body hot.

The other medicinal ingredients were ordinary licorice-like things that had no effect on treating colds or fevers.

<So, has Heather been artificially causing Leos's symptoms all this time? By regularly feeding him medicine that causes fever and cough?>

At that moment, Isabel discovered something in the drawer.

<Oh, a pretty brooch, isn't it?>

Isabel's eyes widened at the sight of the sparkling gem.

She hastily took out the brooch. Inside the transparent pumpkin brooch was a crest of a noble family whose name she didn't know.

<This looks exactly like the symbol of a great noble family, doesn't it?>

But why is such a thing in this house, which is not a noble family?

Isabel examined the back of the brooch.

- Sylphisi de Rodria.

'Rodria family?'

It was a name she had never heard before. Isabel was so lacking in common sense that she didn't know much about the seven major families that people in the empire commonly knew.

'Hmm, should I remember it for now?'

Isabel found a small box under the drawer where the brooch was. That box was a wooden box.

'An incredibly worn-out baby clothes?'

Isabel tilted her head. It was a very luxurious baby dress made of purple silk. It seemed to have a strange smell too.

'This doesn't seem to be worth money.'

Isabel neatly arranged the drawer.

Isabel had overheard Heather grumbling to the maid before.

<Our master becomes talkative when he drinks. He's a chatterbox who can't keep secrets. We must make sure he doesn't drink outside.>

The master is none other than the owner of this house, Jerome de Blanc.

He was not a noble, so he had no title. Therefore, everyone in this area called him Lord Blanc. The people in the house did the same.

'Turns out, Lord Blanc is not the real power in this house.'

At first, Isabel also flattered Lord Blanc, the head of this household.

But the more time she spent, the more she realized that Heather was the real power holder in the house.

Even Heather seemed to manage all the property in the house, and Lord Blanc couldn't often go out with his drinking buddies because he had to look after his wife.

'First, let's try to make Lord Blanc talk.'

Isabel knew how to unlock someone's heart.

'It was good that I prepared the medicine in advance. Phew, it was quite hard to get the ingredients.'

Even in this peaceful region, there was a dark side. For instance, the existence of those who traded poisons and drugs.

Isabel learned how to find such people from Karen, who was already an addict.

<Among the pharmacies, there are places where suspiciously young kids hang around. They're called couriers, they get a fee to deliver suspicious drugs. Even if it looks like a normal pharmacy, if you give some money to those kids and ask, they'll spill? Even the reputation of the illegal drugs sold at that store!>

Illegal drugs or narcotics circulating throughout the empire had recently become a bigger problem. Isabel listened to this attentively.

<So you're saying the drug market is quite big? If I supply the drugs well, I can get a share?>

<As expected, Isabel is smart. If you make this strange drug, you'll make a lot of money.>

Isabel, pretending to visit the Southern Great Temple, visited the 'suspicious pharmacies' mentioned by Karen several times.

And she bought illegal drugs with the money she received from Leos.

She even procured ingredients to improve the drug and made its effects stronger.

'It was a bit hard to secretly make the drug, but this kind of stimulant is basic for Isabel.'

Isabel prepared a drink for Lord Blanc. She filled it with wine and food, pretending to be gentle as she found his room.

<I thought you might be bored without Madam Heather, so I came. Please tell me an interesting story.>

<Isabel is really kind and considerate! Our Leos has brightened up since Isabel came.>

Isabel offered Lord Blanc a drink. Blanc, being trapped by his wife, could not go out often.

So when Isabel gently offered him a drink with a smile, he accepted and began to drink humbly.

<But, Lord Blanc. Um..... Leos really doesn't look like Madam Heather at all. Right?>

<Those two?>

Blanc chuckled. He laughed for a while.

<Haha, is our son really a child of people like us?>

<What? What do you mean?>

<They have to be of the same blood to resemble each other. Isn't that so? Actually, Leos is incomparable to us.....>

Lord Blanc paused for a moment.

<So you're saying Leos is not your biological son?>

<Um, that is.....>

Lord Blanc, intoxicated by the hallucinogen, dodged the question. Isabel rolled her eyes for a moment.

<Are you talking about the Rodria family by any chance?>

Isabel had no idea that the Rodria family had been tragically wiped out by an accident.

She didn't know that it was once one of the seven major families of the Empire, boasting abilities that even the imperial family could be jealous of. Nor did she know that there are no survivors now.

She only mentioned the name of the Rodria family by intuition.

<How do you know that name? Did you eavesdrop on our conversation?>

<Huh? I don't know anything. I'm just trying to make you feel comfortable, Lord Blanc. Just think of this moment as a dream.>

Lord Blanc was not lustful. However, Isabel possessed such astonishing beauty that even those who were not interested in women would be momentarily stunned.

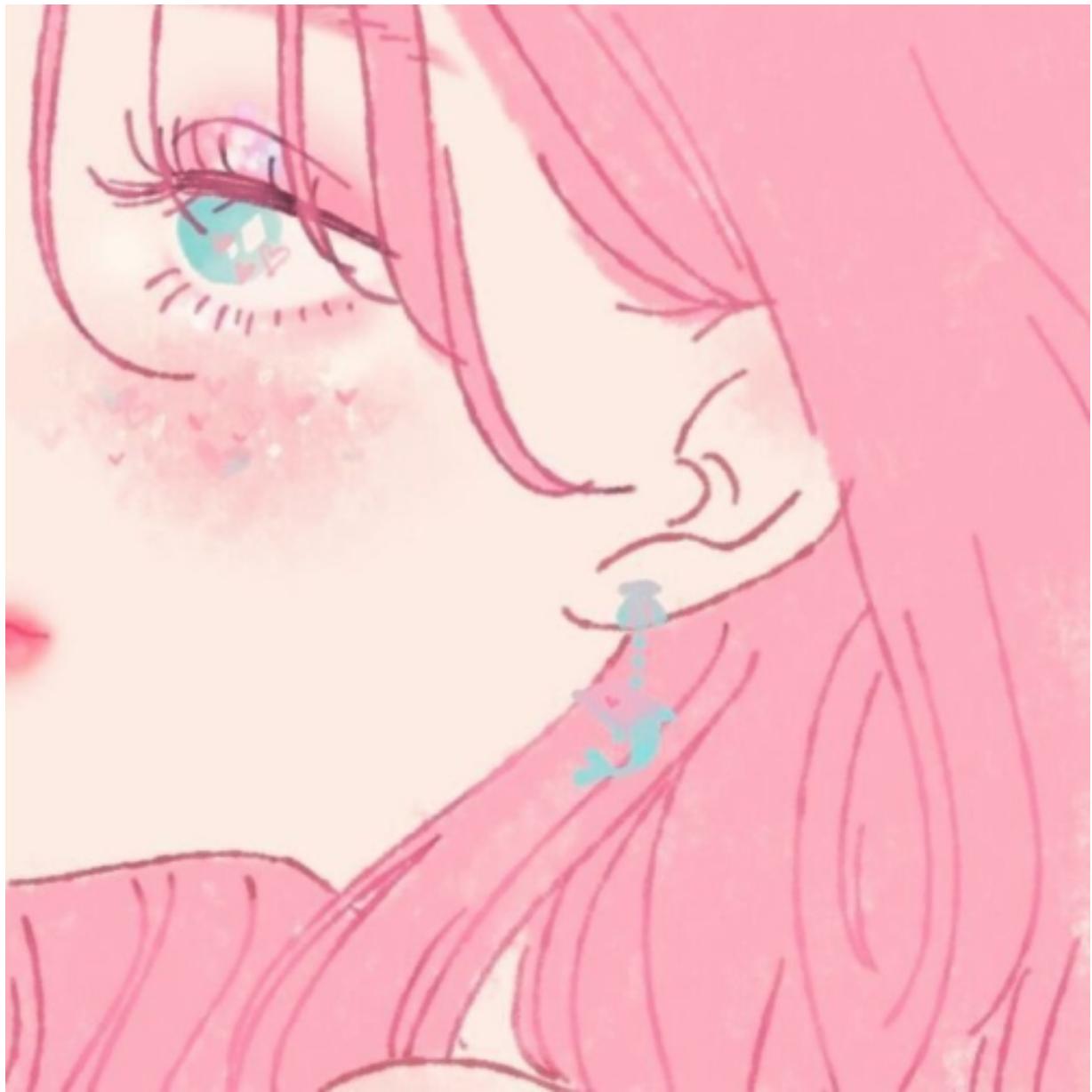
Lord Blanc, intoxicated with alcohol and drugs, suddenly became emotional. He started to believe that this moment was truly a dream.

<Actually, the truth is.....>

He suddenly started sobbing. And then he spilled the truth to Isabel.

[T/N: Goodness, i knew Isabel's going to be a headache 😦 ]

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# Chapter 77

<We shouldn't have done that to our masters.....>

There was a family known as the Marquis of Rodria.

As one of the seven noble families of the Empire, they once had a great reputation and owned a large territory in the south.

But one day, they had a carriage accident on a dangerous road.

They were traveling in two carriages. The Marquis Rodria was in the first carriage.

In the following carriage, the wife of Marquis Rodrigo was riding with their young son.

The leading carriage rolled down a cliff.

The following carriage also lost control when the coachman was startled by the falling front carriage. Eventually, the carriage crashed into the cliff and shattered.

At that time, the wife of Marquis Rodria was with her young son. The son was very sick with a fever that day.

A few days later, the Marquis of Rodria had a schedule to enter the royal palace. So in case the child's fever was contagious, the wife of Marquis Rodria rode in a separate carriage with the child.

In fact, Heather was the head maid of the Marquis of Rodria's wife. And on the day of the accident, she was in the carriage with the wife of the Marquis.

'So that's why she had a dignified posture and showed signs of being well-educated?'

Isabel was convinced.

As a head maid, she must have some dignity. But strangely enough, Heather didn't seem like a lady.

Isabel finally understood what had been suspicious all along. The fact that she was a maid of a noble family. That was Heather's secret.

<Who would know? That I, known as Lord Blanc here, was once a mere coachman.....>

Blanc's real name was Cole. Cole survived because he unknowingly threw himself out of the carriage before the second one hit.

At the moment Cole jumped out, he grabbed Heather's hand who was sitting with him on the coachman's seat. The two were injured from the fall, but fortunately, they were able to move.

<Madam, Madam!>

Heather hurriedly opened the broken carriage door. The carriage was already shattered, only the door was preserved.

Inside, Madam Rodria was tightly holding a child. Thanks to her, the child wasn't hurt but was suffering from a fever.

<Please, I beg you. I trust you. Please take my son and run away. I'm too badly hurt, there's no hope.....>

The madam desperately pleaded with Heather as she handed over the child.

Heather held the child.

<Take the silk pouch in my bosom. Inside it is the symbol of our family. If you show it, you'll be able to get help from any noble.>

As that memory surfaced, Blanc stopped talking and started sobbing again.

<The Madam, the Madam was so good to us. I'm the sinner.>

Then Lord Blanc pounded the table with his fist.

<In fact, I've tried to confess many times!>

<Tell me in detail. You'll feel better after you talk about it, right?>

Lord Blanc blinked stupidly and then spilled everything out.

His tone suggested that he had been dying to tell someone until now.

Heather and Lord Blanc hurried to find a village with the child to seek help.

But in the middle of the journey, the child's fever rose too high. Heather had no choice but to stop for a while and take care of the child in a nearby hunter's cabin.

After about half a day, Heather suddenly started to feel differently.

<Those people are from a powerful family, right? One of the seven noble families.>

<So, what about it?>

<You jumped out of the carriage with me in a dangerous situation. What if we turn that sin around?>

<Th, that.....>

If things go wrong, he could be accused of assassination. With that thought, his vision went dark.

Moreover, this.....

Heather took out the silk pouch barely handed over by the Marquis' wife just before her death.

Inside it was a bundle of keys, along with ample gold coins. Each of those keys bore the emblem of the Rodria family.

<Th, those keys are the ones the Marquis' wife received from the Marquis for the family treasure vault, right?>

His hands were trembling as it was something he wouldn't dare to look at normally.

<I know the secret of this key. One of these keys in the bundle is for a secret vault.>

<A secret vault?>

<The Marquis of Rodria has a secret vault. This is the key to that secret vault. I've overheard the Madam's words.>

According to Heather, the Rodria family has a secret vault. Wealthy nobles often hide their assets in places unknown to anyone in case of emergencies. The Marquis of Rodria did the same. And the place where the secret vault was hidden was a warehouse in a farm not far from the hut where they were staying.

<So, one of these keys in the bundle is for that warehouse?>

<Yes, that's right.>

<Who else knows about it?>

<The people of the Marquis Rodria family.>

The Marquis of Rodria was precious. The Marquis of Rodria did have a brother, but he died in an accident not long ago. And apart from the deceased brother, there were no relatives.

<We can take the big money that no one knows exists.>

Heather and he were secretly dating.

At that time, the two had two options.

To confess or to run away with the big money. It was one of the two.

Cole's eyes wavered. He bit his lip.

<Surely, I.....>

<If this child is alive, he will inherit all the assets of the Rodria family and the hidden money will also belong to this child.>

The two people's gazes met. Clearly, the Marchioness of Rodria was weak. And since she was left neglected while injured, perhaps.....

<There were carriage fragments embedded in her abdomen.>

<Yes. So, she wouldn't have survived.>

Now all they had to do was kill the child. The two thought simultaneously. But they couldn't do it.

<You see, Heather can't have a child.>

Lord Blanc said self-deprecatingly.

<At first, I wanted to kill the child, but I just couldn't do it. He's only two years old. How can I kill that little one? Heather has always wanted a child, so she raised him as her son. Fortunately, Leos completely forgot his early childhood memories because he was too young.>

<Then..... Leos is.....>

Leos is a descendant of a great noble family and the only heir to the family.

It seemed like bells of joy were ringing in Isabel's ears.

'The man who is going to propose to me, who is practically mine, isn't just rich, but is actually a great noble?'

Isabel barely contained her excitement.

She was completely unaware that she was actually of the bloodline of one of the seven fallen great houses, Yveschapel.

This was because she had been unconscious all the while Nicole and Grace were having an important conversation that day.

'As expected, this Isabel is beautiful and also lucky. I'm so happy!'

Isabel suppressed her joy and asked Lord Blanc,

<Then what will happen when Leos returns to the capital?>

<Huh, what will happen. Nothing will happen.>

Lord Blanc, now too drunk, began to mumble.

<We were trembling when we first ran away. We secretly embezzled all the secret funds of the Rodria family. Moreover, we even stole the child of that house. But, no one was looking for us. What do you think that means?>

Lord Blanc muttered self-mockingly.

<There must have been people who wished for the downfall of the Rodria family.>

Lord Blanc began to doze off. Isabel wondered if she had given her too much medicine.

<Is there really not a single person who wants Leos?>

<Yes, there is – there was someone who likes Leos.. the noble lady who married the emperor's younger brother. She was a relative of the late Marquis Rodria. I heard she was Leos' godmother.>

With that, Lord Blanc fell asleep. Looking at the pathetic man with his head drooped, the corners of Isabel's mouth rose in a smirk.

\*\*\*

Date: Year 233 of the Empire, March 15th.

<Title: Now is not the time to write about Glassflowers!>

<Oh my! I take back everything I said about the Blanc family being boring! The Blanc family is very interesting. Who would've thought that such a rustic family had such a secret. The experiments on Leos are getting more and more exciting? I'm so thrilled! Madam Blanc, this shameless woman, you're dead in my hands.>

\*\*\*

Date: Year 233 of the Empire, March 17th.

<Title: The Glassworm is not as potent as I thought.>

<At first, I thought the Glassworm could control all of a person's mind and memories. But to be exact, it's more like a meticulous hypnosis. I guess I'll have to use the weapon I've learned about. I need to give Leos a mental shock to make him mine.>

\*\*\*

March. It had become spring before anyone knew it.

Nicole spent a busy time moving.

Fortunately, with the help of Dagger and Grace, Nicole was able to secretly move her plants to the basement of her new house.

'Finally, I get to live alone.'

On the last day before leaving Grace's house, Nicole received a notification that she had been given a new name.

Now she would become a part of Sith. There was no turning back now.

Grace commented on the name Nicole received as follows.

"Ha, it's a name that won't even be remembered. There's a limit to treating people like fools."

As if she couldn't believe it, Grace said.

"Why? What's wrong with forsythias?"

"Isn't it just a common wildflower? You seem more like a white rose."

"I like spring flowers. Besides, I'm not even flashy."

"Anyway, since you've been given such an unsuitable name, it might be better to just call you Karen. Probably the other Sith agents will think the same."

".....I guess I have to get used to the name Karen after all."

"Speaking of which, I'll call you Karen from now on. We can't make a mistake in speaking. Tell Jay the same. He's Jen, you're Karen."

".....Yes."

Nicole thought Grace was thorough, as always.

'Now I'll have fewer and fewer opportunities to use my real name.'

Nicole repeated her name to herself. She alone must not forget that name.

“But I will remember you, Nicole. You, who used to live hidden in the mountains and looked at me boldly. Someday, you will be able to live freely as you wish.”

Seeing her regret that she couldn't use the name Nicole, Grace spoke.

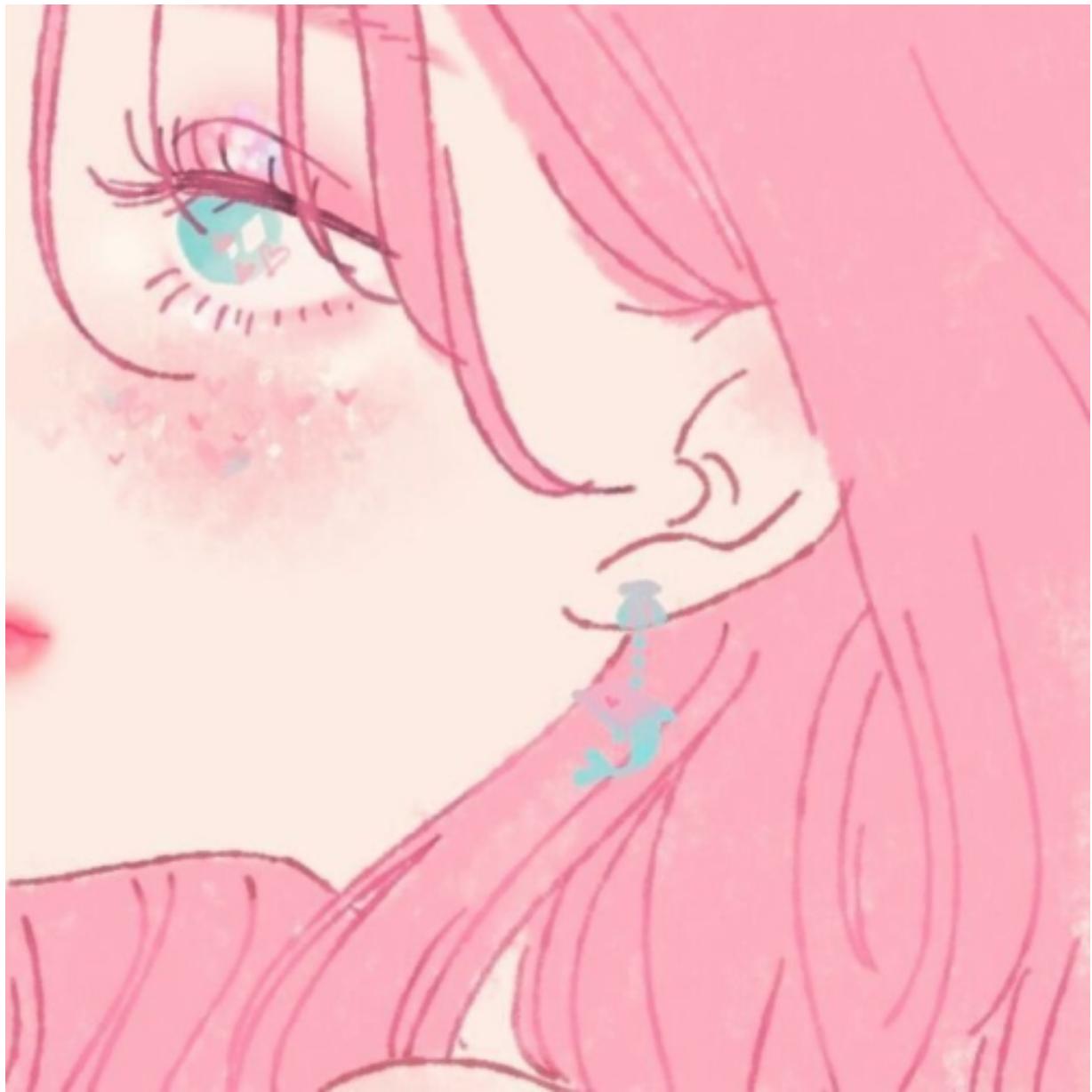
“.....I've always thought this, but Grace, you're more perceptive than I thought.”

“Now there's nothing you can't say to me, right?”

Nicole smiled softly. Now Grace was no different from her new mother.

The carriage sent from Sith arrived. Nicole got into the carriage and left Grace's mansion.

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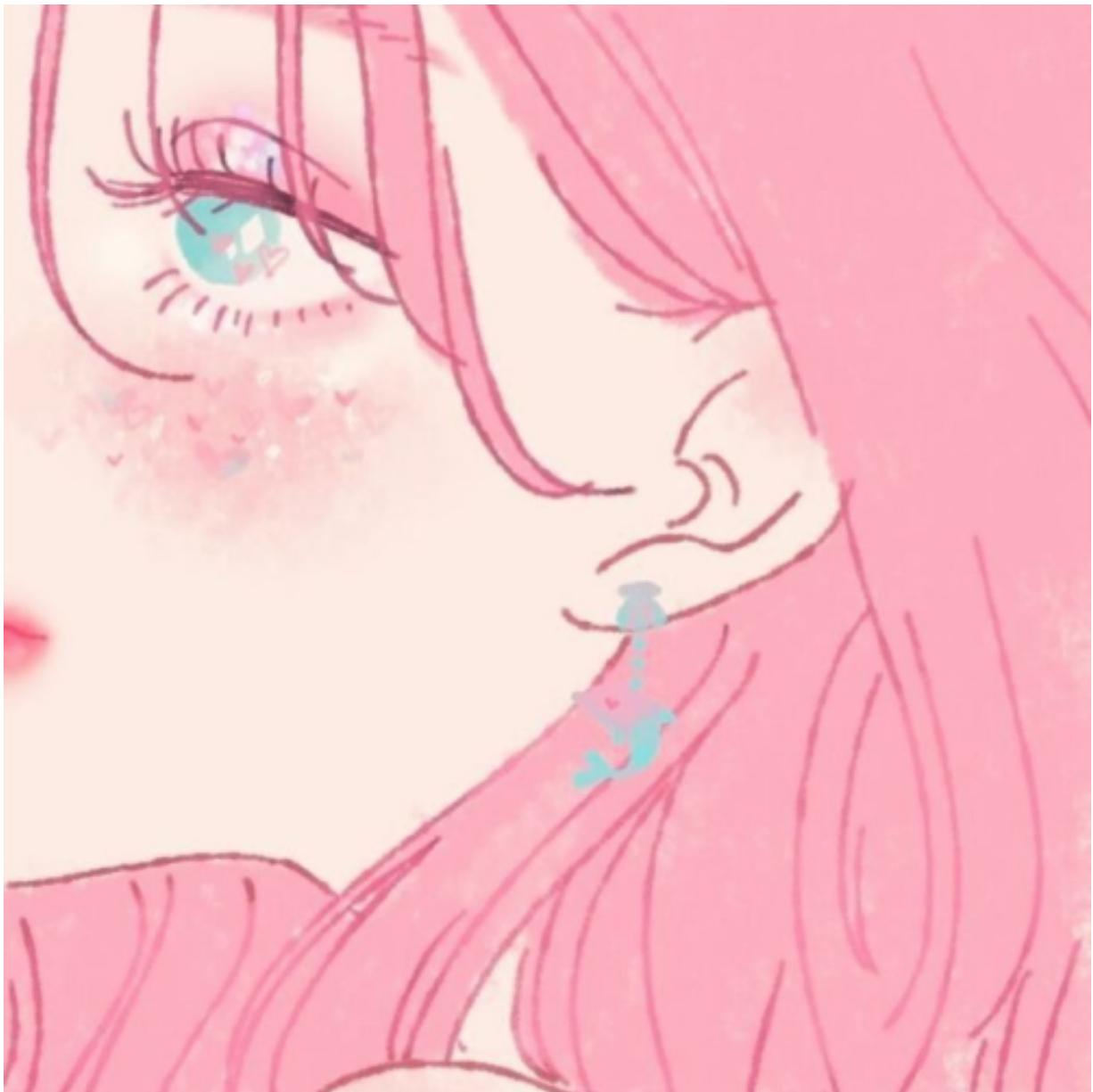


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# Chapter 78

\*\*\*

‘Now I’m going to live here alone.’

Nicole looked around the house.

‘They say both a house and a person need to be dressed up to show their true colors.’

The house was a beautiful and sturdy building in its own right. The newly repaired roof and the cleanly cleaned walls were very beautiful.

‘I can’t believe I’ve come this far from wearing shabby clothes that my mother and I made in the countryside, rationing food in the winter.’

Of course, she lived as a Grand Duchess in her past life, but none of the many Grand Duchess’s properties were Nicole’s. This house was also provided by Raul, but it was different from her past life.

‘This is what I earned with my abilities. I passed Sith’s initiation exam and successfully completed the probationary mission.’

Thinking this way, she felt a little proud.

There were already employees who had arrived in the house. Coincidentally, they were all women, four in total.

In such a small mansion, four employees were enough if they only outsourced the management of the garden.

“Welcome, madam.”

“From today, we will do our best for you, madam.”

Nicole looked at their faces carefully.

Originally, the Sith side wanted to fill all the employees of this house with people they sent. Of course, Nicole didn't want that.

This was because it was a very careful task to secretly move the plants grown in Grace's house to the secret underground space of this house.

‘Fortunately, thanks to Grace's help, I was able to avoid filling this house with people from Sith.’

Following Dagger's advice, Nicole chose a house and sent people to Sith. Shortly after, Las came carrying the house documents.

<Official agents of Sith with a status of Shadow or higher are given attendants. You can have up to four as guards and personal spies. They are not official Sith members, but rather a kind of irregular member.>

And they said they could send trustworthy cooks or maids, provided Nicole pays the cost.

<I don't need anyone.>

<But you will need a guard, won't you?>

<Grace said she would attach people for me. They are people raised by Grace, who lost their place when she

retired.>

Las didn't seem to like Nicole's decision.

<The Grand Duke will probably be displeased.>

<He already dislikes many things about me, including my closeness to Grace.>

Upon hearing that, Las nodded slightly, saying, "You have a point." He still didn't seem to dislike Nicole.

"I look forward to working with you."

And now, the people standing in front of Nicole were those sent by Grace.

The cook was a woman with a warm impression. And the maid in charge of laundry and clothing management was the youngest, but she already looked tall and energetic.

And the remaining two maids were particularly noticeable.

They were agents that Grace had carefully trained before, and they also served as trained escorts.

"My name is Bluea."

"I'm Redia."

"Nice to meet you."

They lightly greeted Nicole as they made eye contact with her.

"I'm relieved since Grace sent you guys."

Nicole said to the two maids who looked younger than her. The girls looked at each other and smiled before greeting her.

"By the way, did Grace give you those names?"

"Yes. She gave us new names."

"....."

Bluea and Redia, huh. It seemed that Grace also had quite a radical sense.

\*\*\*

Thus, peaceful days passed by. Nicole didn't receive any notification from Sith until May.

Drinking tea or secretly reading books she brought from home in her room became her daily routine. Of course, she continued to take care of the special plants in the basement.

And on May 15th, Nicole received a contact from Sith.

<In three days, after passing the regular confession test, you will receive a new mission. Please prepare for the confession training. We will send a carriage to pick you up in the morning. After arriving by carriage, please go to A03 room of Sith's underground headquarters immediately.>

It was something she had prepared herself for. The time came later than she thought, though.

'If I say something wrong during that confession drug test....'

Nicole was nervous. Fortunately, Nicole had a countermeasure. It was Grace.

<I made the confession drug training manual, so don't worry.>

Grace told her just before Nicole left her house.

<Confession drug training is conducted in pairs. After pairing two agents and sending them to an interrogation room, they ask each other questions to maintain their sanity even after taking the confession drug. They become each other's interrogators.>

<What kind of questions are usually asked?>

<Any question is fine. Some people might ask about personal life to tease, but most ask common knowledge questions. For example, 'What color is an apple?' is one of the questions.>

The answer is obviously red, but you have to give a false answer like 'yellow' or 'purple'.

<But apples are red, aren't they?>

Nicole asked, seeming puzzled.

<The effect of the confession drug is to make you tell the truth and spill all your hidden stories, isn't it? So you have to tell a lie, not the truth, to succeed.>

Nicole understood right away.

<You said the training is done in pairs, right? Are Shadows usually paired with each other?>

<Yes. Regular knights are paired with regular knights. It's because they are comfortable with each other as they often see and work together. But according to the regulations, as

long as they belong to the same Sith, they can examine each other.>

Nicole hardly knew any other Shadows besides herself. The only ones she knew were the Grand Duke and the butler.

'I wish the Grand Duke would come. But the chances of that happening are low.....'

The Grand Duke said he had already received confession drug training and internal interrogation due to a previous order refusal incident.

<I'm going to teach you how to resist the confession drug from now on. Remember it well.>

Grace taught her a kind of surefire strategy.

When you take the confession drug, you get excited and want to spill everything.

She said that before the other person asks a question, you should voluntarily spill a minor 'truth'.

<What would be a good minor truth?>

<Spill something really trivial. Something that has nothing to do with your deadly secret. For example, the type of black tea you like, or food you're crazy about.>

<Uh, um. Cornbread?>

<That's pretty cute. That's fine. As soon as you start, shout out the name of the food you like. Then you'll calm down a bit.>

She actually love cornbread. To the point of madness. Nicole muttered to herself.

Grace told her to keep thinking about that.

Nicole nodded her head.

<Is there a chance I might be questioned about Karen's past?>

<What are you talking about, the time you were arrested for public indecency?>

Nicole's cheeks turned red, even though it wasn't her fault.

<Well, considering this absurd past isn't bad. How about acting utterly like Karen to end Raul's suspicions?>

<What is that? Are you asking me to overpower him?>

<If you're confident you can survive, that wouldn't be bad either. But it's too much for you. I mean, act like a thoughtless woman and flirt foolishly. Act like Karen.>

<Certainly, it's not easy to act like someone who tried to burn me and my family to death.>

<That's correct.>

Grace laughed. Only then did Nicole realize that she had been teased.

<Raul doesn't have much interest in women of Karen's status anyway. If he shows interest, it would be for amusement. That guy is obsessively clean when it comes to relationships with women, that's for sure. So don't worry too much. As long as you do your job well, the past doesn't matter.>

Nicole recalled that memory.

\*\*\*

And on the day instructed by Sith's side.

Nicole arrived at Sith's headquarters early in the morning by carriage. When she entered the designated office, what awaited her was Scimitar in training clothes.

Scimitar had her usual expressionless face.

The confession drug is administered by injection. It will be over soon.

Scimitar prepared the injection calmly, making a clinking sound. Meanwhile, she briefly explained the training.

"Ring the bell if your heart beats too hard. But don't worry, no one has ever died from confession training so far."

"I understand." Nicole said. "But am I receiving training alone?"

"Your partner will come soon. You should prepare first. It takes time for the confession to circulate. People who first receive the confession usually fall into a short sleep. But it's a sleep you won't even remember."

Nicole nodded her head.

"The more you relax, the more comfortable it will be."

Nicole was slightly comforted by Scimitar's indifferent kindness.

"Thank you, Scimitar. I couldn't say it last time."

"Pardon? "

"For being kind to me. I... haven't experienced such things much. Competent and great people caring about me."

"You're also competent. So don't be modest. The Siths all live on my good taste, so you deserve it too, Miss Karen."

".....Please call me Karen."

Nicole felt a tickle in her throat for no reason. Scimitar nodded slightly and took Nicole to the next room.

As Nicole sat on the long sofa, she tapped the syringe with her finger and then inserted it into her arm.

"In fact, confession training is a matter of will, not physical strength. Even a frail woman like Miss Karen can endure much better than a hardened knight like me if you get along well with the confession."

"Yes."

Nicole was so focused on Scimitar's words that she didn't even notice the injection coming.

"Don't be scared no matter who comes in as a partner. Sith is all Sith. There will be nothing scary. Really."

Nicole nodded her head. She leaned back on the sofa and closed her eyes, following Scimitar's advice.

Scimitar cleaned up the injection.

"But don't you call me Portia?"

"That name is not very pretty. Karen suits you better. Because Miss Karen is pretty."

Nicole was surprised and opened her eyes wide. Scimitar smiled faintly and left the room.

Nicole closed her eyes. And she tried to pull herself together.

That was the moment. Her heart started to beat.

*Thump, thud. Thump. Thump-thump-thump-*

A steady sound began to ring in her ears like tinnitus.

“Gasp!”

Nicole felt as if she was being sucked into water. And she slowly opened her eyes. It seemed she had fallen into a short sleep.

“How is it, the feeling of getting the confession serum for the first time? It’s not as dirty a feeling as you thought, is it?”

Nicole looked at the person sitting next to her. A giant man was sitting on the long sofa.

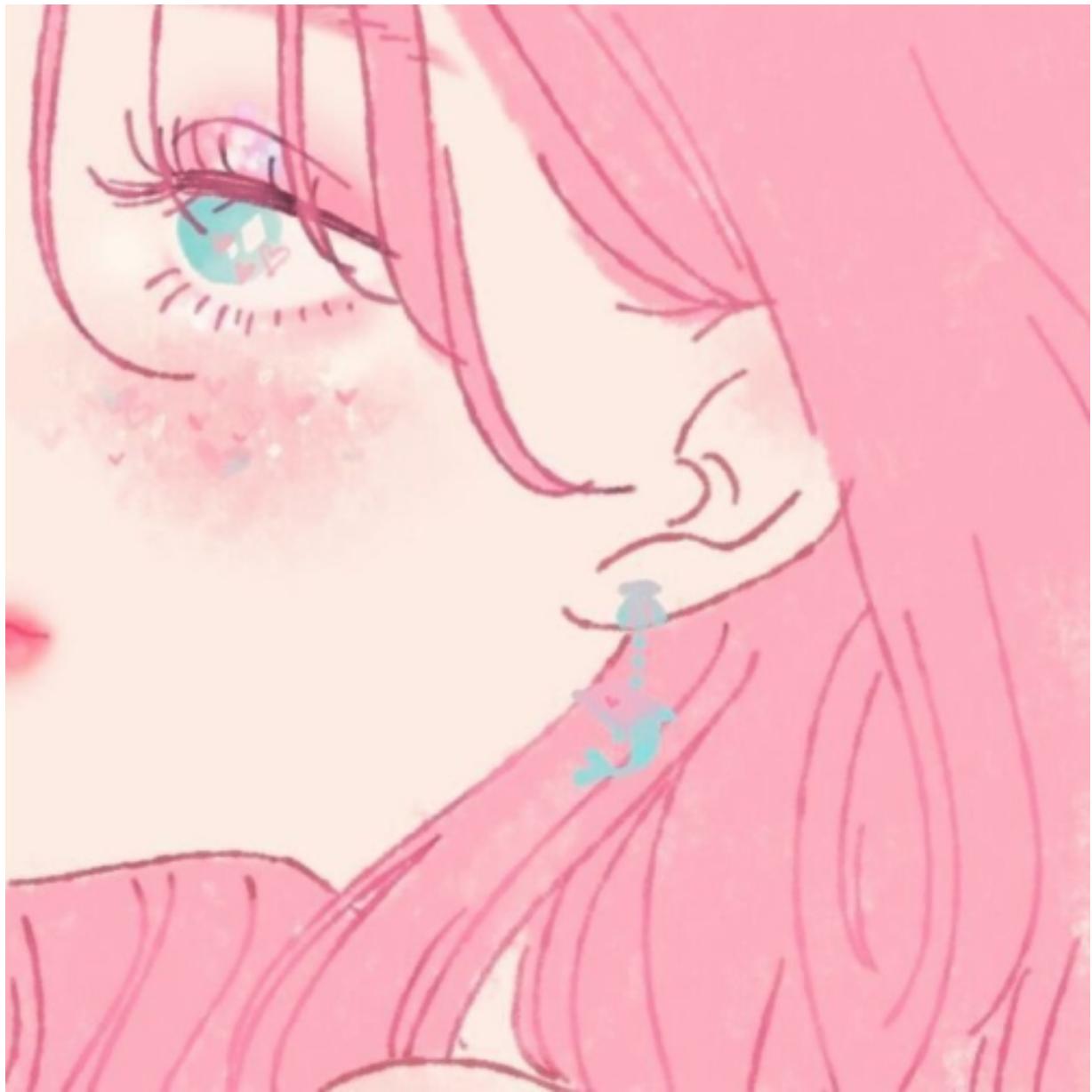
He had a large frame overall, and his long legs stretched out under the sofa. He looked at Nicole calmly and smiled with his eyes.

“.....Ra, ul?”

“Now you’re just calling my name. Yes, it’s me. Miss Karen.”

Nicole’s hand trembled.

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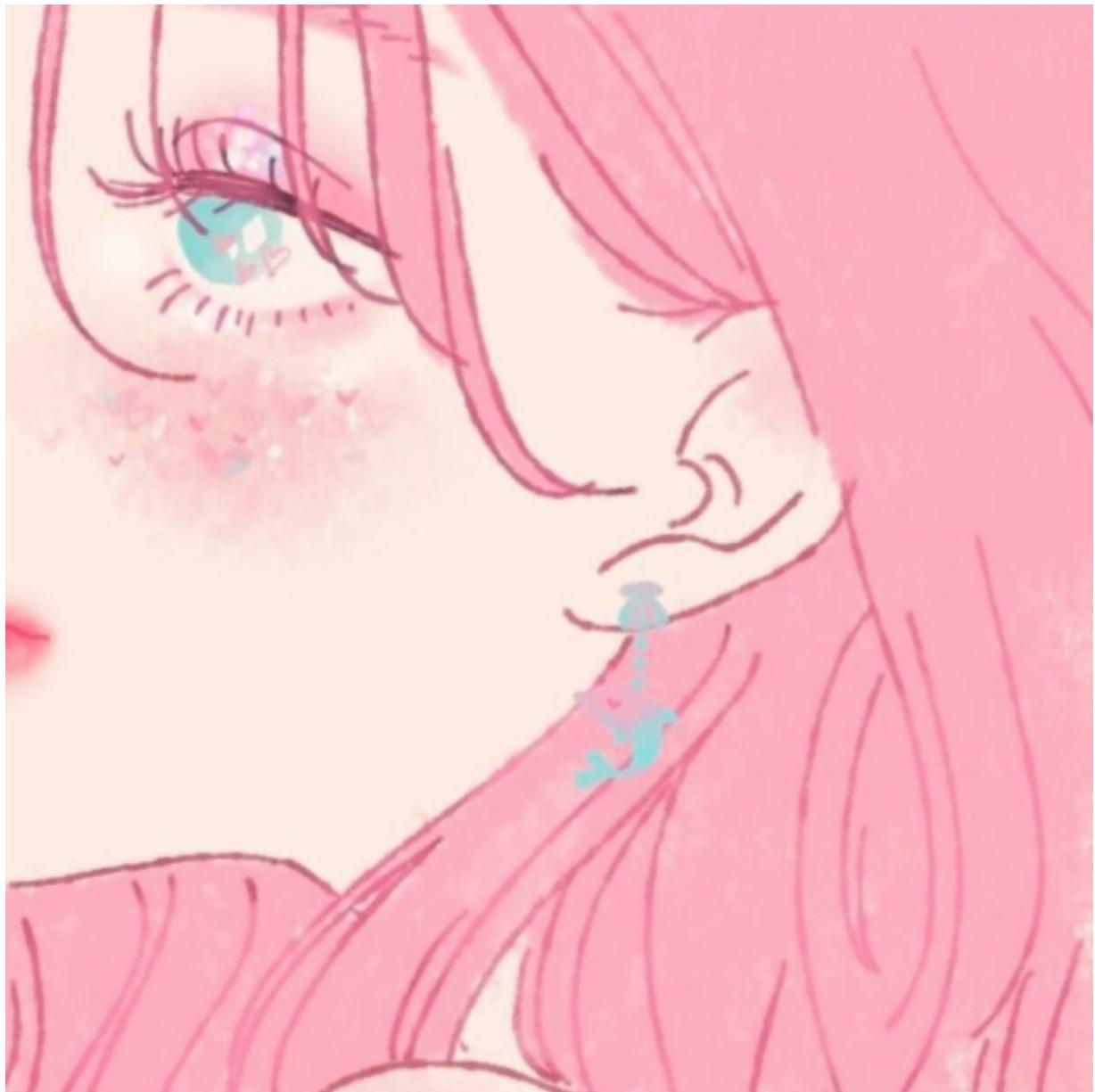


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# Chapter 79

“Why..... are you here.....? I was waiting for my training partner.”

“I am your master, so I can be anyone’s partner.”

Raul said. He injected himself in the arm. Then she sniffed something like a fragrance.

“What are you doing now?”

“It’s a mild hallucinogen. It works better if we do it together.”

“.....Such things are addictive.”

“It’s for medical use, so don’t worry. It just makes you feel relaxed.”

From truth serum to hallucinogens. Just how strong is his mental fortitude?

Raul leaned back on the sofa. He was such a large man that the sofa looked small.

‘Of all people, why him!’

Nicole felt a sense of defeat. This was.....really not good.

In front of Nicole’s eyes, Raul’s side profile shimmered like a mirage.

'Is there such a thing as a safe hallucinogen?'

She reached for the drug box that Raul had placed on the armrest. She was worried that he might do something harmful to his body.

'I'm curious.'

Strangely, after taking the truth serum, she couldn't suppress her desires.

*Thud.*

The metal case was caught in Nicole's hand. But the strength drained from her hand and the case fell to the floor.

"You've become aggressive. After taking the truth serum, I mean."

Raul said expressionlessly.

He caught Nicole's sliding wrist. Her pupils shook greatly.

Suddenly, at that moment, there was a sensation that awakened Nicole's dormant consciousness.

<Ah, ah, uh, hmm..... Here.....>

That was a memory Nicole had never experienced before. The place was the boathouse where Nicole was caught by Isabel in her previous life.

There was a thick silk cloak on the floor. It was obviously a woman's item.

She lay naked, looking up at Raul. Raul held her legs on both sides and looked at her slowly.

<It's your first time doing it outside, but you're doing well.>

Raul whispered. His purple eyes shone seductively and Raul bent his body.

"Huh!"

Nicole pulled her hand away.

'What was that memory just now?'

That wasn't the last time she had slept with Raul in her previous life. That was definitely.....

'Am I having delusions now?'

Nicole didn't know what to say.

"Manual." Raul said.

"Come on, tell me. Your master must be curious about a lot of things."

What did Grace say?

Nicole thought with a dark mind.

'That's right, she told me to confess one simple and trivial thing. There are three questions that need to be answered. Regardless of the number of questions, if you successfully lie three times, you win.'

So.....

"I'll ask first. What on earth do you want? Why are you next to Grace? Is your goal to irritate me, or....."

"I....."

Nicole licked her lips. She wanted to spill all the secrets in her heart. It seemed like her tongue would move on its own.

<I am Nicole.>

<I am your fiancée who died.>

<But I was your wife, although you may not remember.....>

This can't be done. She would be beheaded by his sword immediately. More trivial, more Karen-like things.....

"I want to do it."

Nicole's pupils dilated. She seemed to not believe the words she had just uttered.

'I was about to talk about cornbread.'

Anyway, she needed to tell a trivial secret story.

There was hesitation.

Raul's movement stopped.

"What did you say?"

Raul pulled Nicole's wrist. Nicole collapsed onto him like a rag doll.

"It's not a lie. I..... To you....."

"....."

"I'm attracted. I want to do it once. I feel lust."

Raul's lips faintly twisted. The hand holding her wrist tightened. It wasn't painful yet. She knew that Raul was giving her a chance.

"I, I....."

"I?"

".....to you."

"I'm not attracted to you. Women like you are a headache."

Raul said expressionlessly.

Nicole felt a sudden pain in her chest as if it was being torn apart. Of course, she knew it.

Once, she was his wife.

They could have had a better relationship. She could have done better.

But Nicole could do nothing, and in the end, they ended up like this.

"I don't feel any lust for you."

Raul came closer. Nicole was becoming more and more strange due to the pleasant smell from his body. A masculine scent. And his big hands. His peculiar purple pupils getting closer to her jawline.

Raul raised his hand near Nicole's chin. Nicole was now twisting her body towards Raul as if she wanted to throw herself at him with all her body.

Raul stood up from his seat. And he leaned towards Nicole. He pressed down with both hands on the armrests.

“This is how confession training is done.”

If you lie, it's the right answer.

‘So, you to me.....’

This man is attracted to me. And he feels lust.

The moment she realized this, Nicole's eyelids trembled. This confession drug was too strong. Nicole bit her lip.

“There's one more left. A question.”

Nicole said.

“Do you want to play with me? Like playing with fire, something like that.”

Act like Karen.

Grace's words rang in her ears. Nicole couldn't bear the words she had spit out.

In fact, she wanted to ask more.

‘Do you want to sleep with me?’

‘Do you also have strange dreams when you look at me?’

‘Why did you save me in my past life?’

‘Did you love me even a little bit?’

But she could only ask the most worthless question among them all.

Raul completely leaned over Nicole. He squinted his sharp eyes and faintly smiled. Then he whispered into Nicole's ear.

“I hate it terribly.”

That meant he terribly wanted it. His sharp words dug into her heart, stirring it.

Raul stared into Nicole’s eyes. Nicole did the same, and at the same time, something faint and tingling pierced her heart.

The next moment, their lips got closer. Raul’s lips passionately covered Nicole’s.

“Uh, oh, uh!”

*Thud, thud, thud.*

The sofa Nicole was sitting on started to shake. Like people who had been holding back for a long time, they hurriedly intertwined their tongues.

Raul’s tongue heatedly sucked in Nicole’s. She was helplessly attacked by Raul’s tongue and threw her head back.

Between their momentarily separated lips, a sticky thread of saliva connected them. Raul touched Nicole’s lower lip and spoke.

“Say no if you don’t like it.”

She didn’t know whether to lie or tell the truth. It’s easy for the mouth to lie, but not the eyes. Nicole lowered her head with trembling eyes.

It meant to continue.

“That’s the right answer.”

Raul, who had his hand on the back of Nicole's head, spoke.

"I wished for it too."

"Huh, uh....."

This time, another determined kiss followed. Raul's lips slowly pecked kisses on Nicole's lower lip.

And then his hand went under Nicole's knee. His large hand slowly started to caress Nicole's thigh.

From the place where he touched, goosebumps ran all over her body, sending a tingling sensation. Raul's fingers gently caressed her garter belt. Then it slowly moved up. And it dug deeper.

"Huh, ah, uhh....."

Nicole shivered all over. Over the thin and short slip, he precisely pressed down on her clitoris. She didn't know what to do with the sensation of being nibbled.

"I knew it from the beginning. From the moment I met you, I knew it would turn out this way."

Nicole looked at Raul with eyes filled with tears.

"I, I..... don't know. About you."

This confession test was a complete failure. Because his existence broke her and only made her spill the truth.

*Rip*, her stockings tore. Nicole trembled at his fingers digging through the slip. Their lips entwined again in a sticky manner. Nicole shook her hips slightly as she shivered.

“I, I don’t want to go all the way here.”

“Haah, I’m going crazy.”

Raul said.

“Are you doing this on purpose?”

“I don’t know. So, I don’t like to do it here for the first time.”

It’s just the first time in this life. Raul held back and looked at Nicole.

He bit Nicole’s neck with insatiable desire and wildness. At that sensation, Nicole felt her lower body getting wet.

She kept putting strength in her thighs and wanted to rub them together. As she put strength near her navel, she arched her waist.

“Then don’t act like you’re teasing. Because I’ve been imagining nothing but doing it with you since some time ago.”

Her heart tingled again at the spoken naughty words. Perhaps she had become a little broken after being reborn.

Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been so stimulated by this man’s words and actions.

“Tell me. Who you are.”

Raul whispered. A large hand swam up over her thigh again.

But the fingers that seemed to invade her underwear at any moment had stopped advancing. Instead, he pressed his lower body against her. The thing in his pants, erect to the point of bursting, rubbed between Nicole’s legs.

“You know me, right? Since when have you known me, what’s your identity?”

Nicole bit her lip.

“I’m a pure noble. I was well educated and grew up flawlessly. I have no record of arrest. That’s all.”

Three lies.

It was a condition for passing the confession test.

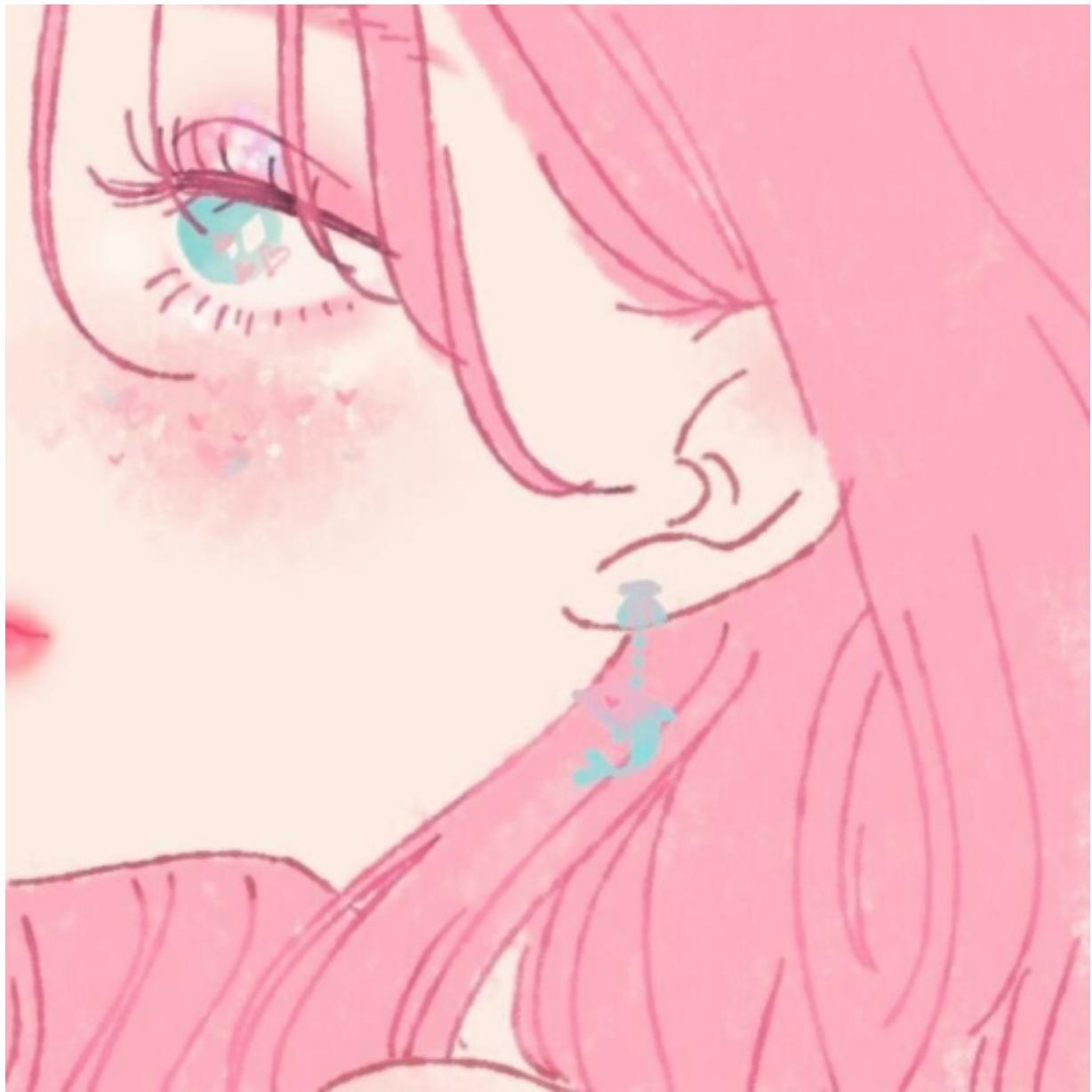
It was the first achievement of this confession training. Raul chuckled at her answer.

“You learn fast.”

Suddenly, Nicole wrapped her arm around Raul’s neck. Raul lightly kissed Nicole’s lower lip.

It felt like something had snapped in her head. Nicole’s outstretched white arms trembled.

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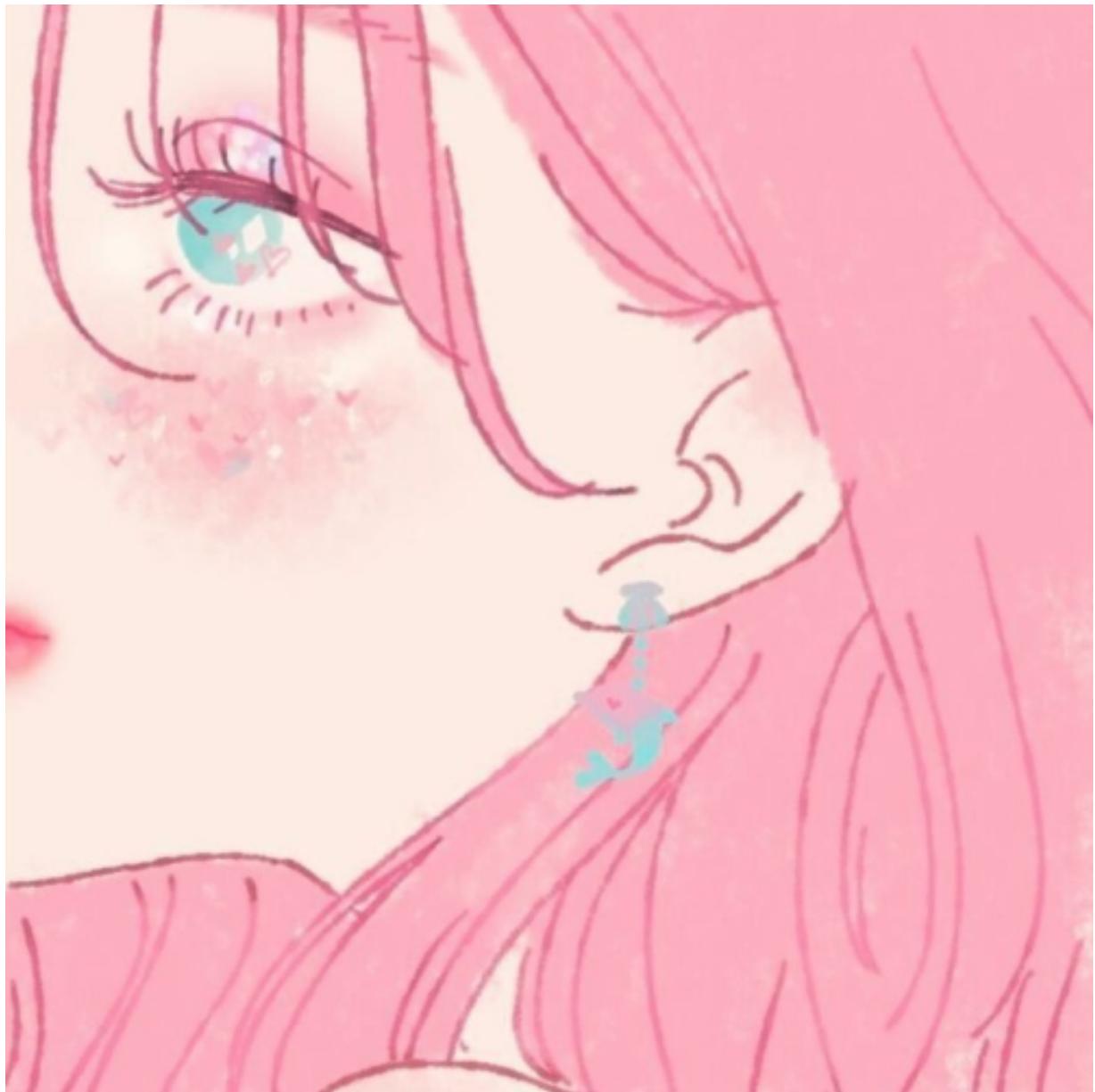


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# Chapter 80

*Knock, knock.* At that moment, there was a knock on the door.

“Are you okay? The designated training time has already passed.”

It was Scimitar’s voice.

Given the loud noise from inside, she must have heard everything. Nicole’s vision went black.

Without realizing it, she pushed Raul away. Raul obediently fell away from Nicole. However, he still tightly held Nicole’s small left hand. He only didn’t let go of that.

As Raul gently squeezed her hand, Nicole felt a shiver run through her.

“Don’t panic and wait. I’ll clean up and leave soon.”

Raul said, looking towards the door. Scimitar’s presence ceased.

When he let go of her hand, Nicole hastily got up from her spot.

Nicole quickly composed herself.

“.....I think I’ll leave now.”

“Sit down.”

Raul said calmly, buttoning up his shirt sleeves.

“The training isn’t over yet.”

Nicole sat down.

“Write a training report. Whether you passed or not. Everything that happened.”

Originally, the partner being tested in this training was supposed to record the contents discussed during the training.

“How should I write it? Really.....”

Raul gave a slight smile.

Eventually, Nicole bit her lip and began to make up appropriate content.

Training subject, Raul Valentine..... Detailed description of questions related to personal life, privacy is omitted.

*I don't like it, I don't want it, I refuse it.*

Resisting confession through three lies about what she usually wanted and preferred...

What Nicole wanted to write was that. But her pen stopped at the ‘want’ part. From the beginning, this writing itself seemed like a delusion, and the content seemed absurd. Eventually, Nicole looked up at him, feeling the confusion in her head.

Raul, who had finished tidying up, said,

"I'm sober now. Don't make the excuse of being drugged later. I've wanted to do this from the start."

*Thud.* The pen fell. Either the nib was loosely closed, or the ink held by the nib fell onto the paper.

"Let's do it again next time, Karen."

"....."

"Next time, until you've cried enough."

Raul spoke tenderly. The door closed. Left alone, Nicole looked at the paper with blurred eyes after Raul left.

The black ink spread on the paper was visible.

It was a confusing color, whether it was fear, regret, or anticipation, she couldn't tell.

\*\*\*

Nicole, who had barely finished writing the report, staggered out. Scimitar was standing in the room connected to the training room. Upon seeing Scimitar, Nicole's face turned slightly red again.

"Are you okay? Are you feeling dizzy?"

".....A little."

"The first confession training is usually like that. It would be best to take a break and monitor your progress. Come this way."

Nicole was sincerely grateful to Scimitar for his business-like attitude. This was already the second time she was led to the infirmary at Sith headquarters.

The infirmary was empty and clean again this time. Nicole sat on the bed.

“Your heart is beating too fast.”

Scimitar, who had checked her pulse, said this. Nicole felt unnecessarily embarrassed. She knew that her heart was not just racing because of the confession drug.

“Scimitar.”

“Don’t worry. Whatever happened inside, it’s none of my business. I don’t spread rumors about my superior’s private life.”

Nicole, who was about to thank Scimitar, closed her mouth. It was easy to deal with direct people, but sometimes they made her feel embarrassed.

“Thank you.”

Nicole said softly. This was also her second thanks to Scimitar.

Scimitar gave her a sedative. Nicole drank the sedative with water from the bottle placed next to the bed.

On the wall opposite the bed where Nicole was sitting, there was a small mirror. Nicole saw her reflection in it.

Swollen red lips, messy hair, and relaxed eyes...

‘The one who can’t catch on when it’s this blatant is a fool.’

Nicole thought.

“Nothing special happened. No one forced me.”

Nicole said, worried that Scimitar might misunderstand.

"You don't have to explain to me."

".....I know."

"But if I had to give advice." Scimitar said, seemingly hesitating slightly.

"The Grand Duke is a charming man. He has a clean personal life, and he has all the conditions that would enchant women."

After becoming Raul's subordinate, Nicole heard about Raul's personal life several times. The words of people, including Grace, were always the same.

'This person really never had a lover.....'

Then it would have been the same before he married me in my past life. That was unusual.

For a man of Raul's status, having a lover before marriage was not a flaw. Usually, such a lover was a woman of relatively low status.

'But why would such a person come to me.....'

Nicole bit her lip.

<I knew it would be like this from the beginning.>

Why does Raul's words come to mind?

"I know. Many women in the capital admire him. But that's not why I fell for him. I'm not that foolish."

“I understand. So, it would be best to stop falling for the Grand Duke, that’s my advice.”

“Advice? To me?”

“There aren’t many young female agents like you and I in Sith. If not me, there would be no one else to give advice from a similar position.”

It was a reasonable but kind word. Nicole began to think that Scimitar was more unique than she thought.

Nicole quietly nodded her head.

“It’s not good to play with fire with the Grand Duke.”

“Because of his reputation?”

“Because you joined Sith because you wanted to advance.”

“.....Isn’t everyone like that?”

“You are a young, unmarried woman. That means it’s easy to launder your status. So, if you do well in the future, you will soon marry through the mediation of the Grand Duke. Then you could become a quasi-noble, or even a noble.”

Nicole immediately understood Scimitar’s words.

Currently in the Empire, the middle class who had amassed wealth through successful businesses were on the rise.

Conversely, there were also impoverished nobles who only had their status.

If Nicole continues to prosper, a time will come when she will need a new status, not this status that is no different from a commoner, but a noble status.

Unless it's a special case like the fallen House of Yveschapel, titles are usually inherited paternally.

So, in the case of women, they can become noblewomen just by marrying a man from a noble family.

In the case of men, it was much more complicated as they had to buy a title, or enter as an adopted child or son-in-law.

"You want to become a noble, not a commoner. A status where you can go anywhere you want and be treated with respect."

".....That's right. You know my heart well."

"People who enter Sith generally fall into one of two categories. Either they're slightly strange people who are crazy about thrills, like Estoc, or they're people who want to live a peaceful life and live like a human being by advancing their status. Anyone can see that you are the latter."

"Scimitar, the fact that you know so well....."

"My situation is similar to yours. I also come from a humble background."

Nicole closed her mouth.

"So, it's not good to fall for someone dangerous like the Grand Duke. Besides, he has a cruel nature and doesn't know love."

Besides, Raul is entangled with the royal family. Has there ever been a good ending for those who went against the royal family?

Nicole nodded.

“Thank you for the advice, Scimitar.”

“Don’t mention it. Take a rest and come out. It seems that you have passed the confession test, so you will soon take on a new mission.”

Nicole suddenly asked Scimitar, who was about to leave the room.

“What about Scimitar?”

“Yes?”

“Marriage... and... future plans...”

“I am already married by the order of the Grand Duke.”

“.....A political marriage, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Scimitar smiled faintly.

“My husband is a good man. He is not wealthy, but he was born into a noble status and grew up receiving a lot of love. And he is a man who knows how to dedicate himself to his wife.”

Her concise words impressed Nicole. Even such a person who lives a fierce life after joining Sith can find peace.

The life of a blood-soaked knight and ordinary happiness. Two difficult-to-coexist things can coexist.

“You’re living your best life.”

Nicole said softly.

"Yes. And I will serve my lord until my name is fulfilled. I will also dedicate myself to my family."

Scimitar replied.

Rather than falling for a bad man like Raul, wait a bit and strategize.

Live happily like an ordinary person.

This is the best given in front of Nicole in this life.

Those who only choose such rational options. Such people deserved to be happy, like Scimitar in front of her eyes.

But in this life, Nicole had values more desperate than happiness.

There were memories that could not be escaped inevitably.

'I can't get away from Raul already. No matter what he thinks of me..... He is an important axis of my life. As long as I have the memories of my past life.....'

So it won't be easy to love another man in this life.

Even until the day when Raul marries her off to another man.

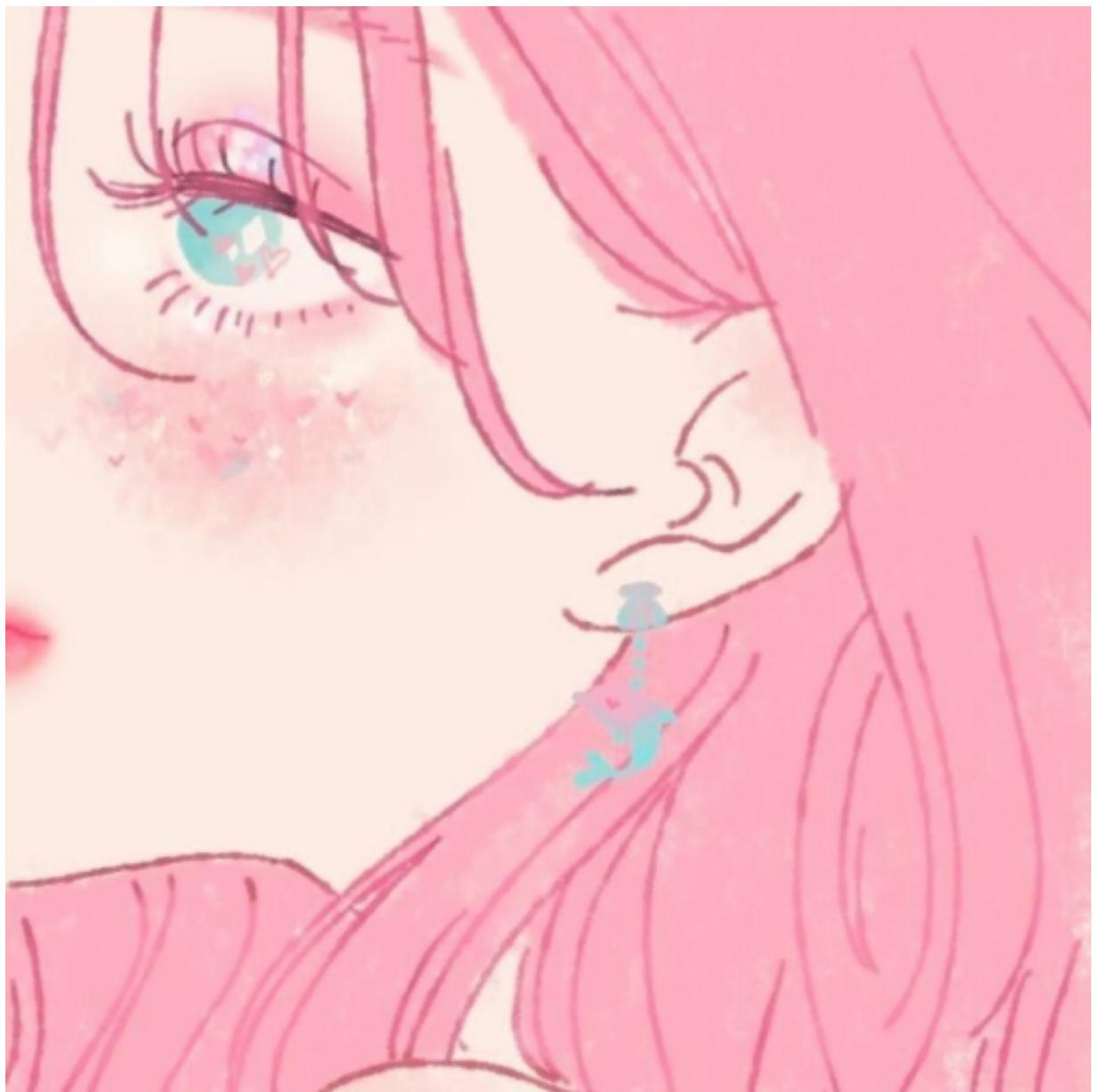
By then, she hoped to end this feeling.

This unknown emotion, sticky like the black ink she had spilled earlier.

Nicole truly hoped that day would come peacefully. She hoped that until that day, neither her body nor her heart would break.

[T/N: Chap 79-80 🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥]

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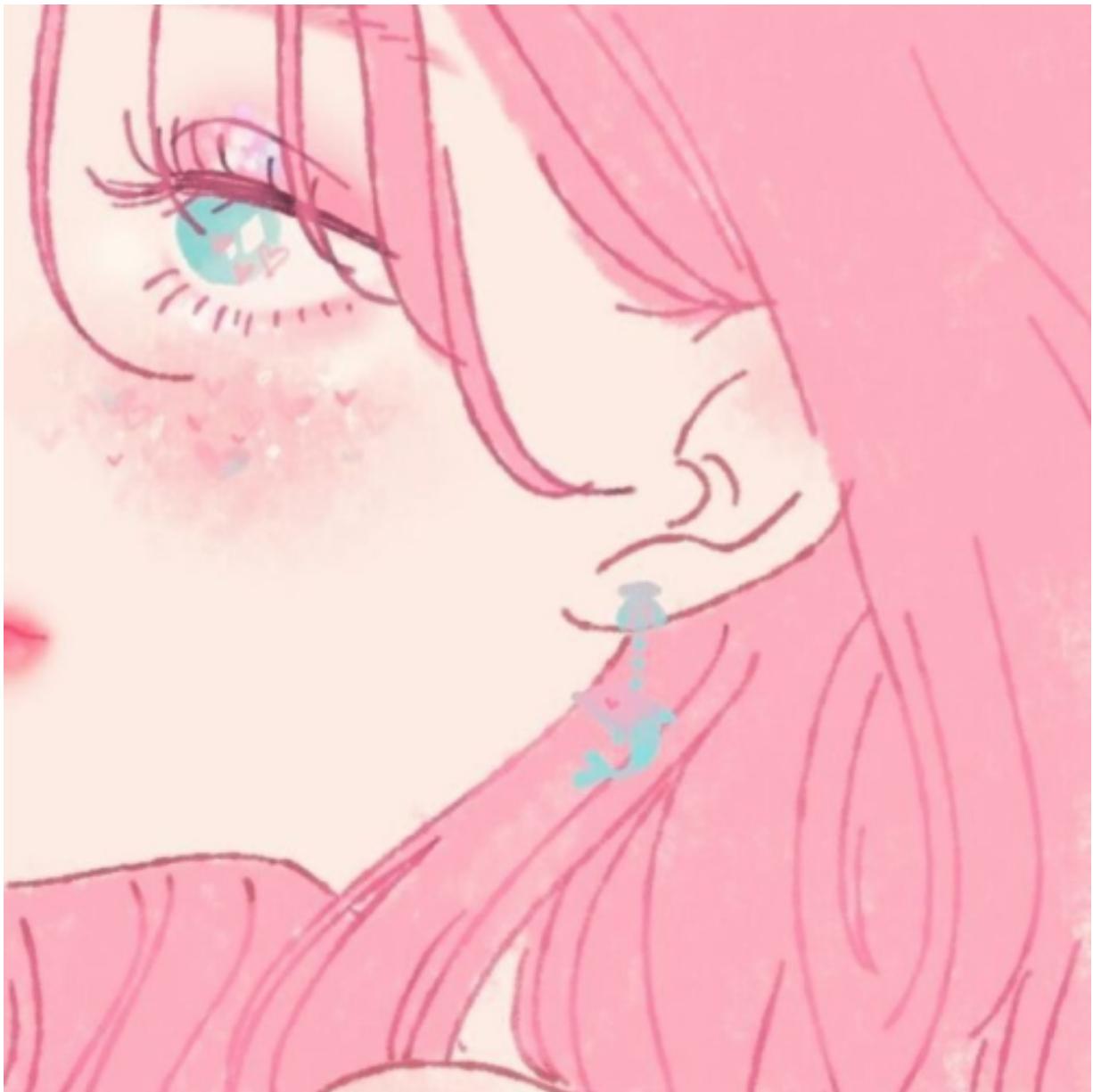


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# Chapter 81

<You will finish your personal affairs and receive new orders at the Sith headquarters within a week.>

It was the command Nicole received as soon as she arrived home.

'First of all, it would be best to avoid Raul.'

Nicole thought so. Nicole contacted Dagger to find out Raul's schedule.

Raul was exactly going on a provincial inspection with the royal family one week from today.

<His departure time is said to be 2 pm on Friday. They have to finish their prayers in the morning at the royal palace and then depart - this schedule is official, so it's not particularly secret, but it might be difficult next time. If I'm misunderstood by him, I could get hurt too.>

Dagger said. Anyway, it was good that among Raul's close associates, there was someone who fully supported her.

'If I go to Sith this time, will I meet Raul?'

From what she heard briefly from Dagger before, when Raul assigns tasks to Sith's regular knights or shadows, he prefers to deliver them face to face.

However, he said that because he is a very busy person, when it's not convenient, he has his subordinates conduct the briefing.

'Raul will be busy on the day of the provincial inspection, so I can go to Sith after his departure time.'

Nicole thought. She decided to fully occupy this period given like a test.

She wanted to avoid Raul until she was sure what this feeling was.

Because she was worried about what would happen when she met him next time.

<Let's do it again next time.>

Because the words he whispered playfully after the last kiss with Raul did not leave her mind.

It's not just that she's worried about what Raul will force her to do.....

'I mean, I'm worried about my self-control.'

Somehow, she seemed to be designed in a way that she couldn't move against Raul.

So Nicole said she would rest for a few days because her body was not good due to the aftermath of the confession training, and visit Sith on Friday afternoon.

On Friday morning, Nicole was cutting flowers she had grown in the garden and putting them in a vase.

This neat and pretty garden was Nicole's favorite place in her new house.

"It's amazing, how do you grow flowers so well? I've never seen such big and fresh flowers."

Redia, who saw the richly bloomed pink peony, said. Nicole laughed when she saw her widened eyes.

"Spring flowers are naturally meant to grow big."

"Even so....."

Nicole chuckled. After ordering water to be brought from the pump, she washed her hands clean.

"Send this flower to Grace as well, along with the bouquet I just made."

"Yes, madam. I will call the carriage. And I will bring a towel for you to dry your hands."

"Thank you."

Nicole would send flowers and snacks to Grace's house whenever she got a chance. Today, after receiving the same request, Redia left her seat.

'Who is it?'

A moment later, there was a sound of a carriage stopping in front of the house. Nicole went out to the main gate.

Across the capital, there were countless coachmen who would take you to your desired location for a fee. The fare varied depending on the luxury of the carriage.

These carriages were called public carriages, and they were usually decorated with a red border.

Typically, these carriages also provided delivery services for a cheap fare.

'Did Redia already call for a carriage to send to Grace's mansion?'

So, naturally thinking so, Nicole approached the carriage holding a bouquet of peonies.

However, the carriage standing in front of the main gate now was larger and more luxurious than the carriages that usually came to pick up Nicole or take things away. Moreover, the entire carriage was a deep navy color.

It was when she stopped, sensing something strange.

The carriage door swung open.

"Hello."

Inside the carriage sat the tall Raul. The carriage was so spacious that it didn't seem cramped even for Raul.

"Hello."

Nicole turned her gaze away. She held the bouquet of flowers tightly for no reason.

"Whose grave did you steal flowers from this time?"

"No one's. Just...."

Nicole bit her lip at his teasing joke. Raul gestured with a relaxed attitude.

"I was arranging flowers."

"It's better than my subordinate being sick, right?"

Nicole felt embarrassed. She had been avoiding Raul under the pretext of being sick.

But it was awkward to be caught by Raul while she was arranging flowers and idling in the garden.

"Why are you here? You're a busy person....."

"My schedule is not something for you to worry about."

"....."

"Come on. Let's talk about something. Important matters should be discussed while looking into each other's eyes, don't you think?"

Raul said affectionately.

"I'll leave the flowers here."

"That looks good. Come as you are."

Nicole had no choice but to get into the carriage.

As soon as she placed the bouquet on the seat, a bright scent filled the carriage.

Raul looked at Nicole without a word. He had a calm expression, as if he had already forgotten the kiss they had shared last time.

'Was it not a big deal to him? Was it just... a joke?'

Nicole was a bit confused.

"So. Have you been well?"

"Thanks to you."

Raul nodded his head.

"Aren't you going to ask about me?"

"Why should I?"

"You're defiant. Maybe I should feed you another confession potion."

Nicole felt defeated. This man seemed to find new joy in teasing her.

".....Have you been well?"

"Hmm, considering I've dreamt a few times about kissing you somewhere other than your lips, I've been fine."

"That's not something to talk about at work."

Nicole barely managed to say. Her voice must have sounded faintly shaky and ridiculous. Raul smiled with his eyes.

"You should be able to endure it if you're feeling frustrated."

Raul said. Nicole pressed her back firmly against the chair.

"I'm joking. You're looking at me as if you're too scared."

Only then did Nicole feel relieved and nodded slightly.

"What kind of work are you talking about?"

"You said you studied nursing, didn't you?"

".....Yes."

Nicole nodded her head.

Grace's theory was 'There's a limit to living in hiding, so let's mix Karen and Nicole's identities half and half.'

Nicole had a bit of knowledge not only in herbal medicine but also in medicine. Grace thought it was a waste to hide that talent all her life.

So she told the Sith side that 'After meeting Grace, she learned nursing from Grace.'

<It's better to make use of the skills you have. Talent, like a cough, is hard to hide. If you force it down like a bad habit, it's bound to make you sick.>

As it happened, Grace was proficient in various fields of study, including nursing.

"Grace taught me herself. When she... first met me, she wanted to keep me as her disciple for a long time. She told me to prepare to nurse in case she was uncomfortable."

"Did Grace tell you to take responsibility for her until her last days?"

".....Not exactly, but she had similar expectations. Someone to take care of her when she was weak and had no one to rely on. She called me her last disciple."

Everything had been discussed with Grace in advance. At Nicole's words, Raul smiled faintly.

"You're completely a replacement for Sienna."

".....Since she was a capable agent, I should be able to—"

"You're not as noble as Siena."

"....."

Nicole closed her mouth.

"And you don't mean the same to me as Sienna. Because I've never once wanted to kiss Sienna's lips."

Raul adjusted his posture to gaze at Nicole. His upper body was precisely tilted towards Nicole.

Just then, the carriage jolted as it turned a corner. The tips of their feet, which had seemed about to touch since earlier, rubbed against each other.

The suffocating air inside the carriage. A sudden impulse. Nicole flinched and averted her eyes, but it seemed like Raul's eyes kept following her.

"That's a disrespect to the deceased."

Nicole spoke softly. A belated sense of guilt flared up like a wildfire. It wasn't that she had misspoken. She disliked Raul speaking carelessly about Grace's deceased daughter.

"And if you make fun of me like that....."

"Mockery is like a joke mixed with coercion and violence."

Raul said.

"I told you, I was serious."

The jolting of the carriage grew stronger

Raul leaned towards Nicole with a smooth movement.

A small spark flashed and popped in her head.

This time too, they couldn't resist their impulses.

“Ah.....”

Raul lightly kissed Nicole’s lips. A small gasp erupted from Nicole’s mouth.

She slowly parted her lips. This time, their lips intertwined quite sweetly.

Nicole was in a white shirt with a belt cinched at the waist, and a long dark green skirt.

As Raul applied force to his fingers, the button fell off with a clatter.

Then, Nicole’s white chest was revealed.

Raul slipped his hand into her underwear and firmly grabbed Nicole’s breast. Then, he very gently moved as if massaging her breast from the bottom. Nicole felt her nipples harden.

“Huh!”

Raul had one hand on the ceiling of the carriage and was leaning towards Nicole.

*Thud!* The carriage shook again. Not missing the moment when their bodies leaned back, Raul held Nicole and placed her on his lap.

“How is it, do you want it?”

Raul said. Nicole, sitting on his lap, looked at Raul with reddened eyes.

He was always the man who gave her the final choice. And she, did not know how to refuse this man.

“If it’s just a kiss, then I like it.”

“You’re driving me crazy, really.”

Raul laughed. He fervently drew Nicole’s lips into his again.

Then his right hand caressed Nicole’s back and folded her shirt as if tearing it off. On Nicole’s body, only the underwear that had been folded down to the chest part remained. A part of her white back was exposed. Raul completely pulled off her underwear.

“Ah, huk.....”

Nicole gripped the handle attached to the carriage ceiling. Her body leaned back again. It was because Raul bent over and took Nicole’s breast into his mouth.

The soft and white skin was slightly bitten by Raul’s teeth.

“Huh, huk, there..... It’s strange.....”

Nicole said. Raul’s hand caressed her round buttocks wrapped in the dress.

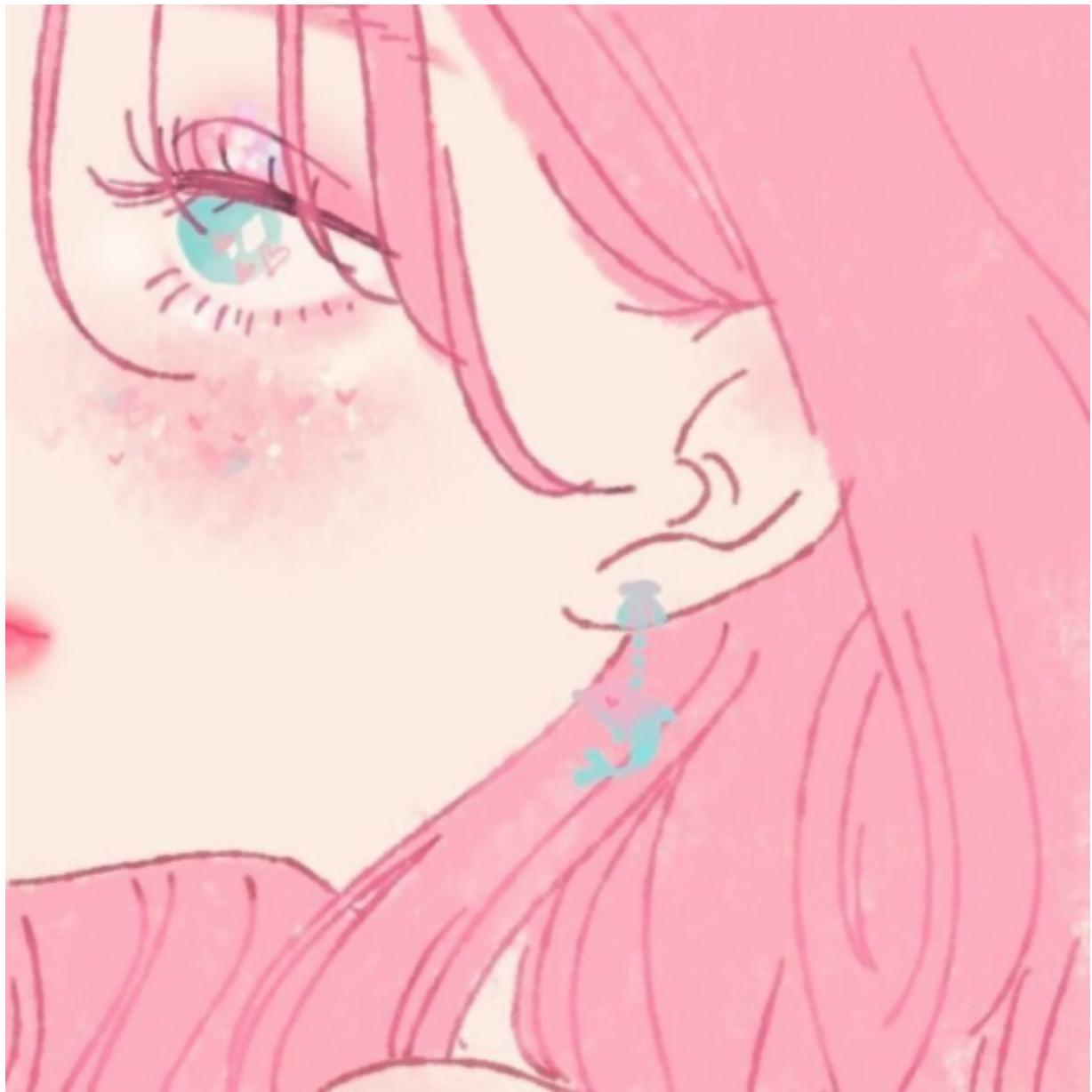
*Thump!* The carriage stopped. But Raul’s tongue didn’t stop.

*Thump. Thump.* Nicole’s buttocks shook in rhythm on Raul’s thigh.

“Huh, huk.....”

Nicole’s breath gradually became faster, like that of a desperate person.

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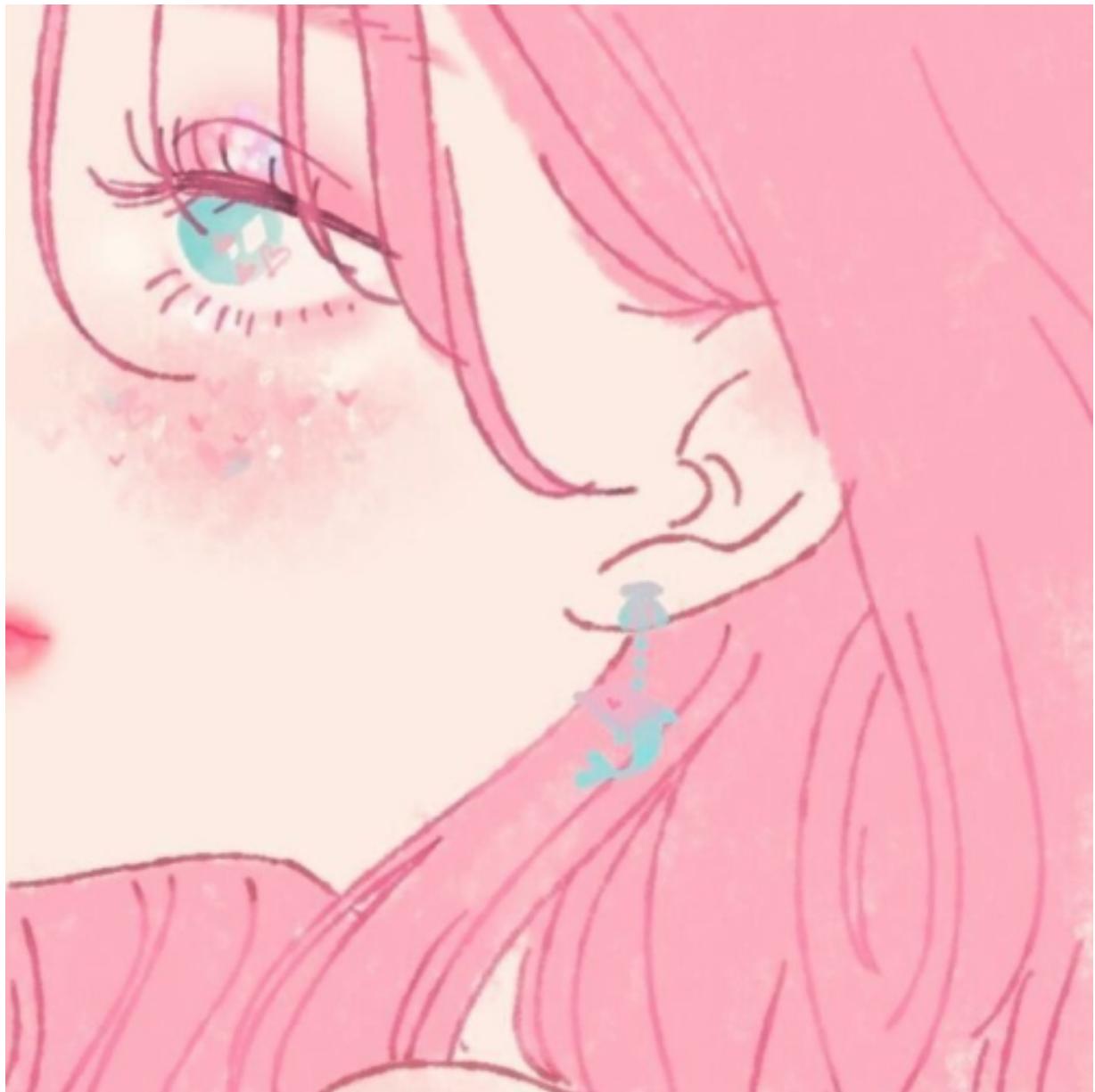


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# Chapter 82

\*\*\*

“Remember.”

Raul, catching his breath, whispered into Nicole’s ear.

“Don’t avoid or run away from me again.”

Nicole managed to nod. Her head was spinning and her lips were dry.

This man clearly liked to dominate. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have noticed and warned her, Nicole, who was nothing more than his insignificant possession, for avoiding him for just a few days.

“I won’t avoid you again.”

He liked it when his commands were repeated back to him... Nicole knew his preferences.

“Good.”

Raul seemed satisfied as he stroked Nicole’s back, his throat rumbling. Each time his large, masculine hand brushed over her, Nicole’s smooth, white skin bristled all over.

Raul opened his mouth again, trying to swallow Nicole’s lips. Nicole blinked. He had told her not to resist...

"Please, stop. Really..."

Nicole was already in a state of half-undress. Luckily, she was wearing a tight green skirt, so nothing below her waist was exposed.

Nicole was only wearing a thin slip that reached midway down her thighs under her skirt. The underwear made of inferior silk was already round and moist in the lower part.

Raul moved his waist as if to thrust. Suddenly, his manhood was positioned exactly under Nicole's legs.

She could tell that he was erect to the point of bursting from the large and heavy touch.

She knows how wildly his monstrous manhood moves, unlike his clean exterior.

The moment he penetrates her for the first time, it would make her feel pleasure accompanied by shame from the start.

"I can't stand it anymore... So only up to here... Not yet... I don't want to."

Nicole spoke quietly. In fact, she wished he would tear her underwear right now and thrust to the end.

But not now. If she were to go all the way with him... She wished it wouldn't be in such an impulsive situation.

Before her heart, barely held together under Raul's influence, completely shattered, she fortified herself against the feeling of being utterly consumed...

"I can kiss your lips. But nothing more than that?"

Raul said as if he couldn't believe it.

"What about the arousal you caused?"

"That is....."

Nicole's cheeks flushed. She looked into Raul's eyes. Upon seeing his beautiful purple eyes, she couldn't bring herself to say 'no' anymore. Instead, saliva pooled under her tongue.

'I'm really enchanted by this man.'

Even if it was just a game to Raul, she didn't mind his attention. She wanted to swallow his desire entirely and make it hers.

"If you really can't stand it, I'll do something else for you....."

Nicole blurted out impulsively.

"Something else?"

Raul's pupils contracted. He firmly held Nicole, who was trying to escape, in one arm.

Raul spoke while looking up at Nicole.

"What else is there?"

"So..... um....."

Nicole thought of 'Karen'. What would Karen do in a moment like this?

A woman like Karen, who is brave and daring - for example, she could easily set someone else's house on fire - would be

able to handle a man with a few bold words.

“I’ll do it with my hand.”

Nicole mumbled, biting her lip. Raul was silent for a moment.

Then he soon chuckled and tenderly tucked Nicole’s hair, who was sitting on his lap, behind her ear.

“Did you think I would be pleased if you said that?”

“Usually, people I-like it...”

“Yes. If you like it, I would be happy.”

“Pardon?”

Relax your hand.

Recently, long tie-shaped cravats were in fashion in the capital. Raul untied the thin, long tie around his neck.

And in a flash, he grabbed Nicole’s hand and tied both her hands.

“Ah, wait a moment.”

Nicole said in surprise. Anyway, the difference in strength was overwhelming, so she couldn’t resist if Raul had bad intentions. But still, this was.....

“Stay still. I won’t hurt you.”

Raul spoke as if comforting a child. Nicole acted obediently, as if frozen at his words.

Raul seated Nicole in the carriage.

There was a small box placed at the head of the back seat of the carriage.

He opened the box and took out another tie. Then he skillfully tied the end of the tie to the handle hanging from the carriage ceiling.

“Ah!”

This time, Raul connected the end of the tie that was tied to Nicole’s hand. Nicole sat in the carriage seat with her hands tied together and stretched upwards, as if standing at attention.

“You’re a good girl. Your whole body is bristling.”

Raul said.

Have I really become a pervert?

Nicole blinked slowly. Her nipples were still erect. It wasn’t because it was cold. The inside of the carriage was warm enough to make her drowsy, although she didn’t know how the temperature was controlled.

“A, are you going to do it?”

Nicole spoke in confusion. It wasn’t that she really disliked it, she was literally embarrassed. Do men and women usually tie each other up when they have sex for the first time? And in a place like this?

“Is that all you can think about, or are you just really naive?”

Raul lifted Nicole’s chin and slowly admired her as he spoke.

“What should you do if you don’t want to go all the way?”

“What, should I do?”

Nicole repeated his words like a fool.

“You should serve. As you suggested.”

Raul took out a small bottle from where he had taken out the tie. When the strong smell of alcohol spread, Nicole knew it was liquor. Raul disinfected his hand by pouring alcohol on it.

“Eek...!”

Raul lifted Nicole’s skirt. Then he slowly began to stroke the top of her slip with his fingers.

“You’re nicely wet, aren’t you?”

Raul whispered. He went down under the seat. He pushed his head completely into Nicole’s skirt, with one knee raised.

“Lift your hips.”

Nicole hesitated, then slowly lifted her buttocks. The slip went down and got caught on one leg. The moist private part, covered with thin and delicate hair, was revealed.

Under the half-dark carriage curtain, her bare skin was completely exposed.

Now, Raul barely spoke.

Instead, Raul’s tongue slowly licked Nicole’s nether region. At the same time, his fingertips gently tapped her clitoris. Then he softly rubbed her labia majora and moved, beautifully tracing the lines he had spread.

*Swish, swish-* And then the rounded tip of his finger moved around the hole, rubbing it. Nicole's waist twitched.

"Shall I put it in?"

Raul slowly twirled his finger as he spoke.

"Tell me, Karen."

He lifted her skirt completely and looked up into Nicole's eyes as he spoke.

"Just a little, *huff...* You can't go all the way."

"Don't worry. This won't break you. "

Raul chuckled.

At the same time, Raul's fingers dug into Nicole's private parts. It was so wet that a squishy sound was already coming out.

Just by Raul gently pushing up the tip of his finger, the transparent liquid pooled in her private parts trickled down. The hem of the dress under Nicole's buttocks was visibly damp.

*Swish, squelch, squelch.*

Seeing that she was sufficiently wet, Raul began to move his fingers quickly without consideration, as if shaking them off.

"Huh, ah...!"

The sound of water splashing and squelching echoed loudly. The flesh inside her body was soaked and twisted violently.

Raul was stirring inside Nicole with his middle finger. His finger penetrated to the end, and the upper part of Raul's palm touched Nicole's clitoris. He moved as if pressing down on it.

"Ah, too deep... so deep... Ah!"

It seemed as if sparks were flying in front of her eyes, and her entire thighs and lower abdomen were trembling. With just a little more, she could go all the way.

It was a thought that Nicole instinctively brought up. She knew this sensation. The memory of when she had a relationship with Raul in her past life....

Just as Nicole was about to climax, Raul momentarily removed his fingers.

"Haah, haah..."

Nicole blankly looked down at his head. Raul's fingers were still deeply embedded in Nicole's genitals.

He slowly moved his fingers as they were, then slowly inserted another finger.

"Don't, don't do that, ah!"

Raul crossed his two fingers inside Nicole's body. No, she wanted to go all the way.

This annoying pleasure made her head tingle and her mouth open involuntarily. Her tongue, which was already sticking out, had neither rhythm nor dignity.

"Ooh, huh, hng... Huh..."

"How can you put so much pressure on just a finger? It's going to snap."

Raul said. And then he started doing something unexpected. He kissed Nicole's soft lower belly. Nicole was very surprised. But his fingers did not stop.

"Uh, ha... Ah..."

Raul slowly bit her slim lower belly and then slowly kissed her, baptizing her with his lips. Then his fingers slipped out.

Nicole felt empty at the sensation of the heat disappearing. And then, in the next moment, Raul's tongue touched her clitoris.

"Ha, ah, uh..."

Raul's tongue delicately touched Nicole's clitoris before burrowing into her labia, moving enough to make a slurping sound.

"Hng, ha, no..."

Nicole couldn't hold back any longer and twisted her bound arm, spewing water-like moans. She felt a sensation of her head going white. Nicole couldn't believe what she had done.

"You look hot. Inside you."

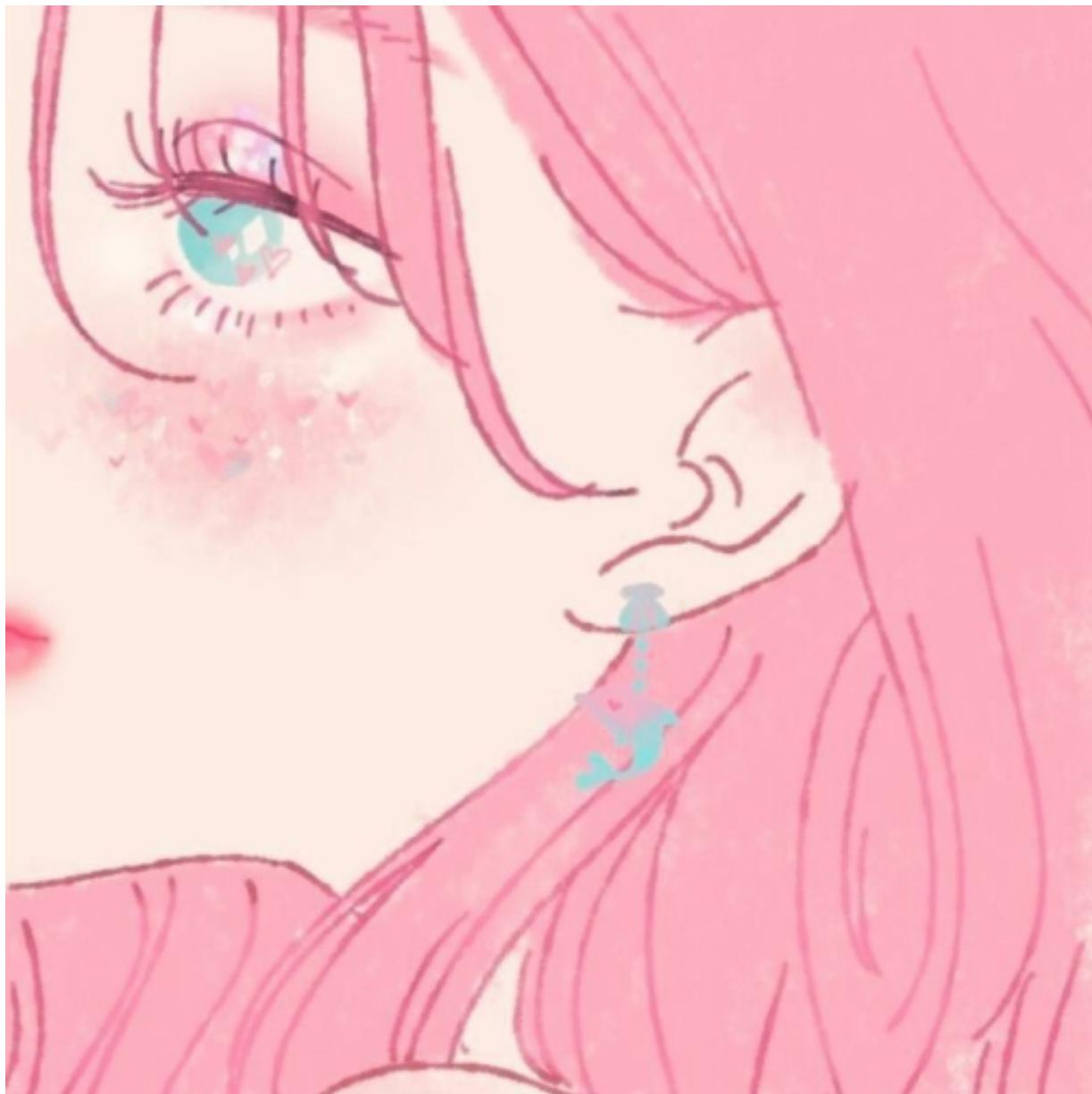
Raul parted his lips. He slightly furrowed his brow and wiped the corners of his mouth.

"Don't worry. This isn't your 'first time' as you say."

Raul patted Nicole's private parts as if to comfort her with his big hand. Nicole gasped and lowered her head. She

wanted to cry from the overwhelming pleasure. How could this man control her so easily?

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# Chapter 83

At that moment, Raul rubbed Nicole's private part once more, as if to praise it.

*Slap.*

A lewd, wet sound echoed. Nicole gasped and turned her head. A momentary stimulus. Tiny pleasures burst out, stimulating her entire body.

"I still need to tame you more. As you said, if I want to go all the way in. You're getting tense too easily."

He sounded surprisingly scared. Nicole got a little upset and at the same time, she thought this shouldn't happen.

Karen was not the type of woman who would easily and foolishly let herself go in front of a man.

"Lift your hips. I'm going to dress you."

"....."

"Or should I do it one more time?"

Raul slowly stroked along the shape of Nicole's private part as he spoke. Nicole pressed her buttocks tightly against the carriage seat in refusal.

"I'll dress myself. Don't treat me like a fool too much."

Raul nodded coolly. And then he untied the ends of the silk cloth that bound Nicole's hands. Nicole's hands dropped to the floor with a thud.

However, he did not completely untie her bound hands yet.

"Then, would you like to suck it before you put on your underwear?"

Raul said tenderly. Nicole blushed furiously.

She didn't know much about intimate relations, but she remembered the profound pleasure she just felt. Raul, being a man, must be in an unbearable state now.

And she also knew that sharing each other's pleasure casually was part of an adult relationship.

...at least, that's what she knew in her head.

"You don't have to do it if it's too much."

"Then what do you intend to do?"

Nicole looked at Raul as if teasing him for no reason.

"Then I'll have to masturbate in front of you. I'm on the verge of climax because of you. If you watch me till the end, I think I'll get excited."

"You....."

Nicole's face turned as red as if it would explode. Raul was completely teasing her.

Did this man have such a mischievous side? Nicole felt her mind getting messed up.

In the end, Nicole obediently knelt in front of Raul.

“Untie my hands, please.”

“Leave it as it is.”

“Do you have such a hobby? Do you usually tie up women?”

Nicole said, looking up at Raul.

“Of course not. You’re the first woman I’ve tied up in my office.”

“.....”

“And you’re the first woman I’ve wanted to tie up.”

Raul gently stroked Nicole’s hair, then pulled her head towards him.

Nicole took a deep breath. Feeling her thighs still twitching minutely, she undid his pants with her tied hands.

*Thud.*

As expected, a massive penis sprang out. She had never seen his penis up close like this even in her past life.

His large, veiny penis was grotesquely contrasting with his face. Nicole mustered up the courage to take his penis into her mouth.

In her past life, there was a time when Nicole spent all day sleeping, her mind in turmoil.

<Men love it when you take them in your mouth. At first, you should suck on the tip like a candy.>

Back then, the maids thought Nicole was completely asleep and gossiped about all sorts of things, including lewd stories.

At that time, she didn't understand what they were talking about even though she heard it. But now she knows.

*Suck, suck.....*

Nicole started to suck on it heavily in her mouth.

"I didn't know it was your first time both ways."

Raul said, tugging Nicole's cheek hard enough to make it pout, feeling a bit mocked.

"Don't be angry, I'm happy right now."

"....."

"I'm quite jealous, you know."

"Ugh-"

Raul pushed Nicole's head in a bit more gently.

'It's too big, how am I supposed to take it all the way...'

Her lower jaw already felt like it was going to fall off, and her entire lips were tingling.

Slowly, steadily, suck.

Panting, Nicole managed to move her head slightly to start licking the pillar. And then she tried moving her head back and forth as she had heard.

The monstrous large penis pillar revealed its full appearance on her small pink lips, repeatedly half-hidden.

"If you don't want to put it all in your mouth, put some strength into your lips. Otherwise, it will spill out."

Raul was relaxed. He had an expression of having the time of his life as Nicole, overwhelmed, let silver saliva flow between her lips, wetting her eyes.

'I really am nothing more than a simple fool in front of this man.'

She shook her hair and moved her head forward and back. And then she put strength into her lips.

"Ha, eugh!"

Then, failing to control it, his member almost touched her throat. Not knowing what to do with the sudden gag reflex, Raul held Nicole's head and pulled it away.

"You'll have to suck it ten more times and teach you before you can suck it properly once."

Nicole looked at Raul. She was a little anxious.

"It's okay. You did well for your first time."

In the end, she completely revealed that it was her first time performing oral.

Raul gently pressed Nicole's head again. When Nicole tried to take his member in her mouth again, he stopped her.

"Try licking it with your tongue."

Raul held out his hand. His hand, disinfected with alcohol, had a faint smell of alcohol along with this man's unique good smell.

Nicole stuck out her tongue long and licked Raul's palm carefully. As she looked up at him, his gaze changed.

"Try taking your tongue out."

Raul said. Once his hand was wet enough with Nicole's saliva, he started to stroke his member with his palm, aiming precisely at Nicole's face.

The sound echoed starkly. She couldn't take her eyes off the sight of his large member throbbing and moving in his palm.

He must have been excited to his limits too, as his member soon reached its limit.

"Hoo-"

Raul hotly sprayed his seed on Nicole's face. Without realizing it, Nicole had opened her mouth slightly. The seed that flowed into her mouth had a bitter taste, but it wasn't unpleasant.

Nicole found this side of herself unfamiliar and a little scary. It felt like she had fallen into an unknown world.

Nicole looked at Raul with lust-filled eyes.

"I'm really going crazy, because of you."

Raul looked at Nicole as if he was about to devour her. He slowly wiped the seed trickling down her cheek and pushed it into Nicole's mouth.

Nicole obediently opened her mouth. Raul pulled her small, red tongue out with the tips of his two fingers. Nicole did as he instructed with a slight frown on her face.

Raul lightly toyed with her tongue, sticky with his seed, with his fingertips.

“I’m looking forward to it. The day when I can lick and suck everything from the tip of this tongue to the tips of your toes, and possess you completely.”

A relationship purely for pleasure. A relationship where they could let out all their desires, since there was no future to consider.

Nicole had a hunch about the relationship she would have with Raul. It wasn’t as desperate as she thought.

He was the man who had given her a life once.

Whatever hot and secret thing such a man gives her, she will swallow it. Just like she’s sticking out her tongue in front of him and looking at him now.

At least Nicole knew that he was fair. What she experiences by his side would be pleasure, not humiliation, and it would be a transaction.

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Raul carefully looked at Nicole’s body. Only after confirming that she was not panicking did he release her hands.

“Drink.”

Raul offered Nicole something contained in a silver flask.

Nicole drank a little of it. It tasted like light alcohol. But it wasn't repulsive.

As she drank it, her shame seemed to dilute a bit. Nicole hurriedly put on her clothes.

"What about the coachman?"

"He would have disappeared the moment the carriage stopped."

Nicole was relieved. At least the coachman wouldn't have overheard what happened in the carriage.

"Can I open the window a bit?"

Nicole asked in a small voice. Raul nodded his head.

'Come to think of it, where am I?'

Nicole thought. Wasn't this man supposed to leave with the royal family now?

When the carriage window opened, an unexpected view came into sight. It was a bright and beautiful lavender field.

'I thought I smelled a faint scent from outside.'

Nicole couldn't take her eyes off the view outside the window. The wind blew, the lavender flowers swayed gently, and a rich scent spread across the field.

"Where is this?"

"Outside the castle gate. It's my field nearby."

"Do you grow flowers?"

“Because it seemed like you like them.”

Raul said indifferently. Nicole turned her head. She was taken aback.

“It’s a joke, so relax your face. How did you live like Karen, with such a personality, with such clothes?”

What on earth does this man know?

At the same time, Nicole was conscious of her attire. She was wearing a white shirt and a long green skirt today. It was so neat that it looked like a middle-aged home tutor’s outfit.

People who grow up in a messy environment tend to pursue messy glamour. Karen was probably such a person.

.....Of course, Raul had messed it up to his heart’s content, her shirt was crumpled, the buttons were torn, and the inside of her skirt was still soaking wet.

“Grace told me not to show my upbringing. She always told me to dress conservatively, like a dignified person.”

Nicole said.

“I like it. Keep dressing like that.”

“You like these clothes?”

“It’s rewarding to mess them up. Next time, I’ll take the time to undress you one by one, so come more tightly bound.”

“.....”

Nicole avoided his gaze. Such a bad man. How much more will she be teased and handled at will by this man in the

future?

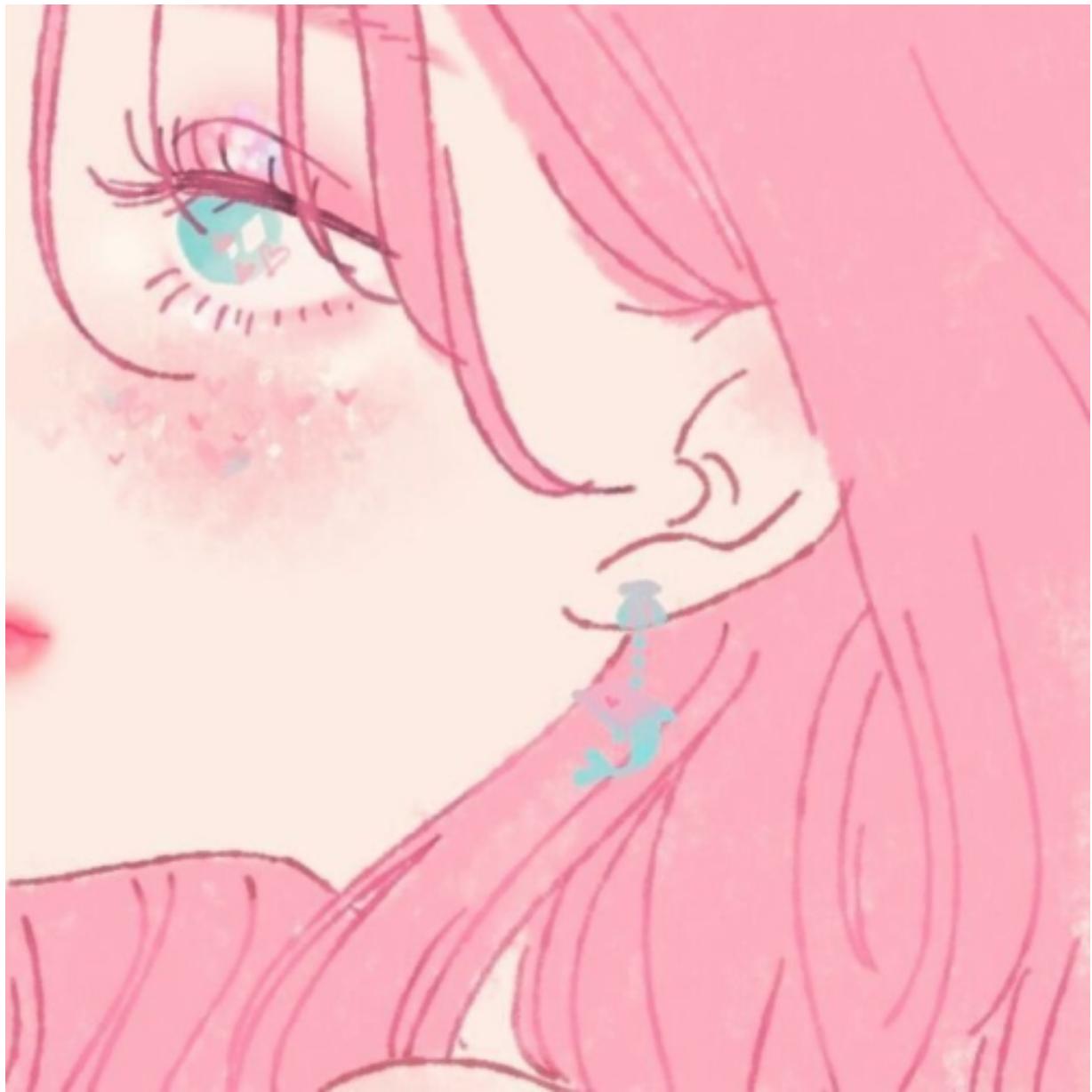
“You didn’t call me to talk dirty to me, did you? You came to talk about work, didn’t you?”

Raul nodded.

“I need a young female spy. It would be better if she could deal with a lady.”

Raul said briefly. It was a story about the effects that the fall of the Marquis of Saratheve brought to the capital.

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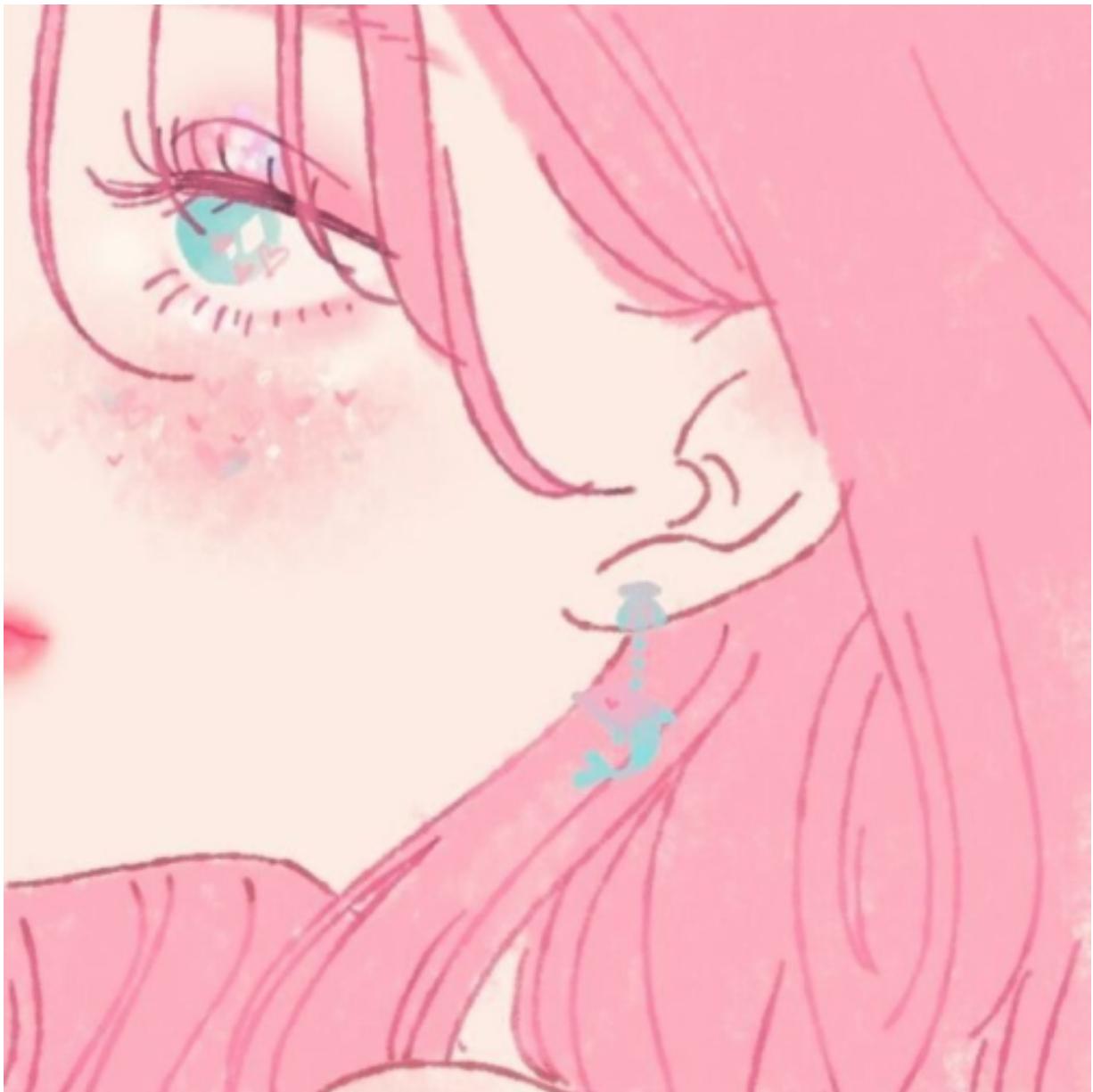


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# Chapter 84

\*\*\*

The person who gained the most from the downfall of the Marquis of Saratheve was undoubtedly Raul.

This was because he alone came to wield the powerful military authority that encompassed the entire capital.

Naturally, the royal family sought someone else to oppose Raul.

“There are two factions in the palace now. The Crown Prince’s faction, and the Empress’s faction that supports Princess Silia.”

The current Emperor is old and his energy is waning. He had many children, but they died one after another, leaving only two remaining.

The first is the Crown Prince, the eldest son of the current Emperor. Nicole recalled him as she listened to Raul’s detailed explanation.

‘He definitely seemed like a sickly person.’

On the day the Marquis of Saratheve met his downfall, he stood on the balcony, looking as if he could freeze to death at any moment.

The second was Princess Silia.

"If you mean the princess, are you talking about the person the royal family is pushing to be the Grand Duke's betrothed?"

Nicole asked casually. Raul's brow furrowed.

"It's a marriage that shouldn't happen. To begin with, the fiancée chosen for me by the royal family is not the young princess."

Nicole felt a slight chill in her heart.

Raul was hinting at his deceased fiancée, Nicole, the eldest daughter of YvesChapel.

"If you marry the princess, there would be benefits for the Grand Duke as well, wouldn't there?"

Nicole decided to dig into his inner thoughts that she had been curious about over the past years. If the royal family wanted to merge with the Grand Duke Valentine family, there would be no harm in accepting it.

If Raul's child succeeds to the throne, Raul becomes a kind of relative by marriage. Such relatives are a measure of power.

Raul looked at Nicole. His expression asked what kind of question this was.

"Where are you trying to get at? Did you think I would say that I don't want a loveless marriage?"

"That's not what I meant....."

Nicole realized that she had asked an inappropriate question in some respects. Bringing up the topic of an engagement

with another woman to a man she had just kissed...

'Is this tactless behavior? But does this person care about such things?'

Nicole avoided his gaze.

"I don't know the hearts of high-ranking people like the former Grand Duke. Ordinary men want a high-ranking wife. Besides, they say the young princess is beautiful. And it wouldn't be bad to have a royal child....."

Raul stared at Nicole for a moment, then abruptly pulled her in.

She is choked by a tense atmosphere, unable to let her guard down for even a moment. If she makes even the slightest mistake, this man will leave an irreversible scar on her tender skin.

"I crossed the line, I'm sorry. I'll be careful."

Nicole spoke humbly. Raul looked surprised at her submissive attitude.

"Anyway, what I want to talk about today is also about the royal family's in-laws and their families."

Raul spoke slowly.

"Listen well. It's closely related to what you'll be doing in the future."

The stories that Raul briefly briefed were facts that Nicole already knew well.

The Emperor had been told from a young age that he wouldn't live long. This year, his health was particularly bad,

and he had postponed official schedules several times.

Currently, with his health not good, the royal family is divided into two factions.

Among them, the Marquis of Saratheve was a loyal supporter of the Crown Prince.

'Thinking about it, it's natural that the Marquis of Saratheve is on the Crown Prince's side. After all, the Princess Silia's side wants her to marry Raul, so Raul could become the princess's husband. And Raul and the Marquis of Saratheve were enemies.'

The Crown Prince and Princess had different mothers.

The current Empress was his fourth wife. He had lost more children than wives.

In that sense, his fourth wife, Cartlet, was remarkable. She had been the Empress for the longest time and gave birth to Princess Silia immediately after their marriage.

Princess Silia was smart and healthy, and she grew up without ever getting sick.

Moreover, Cartlet's family, the Elenis clan, was not part of the seven noble families, but they were a powerful force that produced many officials in the Great Temple. There was no other family comparable to them except for Raul's.

"But the throne is patrilineal and the current Crown Prince has been in his position for a long time. Is it true that the Crown Prince's health is not very good?"

"The Crown Prince suffers from the same disease as my father, but much more severe."

“What kind of disease is it?”

“The Crown Prince has Glass Disease.”

“Glass Disease...?”

“It’s a kind of mental illness where the patient believes their body is made of glass. They think they will shatter into pieces if they bump into something or get hurt, so they can’t do anything and are always nervous.”

It was a bizarre disease that even Nicole had never heard of.

But the Emperor suffered from that disease too?

“Only defective children are born in the royal family. All the children he’s had so far, changing women one after another, were all idiots or physically abnormal.”

Raul casually spilled the facts that the royal family desperately hid to Nicole.

‘Should I be hearing all this?’

Nicole felt a faint fear for a moment. Nicole from her past life didn’t know this much either.

“So nurturing the Crown Prince’s faction means... Is the Emperor wary of the Empress’s side?”

“The Emperor is wary of everyone. Right now, he’s more wary of the Empress. That’s why he urgently needed to raise someone to replace the Marquis of Saratheve.”

The one chosen was an unexpected figure.

It was the Emperor’s younger sister.

She is now married and is the Duchess Lisbeth. Nicole knew her too.

‘Surely that woman is.....’

Nicole felt uncomfortable just thinking about her.

“Have you ever heard about Duchess Lisbeth?”

“I only know very ordinary facts.”

Nicole hid her expression.

“I know she wasn’t that great of a person. I’ve heard she’s famous in social circles, though.”

The life of a former princess who could not wield power is obvious.

She immerses herself in parties under the pretext of maintaining the dignity and discipline of the social world. Or if she’s a better person, she does volunteer work or charity activities and takes care of the people’s livelihood.

Duchess Lisbeth did both. But she was neither rich nor was her husband’s status particularly impressive.

‘Surely, Duchess Lisbeth’s husband is in the military....’

But he was just in charge of a small unit in the military.

Even the title of Duke was a position he obtained by marrying his wife during her princess days, and it wasn’t even a hereditary title. It was common in the empire to give a plausible title to a son-in-law and then not allow it to be inherited by his children.

'But if he has enemies in the military, he could certainly gain power.... He is the husband of the princess, so it's justified.'

So, it wouldn't have been difficult to nurture her if the royal family put their minds to it.

"Duchess Lisbeth was a nobody. She did carry the royal blood, but she was restrained for a long time. The Emperor had been sick for a long time and survived several near-death experiences. On the other hand, Duchess Lisbeth has been very healthy since she was young."

"....."

Nicole realized that the situation was quite similar to the current Crown Prince and Princess Silvia.

"That's... a picture I've seen somewhere. Duchess Lisbeth must have had a vain dream at least once."

If her sickly older brother died early, perhaps... then she could ascend to the throne. She must have thought that.

So, the current Emperor married her off to a lowly man and kept her away from power for a long time.

"Duchess Lisbeth does not support Princess Silvia. People who think they are special often entrust their ego to male descendants, not women, and Duchess Lisbeth is one such example. She adores the Crown Prince terribly."

"But why did the Emperor choose Duchess Lisbeth, with whom he did not get along?"

"Now there's no need to be wary of her, and the royal family always uses people who are thirsty for power. If an

opportunity arises, that woman will do her best to increase her power."

Raul said. Human nature is obvious. Nicole recalled as she listened to Raul's words.

"Duchess Lisbeth was a person no one thought was important. That's why there are hardly any agents secretly planted by her side. So, you should approach Duchess Lisbeth and win her favor."

Raul whispered.

"And then what should I do next?"

"Anything. Think of this as a free assignment."

".....You mean, dig up any information."

"What I need is a weakness."

Raul whispered.

"The royal family does not use people without weaknesses. I need to know the dirty weaknesses of Duchess Lisbeth that even the royal family knows."

"I'll do my best."

Nicole said softly. A smile spread across Raul's lips.

"If you do well this time, I'll give you a big reward."

"What is it?"

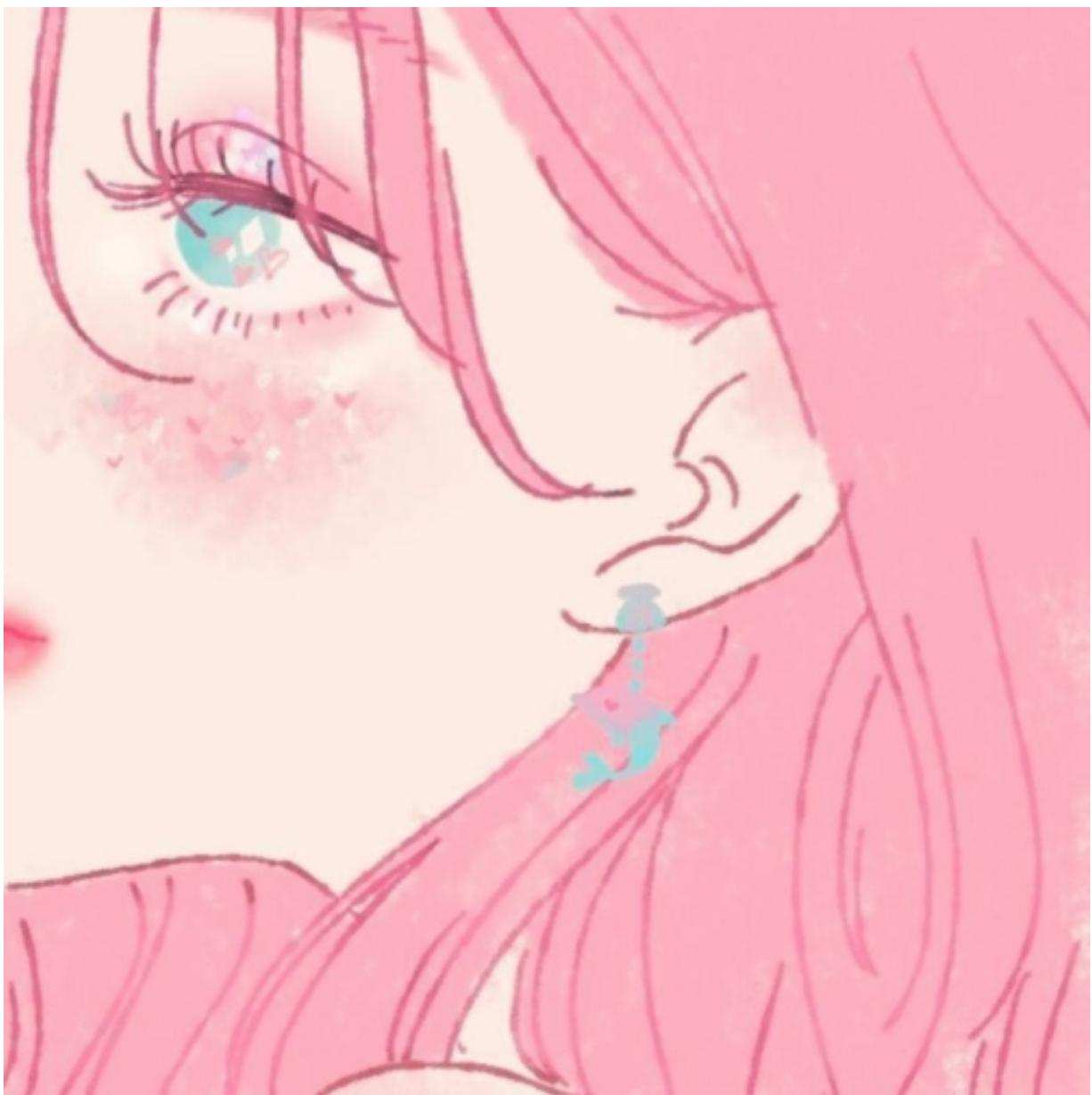
"Everything you want."

Raul said. His voice sweetly dug into her ears. To Nicole, Raul was a golden lifeline.

The problem was whether he would send her to heaven or strangle her neck so tightly that she couldn't even squirm.

But as always, she couldn't refuse.

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# **Chapter 85**

Nicole tightly gripped the hem of her dress with her hand.

“.....I won’t just do my best in words. I will do well.”

Nicole said.

“Because it’s for my master.”

Raul seemed to be pleased with Nicole’s words.

He suddenly pulled Nicole close and gently kissed her lips.

“I look forward to it.”

Nicole felt as if her head was melting.

‘Is this also a type of charm?’

Then, would this man always use his appearance like this when needed? Would he have many such opponents other than himself?

Raul opened the carriage door. A bright flower garden spread faintly in front of her eyes and the scent of lavender made her head dizzy.

However, Nicole wished that this time would be a little longer. She didn’t mind being with Raul.

Someone was approaching from afar. Upon closer inspection, it was a coachman.

It was a man with a face Nicole didn't know. The coachman bowed his head.

"You should hurry. The royal family members must be waiting outside the castle gate for the Grand Duke. It's been an hour."

Raul gestured with his hand. He casually took out a pocket watch from the coachman's pocket to check the time.

"Let's take this woman and go. They can wait for about an hour more."

"....."

"....."

Nicole realized anew that her husband from her past life has some crazy guts.

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As promised, Raul carefully sent Nicole back. And he didn't mention about their kiss anymore.

He acted so nonchalantly that Nicole felt like she was the only strange one.

When she got home, Nicole immediately asked the maids to prepare a bath. The maids looked at Nicole, who had returned disheveled, as if they were stunned but hurriedly prepared the bathwater.

Nicole soaked in the bathtub and thought.

She wouldn't be able to refuse if Raul asked again next time. Perhaps Nicole would also find it hard to resist the temptation. It felt like a premonition of an inevitable event.

\*\*\*

One month later.

"You received a new identity again."

"This time, your identity was more sophisticated and of higher status. Because it was a noble identity."

"Your name is... Maria de Cantera."

"Maria de Cantera was a young noblewoman living alone."

"She was originally from a rural area, and her family had moved to the capital a few years ago. The reason was to find a marriage partner for Maria who was of marriageable age."

"But unexpectedly, her father passed away due to illness."

"And Maria, having no other family, lived alone in the mansion on the outskirts of the capital that her father had prepared."

"She had enough wealth to maintain a noble lifestyle, but she wasn't particularly rich."

"Moreover, she was not from a prestigious noble family as she was from the countryside, so she was not a well-known figure in social circles. However, she had lived as a noble since birth. A weak noble who couldn't even dream of living alone without a guardian."

“So, a woman looking for a high-status husband to stay in noble society. It was not hard to comprehend such a clichéd and boring background.”

“This time it’s a noble. Last time, I played the role of a maid for the Marquis of Saratheve.”

“Better than before, right?”

Dagger shrugged his shoulders. Nicole and Dagger were sitting face to face at a table in the garden.

“How many names will I have in the future? Every time I go on a mission, a new identity is given.”

After finishing her words, Nicole pushed a cup filled with fresh tea towards Dagger.

“Well, I remember most of the names I’ve had. There are female names and male names. But looking at it, it seems like you’ve taken a good route?”

“A good route?”

“They don’t send you to prison to infiltrate as a prisoner or make you work as a maid. Plus, they gave you a very sophisticated identity. This kind of identity can be recycled later. It’s like creating a second personality and letting it live in the capital.”

“.....Is that better?”

“There’s nothing bad about it. Besides, the role of a lady is safe and a good workplace for social information.”

Nicole fell silent. Did Raul favor her? Or was this a delusion?

"Still, it's going to be a difficult mission. The royal family is involved."

"Duchess Lisbeth is not a difficult opponent."

Right now, Duchess Lisbeth doesn't have great power. For example, the ability to control animals, or something having violent tendencies. The Marquis of Saratheve was such an opponent.

"Why is our Grand Duke so generous all of a sudden? Does he like you?"

"What are you talking about?"

Nicole was taken aback by Dagger's thoughtless joke. Raul is not that kind of person. A person who likes anyone...

"Why are you so surprised at the joke, noona?"

Dagger felt something strange, but he was still a child in this respect. He tilted his head.

"...It's a strange joke. Anyway, don't mind it."

Dagger let it go and gave brief information.

The husband of Duchess Lisbeth comes from the same family as the former Empress, the current Crown Prince's mother. The Crown Prince's mother's family seemed more humble than expected.

'Anyway, Duchess Lisbeth must be on the Crown Prince's side because of the former Empress and her husband's family.'

Nicole thought indifferently.

“Duchess Lisbeth is infertile. If you can’t have a successor, whether it’s a boy or a girl, you can’t ascend to the throne. Thanks to that, she survived, so her feelings about the royal authority would have become blurred.”

The opportunity to become the Crown Prince’s backing came before her. Her eyes must be rolling back in her head by now.

Now, if she wants to seize power, she needs a lot of money, so there’s a high chance she’ll act recklessly.

“Duchess Lisbeth has a charity organization that she has been running for a long time. It’s a place like a shelter where poor and powerless people stay.”

Dagger said.

“You’ll infiltrate there, noona. You’ll become a volunteer under the name of Maria, a noblewoman. I’ll support you from outside.”

“This time, I’ll try my best not to cause any trouble for you.”

She heard that Dagger has a lot of other things going on besides this. Dagger, with a happy face, ate a lot of cookies that Nicole baked herself and then spoke.

“My current master may be the Grand Duke, but the lord I serve in my heart is you, my family head. The work for the family head is more important than anything else. So, don’t hesitate to call me if you need me.”

\*\*\*

The next day, Nicole headed to Duchess Lisbeth’s charity as ordered.

The organization's building was located on the outskirts of the capital. A sign reading 'House of Good Deeds' creaked on the entrance of the old building.

Nicole somehow found the sound unpleasant. She calmly knocked on the front door.

"Welcome, you must be the lady who volunteered for service. Your name?"

As Nicole stepped inside, a woman who recognized Nicole approached her.

"My name is Maria."

"You said you wanted to donate and volunteer, I clearly remember receiving your letter. I'm the secretary here."

The secretary looked Nicole up and down.

Nicole, with her hair braided to the side and wearing innocent makeup, looked as beautiful as a freshly bloomed flower. The secretary's face softened considerably.

"If you want to continue volunteering, you need to join the ladies' association of this organization. However, a simple interview is necessary for that, is that okay?"

"Of course. I've heard that this is a traditional place where wonderful ladies are active."

The secretary took Nicole to the next room. And without offering a cup of tea, she started asking Nicole questions.

"Excuse me, but it's the first time I've heard your name."

"I moved here a few years ago. Unfortunately, my father passed away when I was at the age to debut in social

circles. The timing wasn't right, so I couldn't officially debut in the social circle. Recently, I've been spending my free time, so I applied to the charity to utilize my specialty in nursing."

"Where did you learn nursing?"

"In the countryside. The countryside where I grew up didn't have a separate doctor, so the people of the manor had to help with minor things. I helped the nurse when the children of farming families got sick or when patients came up. My late mother was knowledgeable in nursing, so she taught me directly."

The secretary looked at Nicole again as if she was examining her.

She seemed to be gauging Nicole's circumstances after hearing her background.

Nicole lifted the corner of her mouth slightly. Some people willingly pay money to build connections. To offer a line to those who are of higher status and power than themselves.

This charity was also a group nominally operated by the Duchess Lisbeth, a royal family member. Such places couldn't be joined by just anyone, and they tended to want to 'filter out' people like Maria, who Nicole was impersonating, whose status was ambiguous.

So, the unfortunate person was.....

"I've admired Duchess Lisbeth, who has been running this place for a long time. Being a precious royal, she could have lived comfortably, but she has been running this charity for a long time, and so successfully at that. In fact, before my father passed away, he provided me with enough money to

live on. It's not a lot of money, but I thought about how to use this money to honor my father's will."

Nicole covered her mouth with a handkerchief.

"I thought about using this money to help those in need, like the donation I sent you. I want to make regular donations, volunteer, and befriend noble ladies."

In other words, she wanted to spend money to build connections under the guise of donations. That's exactly how to build a network in social circles.

'When talking to a greedy person, start by talking about what they can gain.'

And the Duchess Lisbeth that Nicole knew in her previous life was a very greedy person.

There are those who only react when fed. People like Duchess Lisbeth who are full of greed. And the secretary in front of her was no different from Duchess Lisbeth's ears.

A subtly satisfied expression spread across the secretary's face.

'She seems like a woman who could be quite a sucker.'

Nicole interpreted her expression this way in her heart.

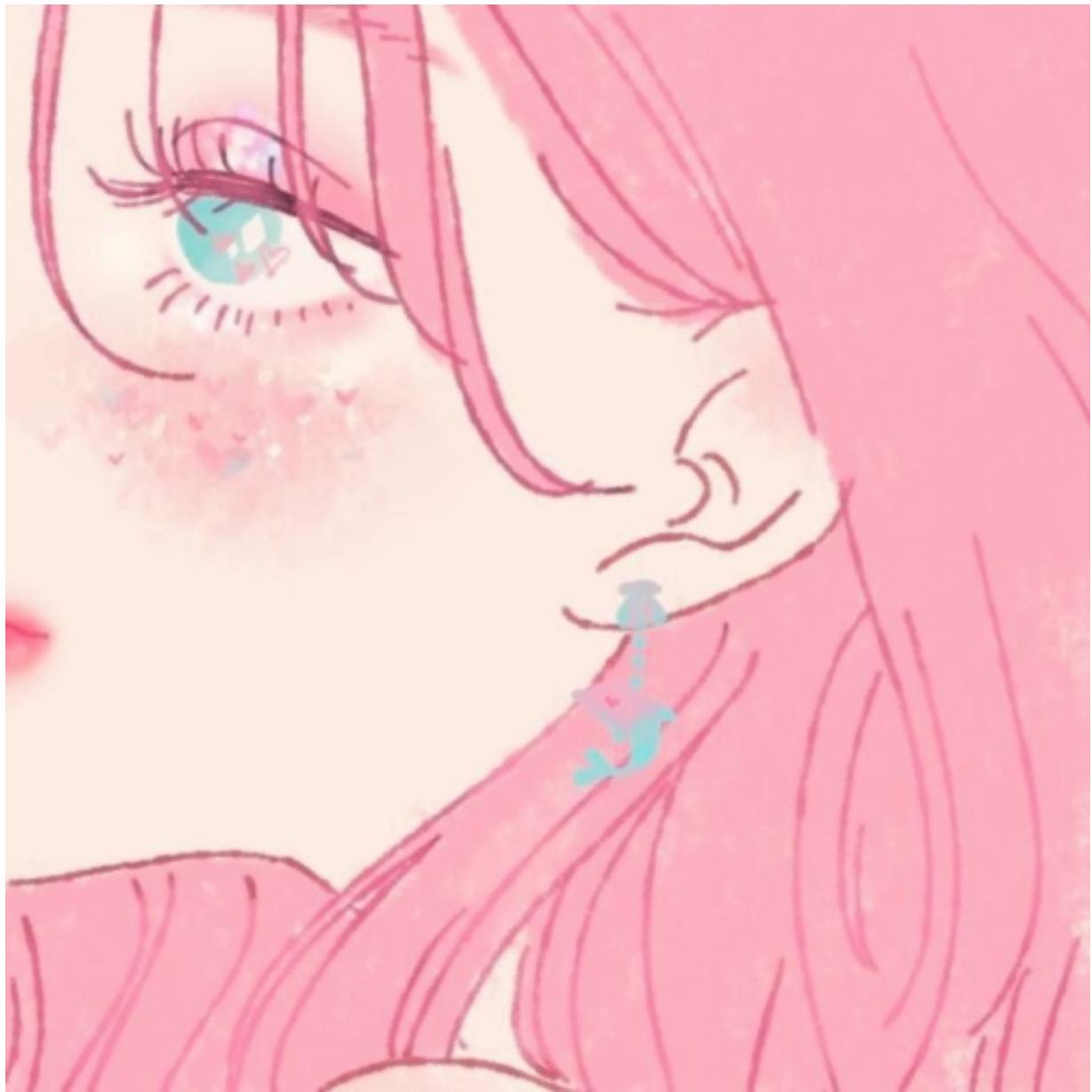
"I think I should introduce you directly to Duchess Lisbeth. Since you came with such good intentions, surely the Duchess will want to talk and teach you directly. It's not easy to find such a good source of funds among young ladies these days. If you do well, the Duchess might even become your patroness."

And a sucker with something to be sucked out of is always treated preciously wherever they go.

But shouldn't we watch to see who's the sucker and who's going to be sucked dry?

Nicole thought cynically at the word 'salon'. And she hid her inner thoughts and replied with thanks.

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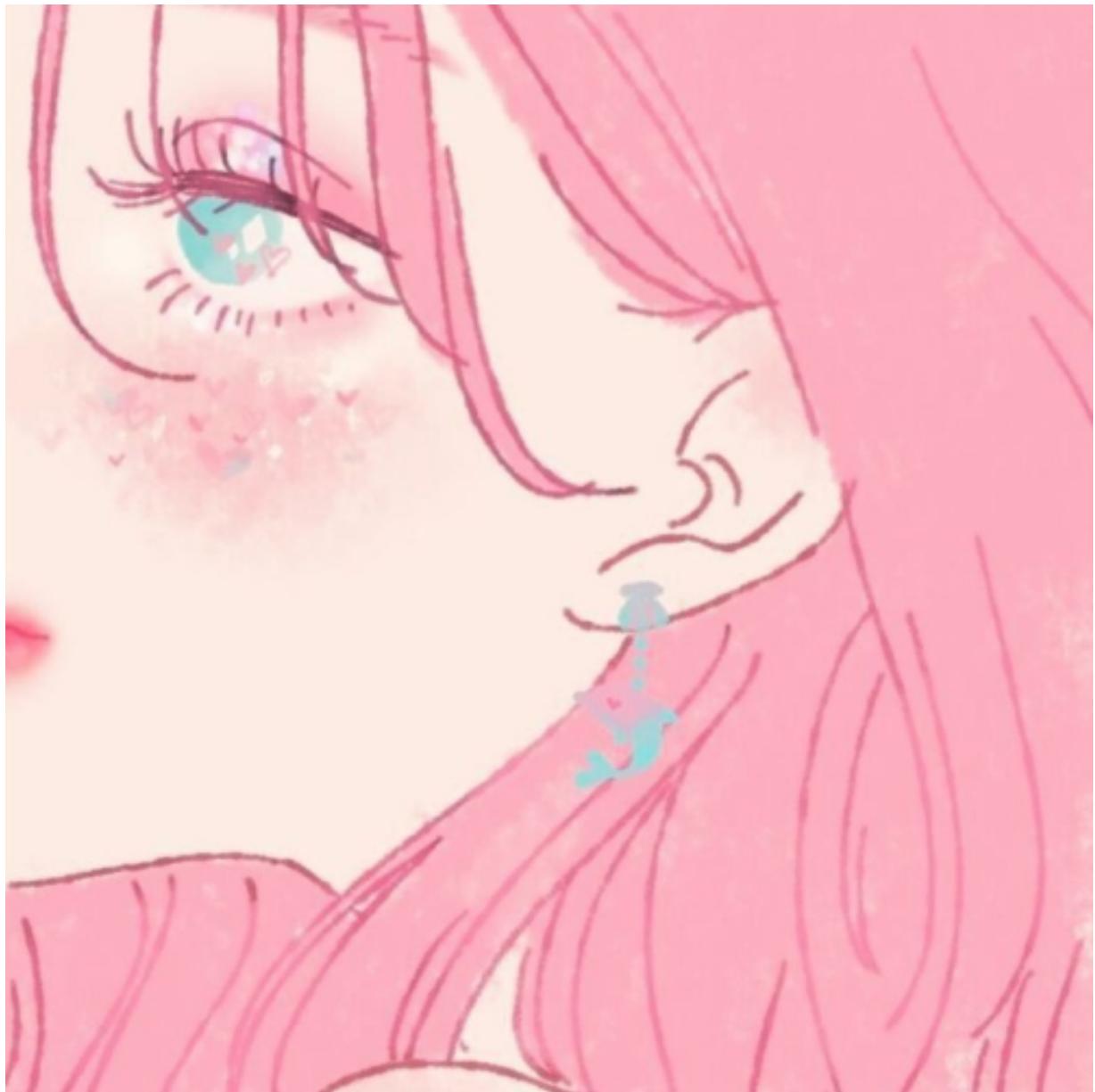


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# Chapter 86

“I will bring the Duchess right away.”

The secretary rose with a rustle of his clothes, and at that moment, the sound of the inner door opening was heard.

“No need for that. I was just about to go out when I heard that a guest had arrived, so I accidentally overheard the conversation.”

Then, a woman came out from beyond the door. Nicole recognized her immediately.

She was a plump middle-aged woman with a somewhat mouse-like impression. She looked noble to anyone, but she was not beautiful.

She was wearing a modest-looking beige dress. However, all the small, sparkling jewels around her neck were real diamonds, and the dress fabric was not flashy, but it was all top-quality.

Nicole stood up and bowed her knees.

“I greet the Duchess.”

“Raise your head. This is a charity organization for people who have gathered here for a good cause. You don’t need to bow before me.”

She smiled kindly and extended her hand to Nicole.

Nicole shook her hand.

Suddenly, a disgusting memory came to mind. The Duchess Lisbeth was Nicole's sharp-tongued guardian in her past life and the one who gave Nicole unforgettable hellish education.

In her past life, the first year Nicole and Raul got married. For some reason, Nicole barely remembered that time.

She only remembered a few things that happened after the forced marriage.

At that time, no one welcomed Nicole. She was a monster in the aristocratic society and no different from a ragged farmer.

<The royal family says that in order to approve this marriage, they need to educate you directly.>

At that time, the royal family was displeased with Raul's marriage.

Their plan to marry Raul and Sylvia immediately was disrupted thanks to the Grand Duke finding Nicole.

The royal family, upset by this, played tricks, one of which was aristocratic education. They brought in Duchess Lisbeth, one of the most senior members of the royal family, to educate Nicole directly.

<If you cooperate, your family will be safe.>

Raul said bluntly.

<I'll try to reduce the number of times as much as possible, so go.>

Thus, Duchess Lisbeth, who became a chaperone, brought Nicole to this charity organization.

'Thinking about it now, it's ridiculous. No matter how superficial, I was a Grand Duchess. Educating a Grand Duchess not in a mansion, but in the back office of a charity organization.'

Although she didn't know why, Duchess Lisbeth hated Nicole from the start. She glanced at Nicole with a sly face.

<Such a frail-looking girl. Would it be worth having someone like that?>

Duchess Lisbeth muttered softly. At first, Nicole thought she had heard wrong.

Duchess Lisbeth soon changed her expression to a gentle one and spoke.

<Grand Duchess, remember this. Your husband is a very remarkable man. A person everyone in the capital admires... with the exception of the royal family, he is the most powerful person, among the nobility. He's someone that a dirty traitor's daughter like you shouldn't dare to approach. So always lower yourself, obey him, and strive not to be his flaw.>

Nicole found these words uncomfortable, but she just agreed without question. Because she knew that it would be a waste of time to rebel anyway.

And so began the torment of Duchess Lisbeth.

In fact, Nicole couldn't remember the details of the torment. She only thought of it as an abstract bad memory.

'But what is this memory?'

Now, facing Duchess Lisbeth like this, suddenly forgotten things came to mind.

<Haha, aren't you being too strict?>

The sound of women laughing. And the contemptuous looks directed at her.

<Duchess, she's been standing for hours. Is that okay?>

<She should do at least that much. She needs to have that much patience to play the role of a Grand Duchess. She has to pay the price for her meteoric rise. Understanding her place is also good for that woman.>

Duchess Lisbeth said sternly.

Nicole was memorizing the royal family tree and related family trees on the orders of Duchess Lisbeth.

The problem was that the weather was quite chilly then, and Duchess Lisbeth did not prepare a chair or desk for Nicole.

Nicole had to keep memorizing for hours, holding papers as if she was being punished.

It was a childish but cruel time. Moreover, in the adjoining room, there was a well-prepared tea table. The beautifully dressed ladies sat around drinking tea, mocking Nicole.

<Shh, she might hear us. After all, she is a Grand Duchess.>

<So what if she's a Grand Duchess? Duchess Lisbeth is royalty!>

<Grand Duchess, the nobility are usually educated strictly like this. Since you received your education late, you need to work harder.>

Duchess Lisbeth purposely raised her voice to say this.

<Won't the Grand Duke get angry if he finds out?>

One of the more rational ladies said this.

<If he was going to know, he would have known from the first day. The Grand Duke is a merciless person, so he would want me to train his wife too. He has not said a thing even to this day.>

At those words, Nicole's cheeks turned red. Nicole felt ashamed.

But because her words weren't wrong, she endured and endured again.

Nicole's mother passed away from illness not long after Nicole was brought here, but she still has remaining family members. Nicole was in a position of weakness.

The day before, the butler Las said this to Nicole.

<How do you find the education of Duchess Lisbeth? If there are any difficulties or things you dislike, please report them to the Grand Duke. You are free to ask him for help.>

However, Raul did not ask about her education.

At that time, although Nicole disliked Raul, she did not hate him. She just didn't consider him on her side. Nicole pretended not to hear what he said.

Even after that, the insults from Duchess Lisbeth continued. Nicole realized for the first time that there were very bizarre ways for a person to torment another person in just five meetings.

And also how cruel the nobles of the capital were.

'I remember now. The place where I stood for hours on end, starving and being insulted, is right here.....'

The large reception room where Nicole is standing now was the place where the ladies had tea time, and Nicole was tormented standing in the inner room. Suddenly, she felt a wave of nausea.

"Are you okay? You look pale."

Duchess Lisbeth said.

"No, I'm just a little nervous."

"Country nobles tend to freeze up when they meet the royal family or high-ranking nobles, but don't worry. Noble people are just people with the same blood flowing in them. It's just that the way they speak and act is different from country folks."

Duchess Lisbeth said with a smile.

"You even do charity and volunteer work, your attitude is really great. I like it."

Duchess Lisbeth's eyes narrowed as she spoke about donations.

She was a member of the royal family. Such a person would discuss a mere donation and even meet with a country-born

noble.

If Nicole had not encountered this woman in her past life, she would never have understood. But now Nicole knows.

Once you fall out of favor with the royal family and lose your power, even if you're a member of the royal family, there's nothing you can do. You can only flounder in your desire for money.

On top of that, Duchess Lisbeth was more extravagant and vain than ordinary people. Such people always needed a lot of money.

"Sit here. Let me serve you a cup of my tea."

"Yes."

Nicole sat down across from her, conscious of her stiff face. But it was hard to control her racing mind.

Uncomfortable memories surged up one after another.

It was a memory from a past life.

After the fifth training.

Duchess Lisbeth, who had been tormenting Nicole, suddenly changed her behavior as if she was someone else.

<Do you know, Grand Duchess? I'm wondering about why your mother Freya and the former Grand Duke got engaged in the first place. You're now married and became a Grand Duchess, following the engagement of the former generation, aren't you?>

As soon as her mother was mentioned, Nicole raised her head. She could endure any insult to herself, but not to her

mother... She couldn't bear that.

<Oh, Freya died recently, didn't she? It's pitiful. She probably closed her eyes in peace having left behind such a terrible daughter.>

<Madam, I think that remark is too harsh.>

Nicole said through gritted teeth.

<I'm just reminded of Freya.>

And then she whispered something shocking into Nicole's ear.

<The royal family wanted the bloodline of YvesChapel. The most perfect and wonderful child... Do you know? If Freya had married the former Grand Duke and had a child... I wonder what the fate of the child born between them would have been.>

And then she spilled a shocking story.

The royal family had two plans. First, they forced a marriage to preserve the healing power by capturing the eldest daughter of the YvesChapel family.

And in case the child born from that has healing power, if it's a girl... That child...

<My nephew, the Crown Prince, is 15 this year. The bloodline of YvesChapel is excellent, so we planned to give that daughter to the Crown Prince. And the second plan was to remarry the princess and the Grand Duke.>

It was as if they were talking about breeding a thoroughbred horse. Nicole's eyes widened.

<So if my mother... if she hadn't met my father...>

<Poor Freya might not have died after giving birth. The Grand Duke had been engaged to the princess a long time ago. The useless Grand Duchess must die.>

They would have a child because the bloodline of YvesChapel is precious and then give that child to the Crown Prince...

It was too shocking a story for Nicole.

<It doesn't matter whether it works or not. It's worth a try. You were brought here to replace Freya of such fate.>

The corners of Duchess Lisbeth's mouth curved into a smile.

<What would happen if you were to have a child? Obviously, you wouldn't be able to raise it yourself. The current Grand Duke, Raul, he's a cruel man, so it's clear what would happen. What do you think? Isn't the ability to bear a child more like a curse?>

Duchess Lisbeth whispered in Nicole's ear.

<Don't you think it's a blessing to become a body that can't bear children at all? I can help you. If you take this medicine, you can become infertile. The pain is only temporary, you'll feel better soon.>

Nicole was shocked by the memory she recalled.

'Why had I forgotten such a tremendous event?'

Nicole looked at the Duchess Lisbeth in front of her.

In her past life, this greedy woman had tried to do something terrible to Nicole.

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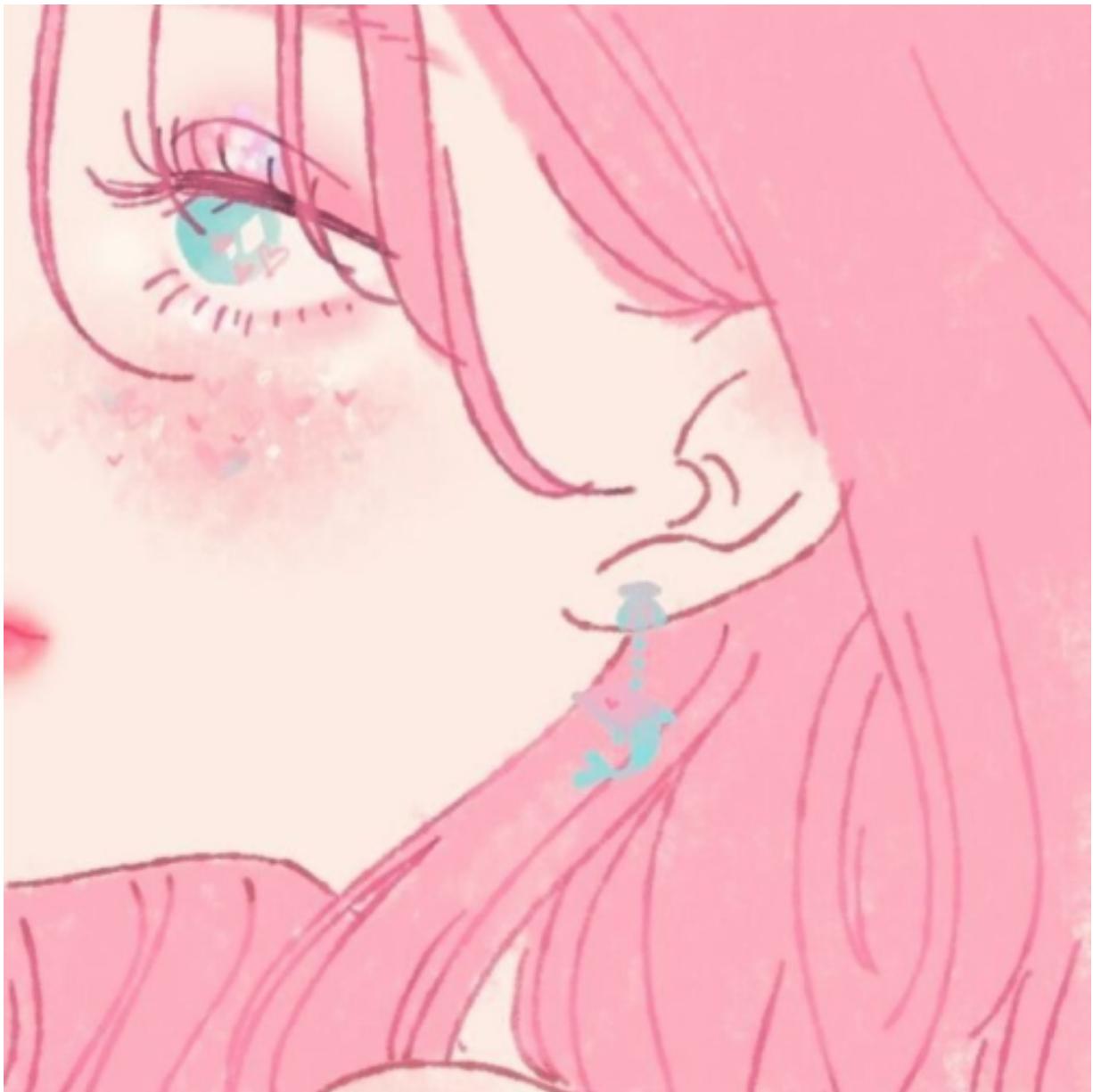


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# Chapter 87

<There's nothing difficult about it. All you have to do is take this medicine.>

Duchess Lisbeth leaned towards Nicole and whispered.

<You have to take this medicine for a week. There will be some bleeding, but that's all. You can have a normal relationship... I mean, there won't be any problem having sex in the future. It will just make you unable to have children.>

Nicole was dragged here and forced to marry without understanding anything. Her husband of an immense status was only terrifying.

'In a situation like mine, what woman would want a child?'

But to make herself infertile?

Nicole looked at Duchess Lisbeth with anxious eyes.

<Duchess, may I ask one thing? In the royal family... after I give birth... over time, will they drive me out of the Grand Duchess's position?>

<Don't you know? The position is not yours right now. If you're going to divorce anyway, it's better not to have a child. Even if they say you don't have healing power, that child is of the Eveshapel bloodline. If you don't have the healing power, neither will the child. But once such a child is

born, it becomes useful. That's the bloodline of the seven great noble families.>

<.....>

Nicole was hiding her real abilities.

She didn't have healing powers, but she did have the unique ability of the YvesChapel to grow plants, and also...

The ability that her mother, Freya, had strictly instructed her to hide.

The incredible ability to sacrifice her own life to save someone else's.

'If my child also has such abilities and if that fact is discovered... they would lead a terrible life.'

Moreover, Duchess Lisbeth had been severely abusing Nicole these past few days.

The words of the perpetrator tend to carry weight. It was hard for Nicole to refuse Duchess Lisbeth.

<A woman without a child can easily get a divorce, but a divorce for a woman with a child can easily become as dirty as mud. If things go wrong, you might even die during the divorce. The Grand Duke is not the type to leave loose ends, so he will get rid of the child's biological mother. If you're unlucky, you might die with the child.>

Duchess Lisbeth spoke like a devil.

<Ah, are you dreaming of remarriage? Wake up from your dream. You were a woman who belonged to the Grand Duke, even if it was only for a short time! There is no man who

would marry such a woman. Not in this empire... You will live your life as an object that once belonged to a noble person. So think wisely.>

Duchess Lisbeth smiled devilishly as she spoke.

'I really don't know. I've never even thought about having a child...'

Nicole only wished for one thing. She didn't want to be involved with the Grand Duke, the royal family, or their affairs any longer.

Besides, the Grand Duke wouldn't want a child with a woman of low status like her.

Duchess Lisbeth handed her a small bottle of medicine and put it in her lap.

<Take it before the day is over. Dispose of the bottle. Understand? You mustn't be caught. This is all advice for your benefit.>

\*\*\*

Nicole left the charity building, the House of Good Deeds, with a pale face.

Nicole, who grew up in the countryside, knew nothing about the world. But suddenly, she was faced with this situation.

'I don't want to have a child with a man named Raul. But do children come that easily? What if I regret it in the future? Does that man really intend to hold me?'

Logically, she should take the medicine. But was that really a rational decision?

'Is it a rational decision to render oneself infertile to be used by others?'

She didn't know what was right.

Nicole committed her first act of rebellion that night. She did not obediently return to the Grand Duke's house.

Nicole escaped through the back door and walked alone on the deserted streets. Then she sat down in a dimly lit alley, sobbing quietly.

Thinking of her departed mother, her sobs gradually grew louder. She didn't even have a safe place to cry in secret now.

'What do you want me to do? Why are you trying to crush my destiny with your affairs?'

A puddle of mud appeared before Nicole's eyes. She sat down on the ground, scooped up the mud and threw it, and then threw the medicine bottle on top of it.

But soon, she took the medicine bottle out of the mud.

'I need my counting device.'

She sat leaning against the wall and thought. Soon, her vision blurred.

Her memory stopped there for a moment.

\*\*\*

'Just now, what was that?'

Nicole suddenly came to her senses. A new memory surfaced, as if a cover had been placed over her dizzying

recollections.

<Are you going to reject my proposal?>

Nicole had returned to the training location. And across from Nicole, Duchess Lisbeth was sitting with a cold expression as if she was looking at a bug.

<Yes. I, I don't want to take the infertility medicine. And I don't want to receive the lady's education anymore. The Grand Duke also allowed me to stop.>

<How dare you talk back to me, a member of the royal family? You, a girl like you?>

Duchess Lisbeth waved her hand. When she rang the bell, several women entered the room.

They all seemed to be unfamiliar faces, likely maids of Duchess Lisbeth.

<Grab her, feed her.>

<But, Duchess..... The other party is still the Grand Duchess..... If this gets known.....>

<This woman can't go around blabbing anywhere. Would she advertise to my husband that she's become infertile? No, even if she did, the Grand Duke would have no interest. The royal command is.....>

Duchess Lisbeth seemed to be conscious of Nicole and corrected her words.

<Anyway, the command is absolute. It's a command to make this woman infertile no matter what..... Anyway, it's a shame. They were expecting a child with the eldest

daughter of YvesChapel, but they got a half-penny Grand Duchess with no healing power. Even if she gives birth to a child, it would be a useless runt anyway.>

Nicole shook off the maids. However, her body was quickly restrained, and a terrible medicine flowed into her mouth.

<I told her to take it for 7 days, but it should be okay to feed her all seven bottles here. Has she finished one bottle? Block her nose.>

<Ugh, euh, n, no, euh!>

Nicole screamed. But no one helped her.

\*\*\*

'I hate this.'

Nicole's mind returned to reality. Before she knew it, she had brushed off the hand of Duchess Lisbeth, who had placed her hand on Nicole's shoulder.

"Oh my."

"I'm sorry, madam. I feel a little dizzy. I think I was too nervous. I was worried that I might dirty your hand with my sweat."

Nicole was the woman who had been forced to take infertility medicine in her past life.

She barely concealed her hatred for Duchess Lisbeth and spoke. Although her whole body fiercely hated her, Nicole now knew how to act skillfully in such situations.

"Hehe, you don't need to belittle yourself that much."

Duchess Lisbeth laughed, covering her mouth with her hand.

"I'm sorry. We were talking about donations, but I'll have to leave it at that for today....."

As the topic of donation came up, a faint anxiety flickered in Duchess Lisbeth's eyes.

"It's a shame, you won't have a chance to see me again after today."

"....."

"As you know, my husband is about to become a general..... When Marquis Saratheve died, a considerable number of his soldiers were left in the air. It's the duty of the royal family and its husband to take care of the soldiers who lost their jobs so as not to be disturbed at such times."

"Can I know such an important information? A general. That's a really high position....."

Nicole opened her eyes wide. It was an act this time as well.

"It's going to be widely known soon. The important thing is what comes next. Once that fact is known, all sorts of people will flock to me to make connections. I've been focusing on charity work so far, but I'll get busier and busier. Today will be the last day I meet anyone."

A smirk spread across Duchess Lisbeth's lips.

"And our charity will no longer accept members. I'm thinking of stopping taking care of the commoners and returning to the royal lifestyle for my husband."

Nicole sincerely ridiculed her.

The former princess who fell from grace for aiming at the imperial power without knowing her place.

Now, she's no different from a scammer, shamelessly exploiting the royal family's name.

Yet, if she catches a glimpse of power, she rushes at it like a dog.

'How much money from naive nobles and middle-class people has she sucked up with such words? She seems more heartless than anyone.'

In her past life, she had been scared and impressed by her. But not anymore.

Nicole really wanted to avoid her today. The sudden surge of memories was burdensome.

But she composed herself and sat down again, wearing a flustered and anxious expression.

As if she was shaken by Duchess Lisbeth's words.

"Ah, that..... I really want to join a charity. I don't know how much the donation will be, but I brought a check."

"Well, if you insist..... The donation is not about the amount, but about sincerity. This is all money used for good causes."

Duchess Lisbeth said with a snort.

You wouldn't know. This check could be a poisoned bait sent by a man - Raul - who might become your enemy.

‘No, it’s too much to consider Raul as your enemy. It’s out of the question.’

Nicole thought.

“Initially, I can give this much, is it...not enough?”

Nicole wrote a substantial amount on the check, and Duchess Lisbeth accepted it with joy.

‘I spent more money than I thought.’

What’s the big deal, this will be an expense. And the Raul that Nicole knows is a man who doesn’t understand loss. No matter how much he spends on this operation, he will definitely extract more value from it.

Duchess Lisbeth looked at the check and smiled with satisfaction.

“Every Monday and Wednesday are regular volunteer days. On weekends, we do social activities. Actually, volunteering is not a big deal. Because the real thing is the social activities derived from it.”

Duchess Lisbeth pulled the check slightly towards her and said,

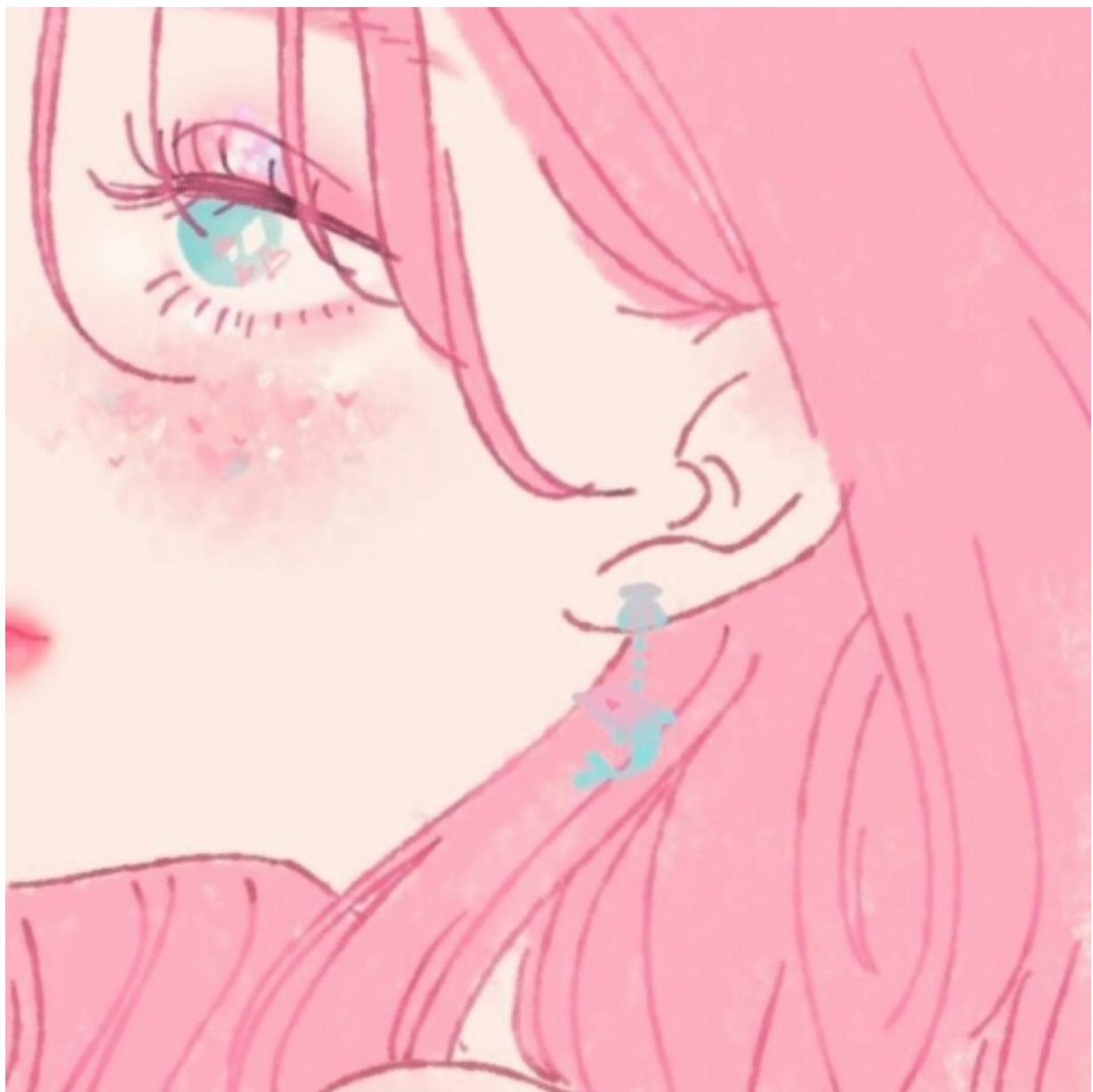
“Looking at you, you seem to have great qualities and will do well. Whether it’s volunteering or socializing.”

Nicole smiled at her. She had originally intended to succeed in this mission somehow...

‘What should I do. I’m becoming more committed about this mission than I thought.’

Nicole thought indifferently. It was impossible not to involve personal emotions because the person in front of her was too disgusting.

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# Chapter 88

As Nicole presented the check, she was immediately enrolled in the charity organization.

“Come to volunteer two or three times a week. I’ll invite you to social gatherings from next month. There will be a line of noble men who would want to meet a young lady who is pretty and smart like you.”

Duchess Lisbeth said meaningfully.

Nicole showed an expression of anticipation, pretending to be moved.

Then she naturally rose from her seat and bid farewell.

“See you again.”

“Yes, I have a backlog of schedules. Ho ho, I wonder where the rumors spread from, I’m getting visit requests from everywhere.”

\*\*\*

As soon as Nicole left the room, Duchess Lisbeth carefully checked the check.

“How much is it?”

“It’s quite good. She’s a pretty girl with a nice face. She said she has no guardian?”

“Yes, she said she lives alone in the capital since her father passed away.”

“She’s smart. She realized that the only way for her to survive is to get married. After getting enough out of her, I should introduce her to a few old nobles. Her status isn’t much, so a position of re-marriage should be enough, right?”

“Seeing that she’s come this far, it seems like she has ambition. Would she be satisfied with the position of a concubine?”

“Indeed, one must know their place. Even if she’s not satisfied, would she dare question me?”

The secretary seemed convinced by her words and nodded.

“Moreover, that’s not even ambition. There’s a girl with real ambition... Is she upstairs?”

“Yes, of course. She’s waiting for the Duchess.”

Duchess Lisbeth rose from her seat and went upstairs.

The person leaning against the window turned around. She was a girl with a still young face.

“Well, where did we leave off in our conversation?”

When Duchess Lisbeth asked quite casually, the girl opened her mouth.

“You showed interest in my plan to export my medicine. From what I hear, your husband is in the exporting country, isn’t he?”

The woman was none other than Isabel.

Isabel was wearing a neat dress decorated in black and red. Isabel, with a smile on her face, was dazzlingly beautiful, but recently her expression had changed, leaving a strange aura on her face.

“Yes. He’s soon to be promoted to a general.”

“That’s great.”

Isabel clapped as if she was pleased.

“Indeed, one’s finale must be grand. Shouldn’t your last job in the export and import department be a big one? Once this deal is settled, there will be no need to worry about money.”

Duchess Lisbeth coughed at that. It was true.

The royal family would cover Duchess Lisbeth’s side.

However, how actively she would use that coverage, and whether she would turn it into power rather than just a simple cover, was all up to her.

Naturally, leading an army requires a tremendous amount of money. Considering she’d have to distribute money to each and every subordinate, it would make sense for Duchess Lisbeth to be desperate for money now.

“My medicine is reliable, it will work even abroad. All you have to do is get a little involved in the export business...”

“I’m not usually one to get involved in such things. However, I can’t help but assist someone who is like family to me...”

Duchess Lisbeth said this while looking at Isabel with a peculiar expression.

“Isn’t that right, Madam Rodria?”

“Of course. You are my husband’s grandmother, aren’t you?”

Isabel smiled broadly, showing her teeth.

\*\*\*

Two months ago.

<Haa, haa, haa.....>

Isabel looked at Leos with surprised eyes. The weak boy was looking at Isabel with trembling eyes.

<Wha, what do I do, Isabel? I didn’t mean to do this. I, just..... wanted to get away from my mother.....>

Isabel calmly put her hand on Leos’s shoulder.

In front of them were the Blanc couple, who had fallen with blood flowing from their mouths.

There were Leos’s foster mother and father-in-law, Heather and Lord Blanc.

<I told you, this is for your freedom. These people are your enemies and they abused you. I have... saved you. Poor Leos, now.....>

Isabel whispered into Leos’s ear.

<Just trust me, noble Lord Rodria. I’m on your side, okay?>

Isabel, recalling the memories of that day, walked slowly.

House of Good Deeds.

The charity building established by Duchess Lisbeth was quite large. Isabel was living in the rearmost building behind this building.

Isabel entered the room and took out a notebook from the bookshelf.

Poor Leos showed no signs of waking from the sleeping pills Isabel had given him.

Date: Imperial Year 233, April 9

Record: Isabel's Fun Experiment Diary 21

<Note: Progress of the test subject after using Glassworm.>

I finally figured out the complete way to use the Glassworm.

The Glassworm doesn't simply work by implanting it in a person. It works when I give the command I want when the other person's mind is weakened and vulnerable.

I, Isabel, gave only one command.

- Leos, I'm the only one you can trust. The wicked Heather is not your real mother. She's a filthy murderer who killed your family!

Make him hate Heather, and obey my words absolutely.

But Leos didn't fully believe my words.

So I showed him the evidence one by one. That Leos is actually the direct successor of the Rodria Marquis family,

and the wicked Heather and Lord Blanc are just lowly servants.

And that Heather has been feeding Leos medicine that weakens his body.

Upon learning this, Leos's mind collapsed. Leos confronted Lord Blanc.

Stupid Lord Blanc. He was so naive that he failed to deny Leos's words.

<That is, Leos, I am, we are.....>

Wiping sweat with a stupid face and just repeating such words.

Now Leos knew all the truth. Something changed inside Leos at that moment.

Yes, Leos began to recognize me, Isabel, as his master.

Finally, the effect of the Glassworm worked.

.....

.....

Date: Imperial Year 233, April 13. Additional record.

This is really effective. I was so surprised.

Not only did Leos believe that Heather killed his parents and took it from them, but he also started altering all the 'happy memories' with Heather himself.

*Heather starved and beat me when I was young, because I wasn't her own child.....*

I was a little taken aback by Leos's mumbling.

*Even now, she feeds me poison and locks me in a room in case it is revealed that I am a descendant of the Rodria family.*

*Heather will definitely kill me!*

- End, this is the list of Leos's delusions.

So, when the effect of the Glassworm works, people start to manipulate their own memories and believe as they want to believe.

It can even make a person hate someone who was always dedicated to them, someone they always loved, overnight.

And all that love and heart are transferred to me.

This is the result of the experiment through the Glassworm.

.....

Note: The Glassworm is definitely a demon that controls people's hearts.

Now Leos has manipulated all his memories and finally started to hate Lord Blanc.

Very good. Leos is now absolutely obedient to me.

'So, this tragedy happened?'

Isabel wanted to hum a song.

In the end, Leos ended up poisoning his foster parents. It was the result of Isabel instigating hatred every day.

<Well, Leos. Let's go to the capital now. Don't worry. Just leave a letter saying that the whole family is going on a trip. There are no relatives of the Blanc family, so no one will look for them.....>

\*\*\*

She said so, but when Leos really killed the Blanc couple, Isabel's heart seemed to shrink. Because it's the first time Isabel has ever committed a real murder.

But soon Isabel sorted out her own heart.

'But it's Leos who killed them? I did nothing wrong.'

Isabel took pity on poor Leos. He drove out all the servants and hid the bodies of the Blanc couple in the basement.

And they fled to the capital with all their property.

The reason this was possible was because it rained heavily that night.

The roads became muddy due to the rain, and people couldn't go out. This made it easier for the two to escape.

<Isabel, it's strange. I can't stop this rain. But this rain... I'm making it rain.>

This is what Leos claimed.

At first, Isabel was also very surprised.

'Is he crazy?'

At first, that was all she could think of. Leos claimed he was making it rain. It was the first time something like this happened. But the reason Isabel could soon accept it was -

'Well, there seem to be such people in the outside world. I also have healing power.'

Because she also had a special ability. Even at this point, Isabel didn't know the detailed circumstances related to the seven major families.

\*\*\*

Lord Blanc. His identity is just a humble coachman named Cole.

Before he died, the man spilled most of what he knew about the Rodria family.

One of them was a story about Leos's godmother. Leos's mother, who was also dead, was from a noble family, the wife of the late Marquis Rodria.

The Marchioness of Rodria was a good person who put a lot of effort into charity work. Because of her, Leos was able to have a royal family member as his godmother.

'The name of that godmother is the Duchess Lisbeth.....'

Duchess Lisbeth. A woman who was once a princess. It is said that she adored Leos because she had no children of her own.

Isabel arrived in the capital secretly with Leos. The Duchess Lisbeth was quite a well-known figure.

Another stroke of luck here was that there was an opportunity to meet Duchess Lisbeth. Since Duchess Lisbeth ran a charity, even ordinary people could approach her.

'It was helpful that Karen told me various stories before she died.'

Karen and Jen. They had experienced all kinds of hardships at a young age. They were said to have worked as informants for the information guild, not only as pickpockets but also as bar solicitors and illegal drug couriers.

Isabel remembered all the information they had blabbered about.

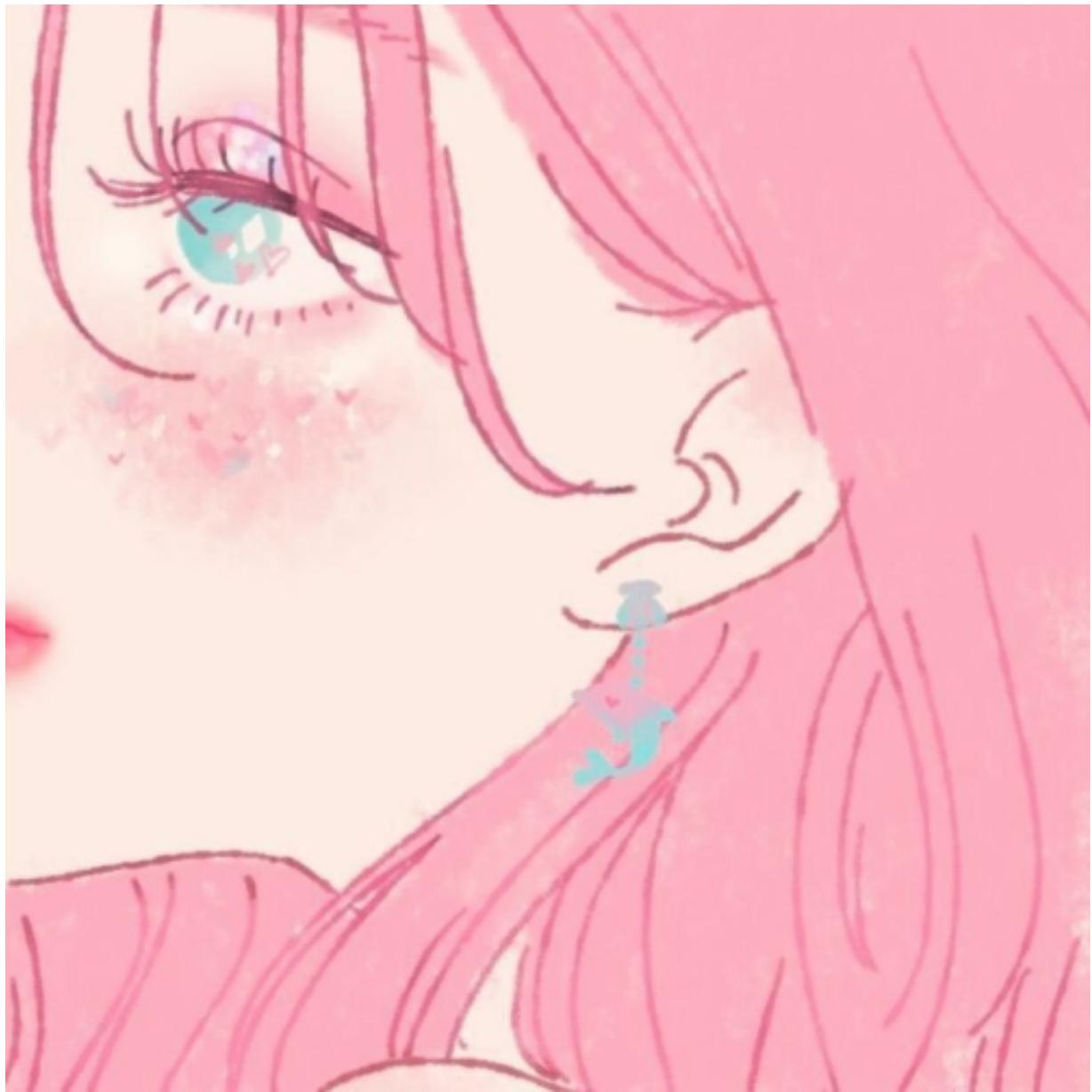
Isabel came to the capital and acted like Karen, gathering various pieces of information.

And then she appeared in front of Duchess Lisbeth and spoke.

<I am the Marchioness of Rodria. My husband is the sole survivor of Rodria family. This is the proof.>

That's how Isabel's conspiracy began.

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# Chapter 89

After much probing, Isabel finally succeeded in meeting Duchess Lisbeth in person.

And she explained, mixing half-truths and half-made up reasons appropriately.

She presented various pieces of evidence, including the proof of the Marquis of Rodria's house.

Fortunately or not, Duchess Lisbeth immediately recognized the clothes that Leos, who was a baby at the time of disappearance, was wearing.

And Isabel naturally explained the situation.

The fact that the servants ran away with the child for fear of punishment. Until recently, she herself didn't know her husband's identity...

The fact that they wandered around doing various things, but came up to the capital because her husband's health was not good, etc.

There were quite a few lies mixed in, but Leos's lineage was not a lie.

Duchess Lisbeth, who greeted them, was a bit embarrassed.

'It's true that I liked them a long time ago. But that's in the past, and if I get involved wrongly, I could get tired too.'

There were many questionable points about the death of the Marquis of Rodria. In other words, there is a high possibility that someone intervened from the outside...

'It's certain that the royal family wanted the extinction of the Duke of Rodria, judging from the circumstances.'

However, Duchess Lisbeth, who had long been pushed away from the center of power, did not know the exact reasons.

Isabel said with a soft smile.

'Even if I kick them out, they'll go to other nobles. Then, should I rather keep them for now?'

Anyway, the people from the seven great families were of use. In the end, Duchess Lisbeth secretly accepted them.

'But they say the child is a bit strange...'

So, Leos, whom she met this way, seemed very sick. His complexion was not good and he barely spoke as if he was tired of something.

Moreover, he excessively trusted Isabel, following her decisions even in trivial matters.

'But his face is exactly like his parents. Anyone can tell he's their child.'

It was true that the deceased Leos' mother and Duchess Lisbeth were close friends. So, out of a bit of affection, Duchess Lisbeth decided not to immediately inform the royal family of their identities.

If they were discovered by the royal family, it would be enough to explain that she was keeping them for the time

being, since she was not sure if they were really the Marquis and Marchioness of Rodria.

Isabel, in her own way, spent a few days hiding in the place prepared by Duchess Lisbeth and observed her.

Isabel had robbed the Blanc family's vault. However, she couldn't take all her assets because she had to flee in a hurry, and the amount of Marquis Rodria's slush fund did not meet Isabel's expectations.

Heather and Lord Blanc were not very good at making money. They just lived by diligently spending part of the siphoned off Marquis Rodria's slush fund, so they saved a lot of money.

'I need more money. I need power and strength.'

The first thing Isabel thought of was the advice Karen gave her.

Isabel also knew the value of the hallucinogens she made.

Because Karen and Jen said that they had never seen this drug anywhere else and that its effects were surprisingly good.

Isabel presented a medicine to Duchess Lisbeth.

Coincidentally, Duchess Lisbeth was a chronic insomnia patient.

The medicine was the kind that could put you into a deep sleep as if you were dead. Isabel explained that it was somewhere between an anesthetic and a sleeping pill.

Moreover, it had the function of a hallucinogen that extremely excited people when they woke up in the morning.

Isabel also knew very well that there were laws in the world. She was aware that the laws related to drugs within the empire were very strong.

'While living in the Blanc family's house, I also studied the ways of the world quite a bit.'

If caught making and selling illegal drugs carelessly, one could be sentenced to death. That was imperial law.

Therefore, Isabel couldn't move alone. She needed someone to watch her back.

So, the proposal that Isabel came up with was to export the medicine. If the medicine is sold to other countries, there will be no one in the empire to blame them.

Since Karen's mother was originally a foreigner, Karen knew roughly about the situation in other countries. The empire was a big country, but it was not the whole world. Across the sea, there were countries where things prohibited in the empire were possible.

'I need someone with considerable power to help sell the medicine abroad.'

As soon as she arrived here, Isabel immediately recognized the nature of Duchess Lisbeth.

No matter how much one adorns oneself with the status of royalty, there is a smell to the nature of a person with desires.

‘It’s hard for a good person to distinguish an evil person, but an evil person easily recognizes an evil person.’

It was something that Freya, her mother, had once said.

It wasn’t supposed to be used in situations like this, but nonetheless—

Therefore, Isabel took great pains to persuade Duchess Lisbeth. Coincidentally, Duchess Lisbeth’s husband was a soldier working in the import and export department.

In fact, Duchess Lisbeth’s husband had been involved in smuggling for a long time.

It was really hard to handle money without the soldiers turning a blind eye to smuggling.

“Let me say it again, this medicine doesn’t cost much to make. A few workers can produce enough. It takes about a couple of months to gather the ingredients for the medicine and to work on it.”

“But my husband is going to be a general, I wonder if it’s okay for him to get involved in such things.....”

“After all, isn’t the future successor of the throne someone your husband has influence over? It’s not like we’re doing anything bad, we’re just selling simple sleeping pills. With the money earned like this, you can help those in need. I’m just worried about various things under the imperial law because this medicine is such a good one. I want to make its value in foreign countries.....”

Duchess Lisbeth smiled. It was obvious what kind of woman Isabel was and where she was from.

'A girl who makes drugs. Marquis Rodria has caught quite a tiresome woman. But she's not ordinary.'

The imperial capital was overflowing with beauties. But smart people were rarer than that. Moreover, Isabel was pretty, clever, and even wicked.

Such a person is bound to become something. Duchess Lisbeth had two choices. Either trample Isabel or raise and use her.

"But why don't you ask for rights to the wealth of the Rodria family?"

Duchess Lisbeth said.

"If it were me, I would have thought of that first."

"The wealth of the Rodria family has already been liquidated or reclaimed by the state. To claim such wealth, a large-scale lawsuit or dispute would be needed, but who would listen to the words of a poor person? I will gain power and emerge into the world as a person of the Rodria family."

Isabel said it bluntly. It made sense.

"First of all, you said that the sleeping pills can be commercialized immediately, what else is needed?"

"Some medicines need to be tested. I'm talking about painkillers, not sleeping pills."

"Painkillers?"

"Yes. It's a medicine to relieve the pain of those who are suffering. It gives a slight pleasure when taken and allows you to have good dreams....."

Duchess Lisbeth understood Isabel's words right away.

'She's talking about something like painkillers. She must be trying to produce hallucinogens.'

However, hallucinogens are known for their tremendous addictiveness, so they could be a big money-maker.  
Duchess Lisbeth responded as if she didn't catch on.

"What kind of experiment do you want to conduct?"

"Detailed clinical trials are needed. So..... shall we say experiments on humans?"

Isabel finished her sentence with a smile.

"I want to see how effective the hallucinogenic... no, the painkiller I made is, and what side effects it might have. There's always sacrifice for progress after all....."

The only people Isabel has made and fed this medicine to are Karen and Jen.

Both of them were quite fine even after taking this hallucinogen. They became addicted, but there were hardly any side effects.

The biggest problem with the drug is that it's easily addictive.

The hosts of the drug need to fall in slowly in order to maintain their healthy appearance for a long time. And since they won't be able to get out of it once they start taking the drug, they'll be buying it for life.

It's an easy way to drain money. Isabel wanted a drug that would be as slowly addictive as possible. She wanted to

adjust the concentration of the drug for that.

“If we find people, can we start right away?”

“Yes, we can go in right away.”

Duchess Lisbeth lightly tilted her head and looked out the window, lost in thought. Isabel, anxious at her leisurely gaze, spoke.

“There are people overflowing here anyway, isn’t that right? They are poor souls with nowhere to go, but if you give them a chance to repay your grace, they will be happy. So.....”

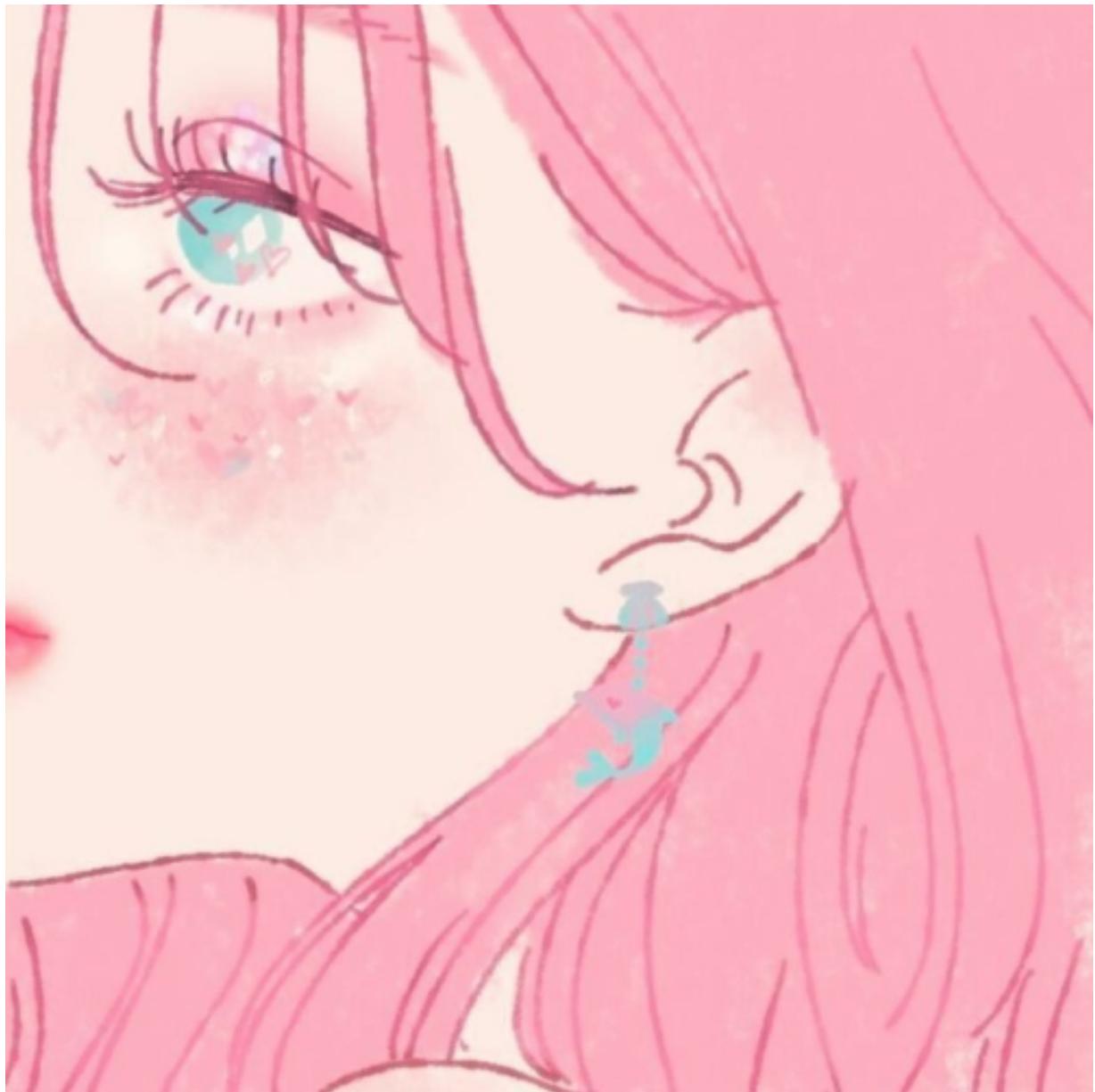
Testing the effects of the drug was not a loss for Duchess Lisbeth either. She needs to know exactly what the drug she’s selling through them is.

“Enough.”

Duchess Lisbeth raised her hand.

“I know who the right person is.”

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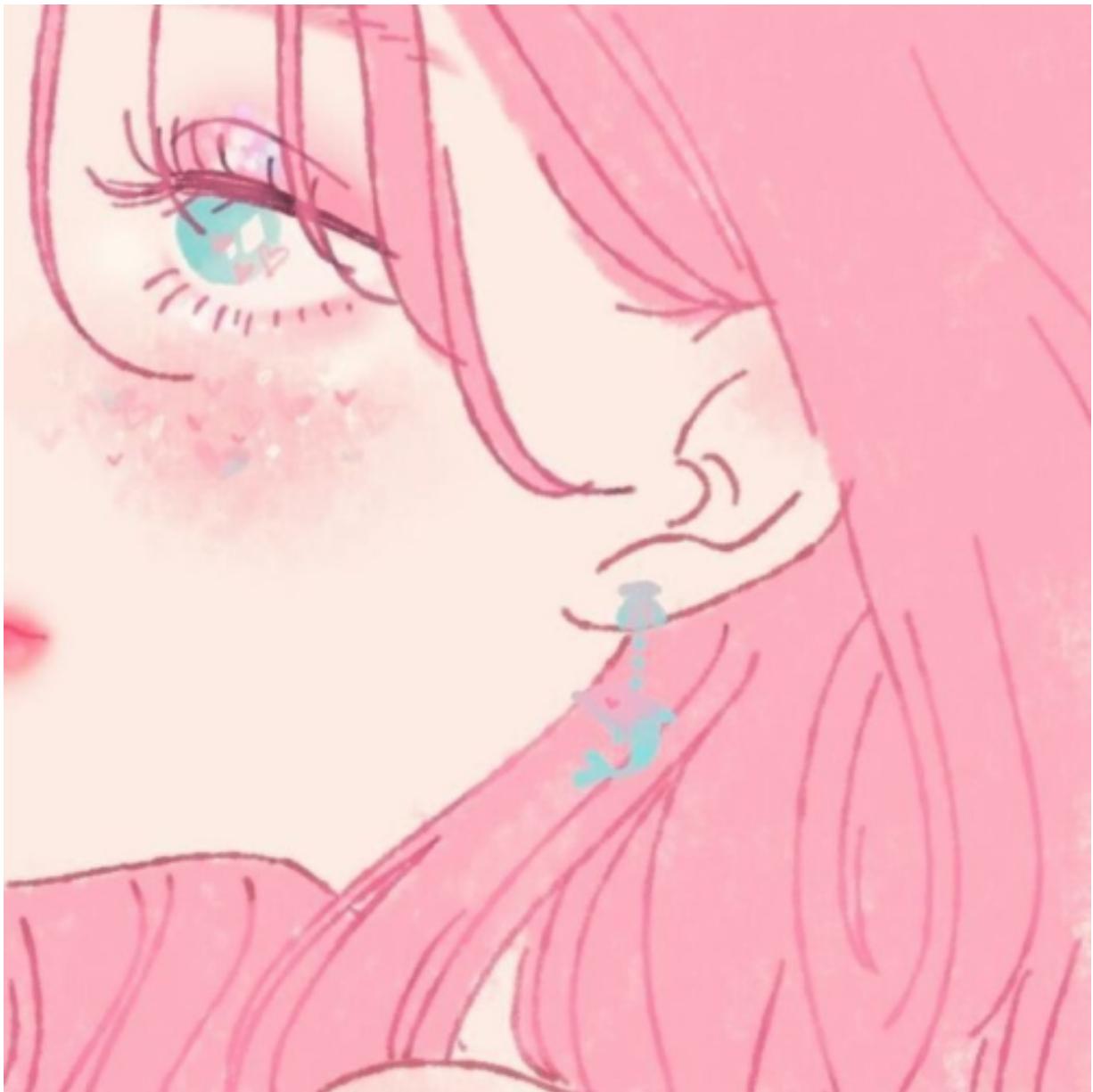


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# Chapter 90

The people of the empire valued conservative family views.

It was a social taboo for an unmarried woman to have a child.

Therefore, this place was a facility created to protect women with children, especially those who could not afford to raise them.

In fact, it was nothing more than the duchess's private enterprise. Duchess Lisbeth received donations from those who wanted to build a relationship with the royal family.

In reality, most of these donations were laundered into Duchess Lisbeth's pocket, leaving almost nothing for those who entrusted themselves to the charity.

However, such facts did not easily leak out. Because only pitiful women gathered here, most of them disappeared without anyone knowing.

"There is another facility in the suburbs of the capital, called House of Good Deeds No. 2. We only accommodate women there who are not suitable to show to sponsors. Those who are sick with terrible diseases or those who have fallen into alcohol addiction due to bad habits."

Duchess Lisbeth grumbled.

“If you accept even the sick, there are many benefits. Like tax deductions or subsidies.”

“So, Duchess?”

“They’re useless trash to begin with, so what would change if they took some medicine? They’d probably like it if we gave them hallucinogens.”

“You’re right. You’re really wise!”

Isabel clapped with a smile.

“Just pick the people and I’ll start right away. After the experiment, we can immediately commercialize the medicine.”

“There happens to be a suitable person. She’s crazy, addicted to alcohol and all. She’s a useless patient. Let’s start with her.”

Duchess Lisbeth spoke harshly then soon softened her tone.

“Remember, my husband and I have nothing to do with this. The income from the drug sales is.....”

“I’ll give you half. It’s money you earn by just sitting.”

Isabel said.

“And what else do you want?”

“I have one thing.”

Isabel said.

“I want to formally become the Marchioness of Rodria. So, I need a proper noble status. It doesn’t have to be right now.”

It was as expected. Duchess Lisbeth nodded.

"Falsifying a noble status is very difficult. It will take some time, but after my husband becomes a general, I will try."

It was a trade that satisfied both. They looked at each other and smiled.

'She's an old fox, but she's quite clever. How did she smell that this would be a big money?' (Isabel)

'She's really amazing. It's surprising that I, who have nothing to regret in the world, got involved in this. But what can I do when it smells like money? It would be very interesting to just watch how this woman will sweep the capital in the future.' (Duchess Lisbeth)

\*\*\*

A few days later, Nicole started volunteering regularly. Every time she entered the House of Good Deeds, Nicole always covered her face with a cape.

It was when Nicole was about to cross the garden and enter the building.

"Ah!"

A girl ran into Nicole's knee. Nicole, who lost her balance for a moment, inadvertently grabbed the girl's shoulder.

"I'm sorry!"

Nicole locked eyes with the apologizing child. The child's hair was disheveled, but her clothes were fairly clean. She was a very small child. Her eyes were a very clear green. Nicole had seen such green eyes once before.

‘Where have I seen that kid?’

It was a very familiar face, but she couldn’t quite remember.

“What were you doing?”

Nicole soon recalled that this was a house of charity, a place for those with nowhere else to go.

She was probably one of the unfortunate children.

“I dropped something and was looking for it. It’s like a small, shiny gem.”

“I’ll help you look.”

Nicole bent down. At that moment, she saw someone standing in front of a large window on the third floor of the building.

‘Who is it?’

Nicole thought for a moment. She had only seen the silhouette. When she straightened up to get a better look, the curtain was closed.

‘Could it be that Duchess Lisbeth is watching me?’

But she thought that couldn’t be it. Nicole looked at the window with suspicious eyes.

“Ah, I found it! This, my mom gave it to me.”

Nicole turned her gaze to the child. On the palm of the child’s hand were small jewels. At a glance, these fake jewels were colorful, and were shaped like stars and hearts.

‘This, it seems like I’ve seen it somewhere.’

But she felt a sense of déjà vu again. Nicole stared at it for a moment before returning it to the girl.

“Take good care of it.”

“Thank you, noble lady.....”

The child said softly.

“Aru, what are you doing there?”

Then the secretary yelled sharply.

“Why did you come out here?”

“I was just playing. Really. I didn’t steal anything.”

The child named Aru said in surprise.

The secretary found Nicole and changed his expression to a soft one.

“I’m sorry, you were surprised, weren’t you? This child is under special protection and observation.”

“Protection..... and observation?”

“Her mother is an alcoholic. She’s been drinking since she was in her belly. So, whether it’s because of that, or because she takes after her mother..... she’s particularly disobedient. She’s originally from facility number 2, but we brought her here because she wasn’t feeling well and needed to see a doctor.”

“.....Should I take a look at her?”

“Ah, you said nursing was your specialty. Don’t worry. The doctor has already seen her.....”

The manager looked at Nicole's expression and laughed awkwardly.

"Anyway, she shouldn't be walking around with a sick body. So I just nagged this child a bit."

Having said that, Nicole had nothing more to say.

"Anyway, please go in. Oh, and you know? This is a facility with many sensitive beneficiaries, so volunteers should not roam outside of designated areas."

The manager said. It was a tone telling Nicole not to pay more attention. Nicole nodded and entered the building.

\*\*\*

Two weeks after Nicole infiltrated the charity facility of Duchess Lisbeth. Nicole was standing in the middle of the street, next to a newspaper stand.

"How's it going, the Duchess Lisbeth's side?"

Dagger whispered.

"The Grand Duke has set a long deadline for this matter, so I'm trying to win their favor for now. Nothing special is happening in the 'House of Good Deeds' building near the capital."

"Any suspicious points?"

"Actually, there is."

Nicole said.

"I thought I would be taking care of the people staying there. Taking care of pitiful people with nowhere to go. But

I've never even seen the actual people, that is, the beneficiaries. They always just give me various chores in the main building."

"It does feel a bit strange."

"Right. So, I will dig into the facility once. At least, I think I can find evidence of embezzlement... The most important thing for now would be to gain the trust of the Duchess. The work itself isn't too hard."

Baking cookies for the beneficiaries, sewing, or organizing documents.

Nicole didn't feel tired at all from such tasks. Normally, ladies would feel ashamed if they were treated like maids.

"Do you think you've won her favor?"

"She called me and praised me a lot. Besides that, nothing special."

In the meantime, Duchess Lisbeth, who had already donated a large amount of money, began to look very favorably at Nicole, who was diligently focused on volunteering.

She even made a significant comment yesterday.

"Duchess Lisbeth doesn't have a good reputation. She's famous for her skill in seducing nobles with ambiguous statuses, like your fake identity Maria, and extracting donations from them. Be careful not to be deceived."

Dagger said.

"What's her difference with a scammer? Does the royal family live so miserly?"

“To be exact, it was the royal family who made it that way. Duchess Lisbeth was originally a destitute fallen noble. But you never know. Since she’s royalty, she must have connections, so if you look good, she might introduce you to a wonderful groom.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

Dagger laughed heartily.

“By the way, the Grand Duke is coming back tomorrow.”

Today, Dagger, dressed like a student, said this to Nicole. Dagger stood under the shadow of a building, side by side with Nicole, looking at the distance.

“It was a short inspection.”

“The schedule got shortened because there was a problem in the royal family. It worked out well. If such a schedule gets longer, that person becomes subtly irritable.”

“..... Are there things that person can’t bear on his nerves?”

“There are many things that bother him.”

Nicole just smiled faintly.

“Just for that few days of inspection, they’re holding an event at the front of the castle gate. Should it be called some kind of a welcome back ceremony? They’re preparing a carriage filled with flowers, playing music, and knights are lining up to greet him.”

“You know quite a lot.”

“Because it’s my job to guard the Grand Duke.”

Nicole pretended to buy a newspaper and turned her back.

“By the way, are you introducing your daughter today? I dressed up carefully today.”

“.....Is that so for going to the orphanage?”

“I have to look good. I’m Dagger’s family.”

Dagger rubbed his nose and blushed.

“Let’s go, we can go now.”

\*\*\*

The place where Dagger’s self-proclaimed daughter lives. That place was an orphanage that was greatly sponsored by the Grand Duke’s family.

“The orphanage building located on the outskirts of the capital was small in scale, but neat and pretty.”

“Mostly young children stay here. The older ones are in another building.....”

The children playing in the yard ran over when they saw Dagger. Dagger stroked the children’s heads.

The child that Dagger adores was a girl who looked to be about six years old. The child showed interest while being shy when she saw Nicole.

“What’s your name?”

“Anna.”

The child spoke softly. She was a surprisingly pretty child. Her hair was congenitally pink and her eyes were brownish-

red.

‘She’s also cute.’

For the first time in her life, Nicole had such a thought when she saw someone else’s child.

“How old are you, unnie?”

Anna asked.

“Are you a sister or a brother to Dagger?”

“I’m his sister.”

Nicole said. Anna looked at Dagger and Nicole as if measuring them, then took a step toward Nicole and grabbed her clothes.

“Unnie, I like you because you’re pretty.”

Nicole, who had been looking after her younger siblings since she was young, quickly felt a sense of familiarity and gently stroked Anna’s head.

“Your maid, Bluea, has arrived, Nicole.”

“I brought the things you mentioned, miss.”

Bluea unloaded a bunch of things from the public carriage. It was cookies and bread baked this morning, and toys for the children to play with.

“Did you prepare this, Noona?”

Dagger seemed surprised.

“I told you I’m trying to look good.”

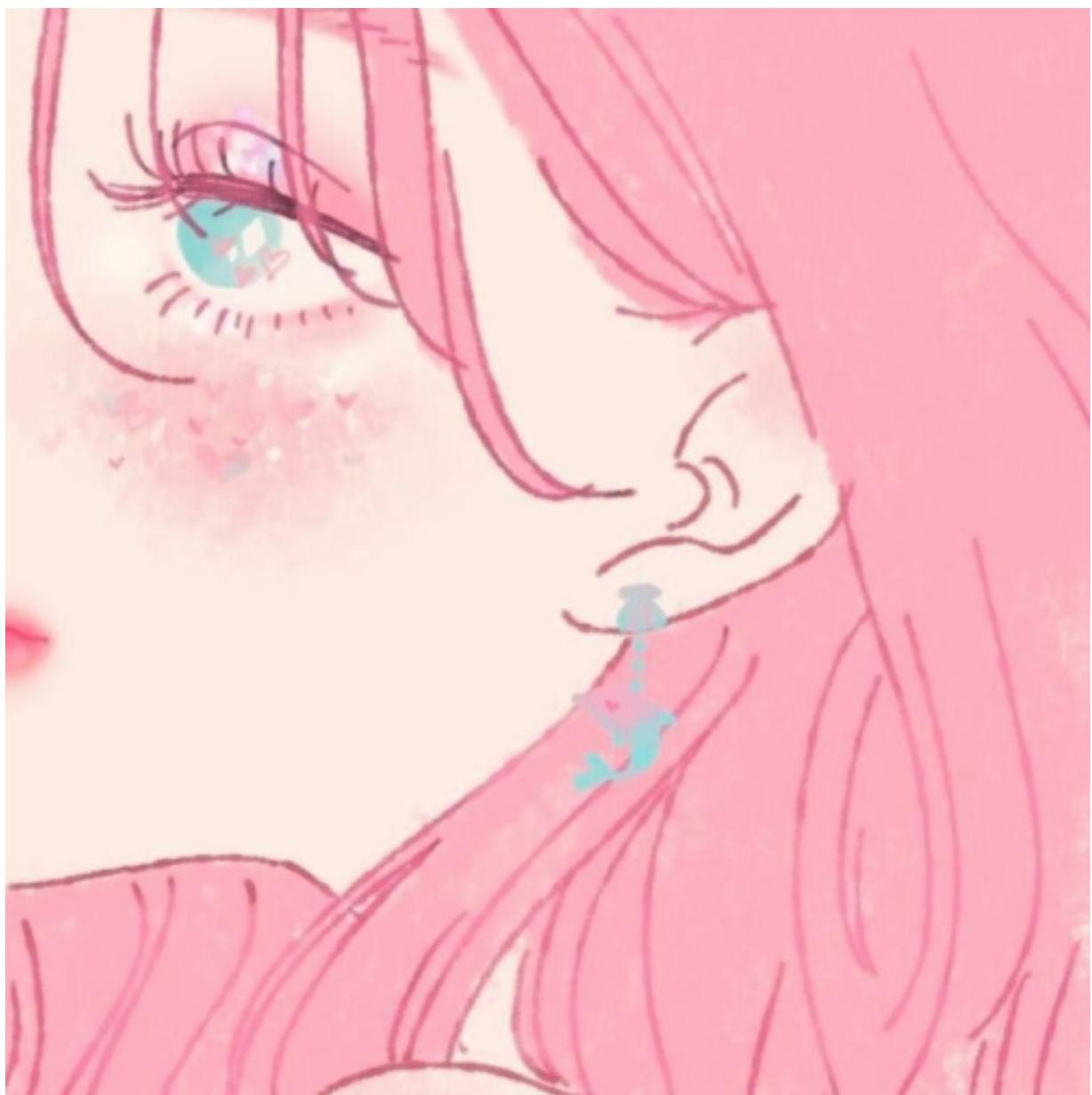
Nicole said. The children cheered when they found the toys.

Note:

Noona = means 'older sister' when spoken by a male

Unnie = means 'older sister' when spoken by a female

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# Chapter 91

\*\*\*

Despite the still chilly weather, the children were playing energetically without a care. Nicole was sitting on a chair set up in one corner of the garden.

Anna was playing among the children, wearing the cloth crown that Nicole had given her.

“Dagger, you said this orphanage is supported by the Grand Duke’s family. Then these children... are they being raised to join the Sith?”

“No? It’s just a social service. However, if there’s an exceptional child, they might get an offer. But only when they’re all grown up. No matter how scary that person is, he won’t exploit the children.”

‘That’ person would obviously be Raul.

“Can a very young child also become a full member?”

“Unless they’re an extraordinary genius like Estock or me... ah, it’s embarrassing to say it with my own mouth. Hmm, usually, we don’t use ordinary children. The ones who becomes a leaf, even if we don’t use them, they’re the ones who would hustle somewhere to earn money. Anyway, the ones who bring information don’t do dangerous things.”

Nicole was convinced.

A child would have to be as much of a genius as Dagger to join.

"Well, that's right. Why? The person you mentioned last time, your younger brother? Are you going to put a child of the YvesChapel family into the Sith?"

Nicole's expression changed at those words.

"No. One of us siblings joining the Sith is enough."

"I suppose so. It's a dangerous position."

Dagger looked a bit awkward.

"I'm a bit envious of your brother."

Nicole looked at Dagger. Dagger was exactly the same age as Jay.

"Dagger is no different from my brother. If you are in danger, I would risk my life to help you. It's both a repayment for the kindness you've shown me so far, and a duty for my family members."

Dagger's neck turned red. He pretended to be nonchalant.

"You resemble my mother. You look weak, but you're strong."

Dagger said. Nicole smiled.

"Anyway, don't you have something to tell me?"

"Did you notice?"

"I noticed a while ago. If you have a favor to ask, just say it. We family members should help each other."

“This matter might be a bit difficult.”

Nicole gestured to Dagger. Dagger bowed to Nicole.

“I would appreciate if you could prepare something.”

Dagger’s eyes widened as he heard Nicole whisper.

“Why are you preparing such a terrible thing. Noona, do you have such a hobby?”

“I don’t have such a hobby, but I may get my hands dirty for necessary work. But there’s something I need to confirm. Please act discreetly until I confirm it.”

“It’s not a difficult request, so I’ll do it. But this matter.....”

“It will never harm the Grand Duke’s family. Now, my master is also the Grand Duke.”

Dagger nodded.

‘Why is she suddenly asking if a child can join, and why is she asking to prepare such a thing, she’s really an incomprehensible person.’

Dagger thought to himself. Strangely enough, this matter seemed to be getting interesting as well.

\*\*\*

The next day, Nicole worked as usual at the charity house. That morning, a mountain of flowers was delivered, and the sweet scent vibrated throughout the building.

“What are these flowers for?”

"Ah, that's because today is the day the royal family is returning to the capital. Duchess Lisbeth has prepared a carriage full of flowers at her own expense. There are several such carriages, and she will take the children to distribute the flowers."

The secretary said to Nicole.

"It was a sudden decision, and Duchess Lisbeth was very excited. She'll be busy without a moment to spare."

"I was supposed to have tea time with the lady today, has the schedule changed?"

"Ah, I'll ask about that again. I think it might be difficult for her to make time."

That day, Nicole saw other noblewomen here for the first time since she arrived.

Clearly, several relatively young and lower-ranking ladies from this charity organization filled the room and made flower decorations.

"Do we have to do this too? Can't we order the maids?"

"Shh, it's for the royal family. The 'beneficiaries' are all making small bouquets today. You know how much Duchess Lisbeth has been paying attention to her husband's promotion lately."

The noblewomen didn't pay much attention to Nicole after a few formal greetings, perhaps because they hadn't been formally introduced.

'It seems the secretary is too busy and has forgotten about me.....'

It was time for Nicole to have tea with Lady Lisbeth, the Duchess.

'It's a perfect day for me.'

Nicole headed towards the back of the garden, pretending to look for Duchess Lisbeth.

Perhaps because there were tightly packed three-story brick buildings, the buildings at the back were all closed, unlike the main building where Nicole went every day.

'Surely people would be staying here, but how could it be so quiet.....'

There was no sound of children laughing, no sign of anyone. All the curtains were closed. Perhaps inside these buildings, even the poor mothers and daughters were all making flower decorations.

Nicole stopped in her tracks.

'Never go to where the accommodated people stay. Especially the buildings at the back, there are many sick people. You should never approach because you might get infected.'

The secretary had warned Nicole.

Despite being a charity, there were many petty rules that didn't fit their description, and the secretary and a few maids always kept a close watch on the comings and goings.

Anyway, the manager's words 'Do not approach the buildings at the back.' were nothing short of a hint to Nicole.

‘Was the back door this way?’

*Rustle.*

Then someone popped out from between the tree shadows.

Nicole made eye contact with the other person.

‘A boy? No, a young man?’

A slender man with a youthful face that seemed to be of medium height. He seemed taken aback when he saw Nicole. His eyes were cat-like but looked weak, and he had quite a handsome face.

“Adult men are not allowed in this facility.”

Nicole spoke before the other person could say anything. As soon as she opened her mouth, something inside her sounded an alarm.

Nicole stepped back.

“Don’t scream. I’m not a bad person.”

The man spoke in confusion. Nicole turned her back. No, she tried to.

*Thump,*

Something stinging pierced her shoulder. Nicole slowly turned her head.

The moment she saw the face of the person who had ambushed her from behind, Nicole felt as if her heart had stopped.

“You.....”

Her tongue gradually felt heavy. Nicole felt dizzy.

The giggling woman was none other than Isabel.

"Isabel."

The man called the woman's name. The woman smiled with her eyes.

"Leos, really. I told you not to come out at this time."

"....."

"But thanks to that, I met this bitch who you could say is an enemy of mine. What a coincidence."

Nicole was about to say something. But suddenly her body stiffened and she couldn't do anything.

'I can't, speak.....'

"Easy."

As Nicole collapsed to the ground, Isabel caught her.

"Bring her over here. The shade under the tree is a blind spot."

Isabel said with satisfaction. Leos looked at her with confused eyes.

"Who is this woman?"

"This woman. Leos, she's your mother's subordinate."

"But my mother....."

Leos lost his words. His eyes widened.

"Even if she's dead, she's after you. Don't you think she'd have a couple of subordinates?"

Nicole didn't understand a word of what Isabel said. But she knew one thing.

Isabel made this face when she was making a fuss and telling unbelievable lies.

'This situation - this expression. It's familiar.'

<All of my sister's unhappiness, *your* unhappiness, is because of Raul, that man. Remember. Who caused our parents to die miserably? You have to remember.>

This is a memory from a past life.

After Isabel whispered like this, Nicole, who was the unhappy Grand Duchess.....

She rekindled her hatred for Raul. It seemed like everything that Isabel said was right. Isabel was the only person Nicole could rely on.

'That's right, I thought that way back then.'

What kind of expression did she have then?

"I understand, Isabel."

That's right. She looked at Isabel with a scared expression like that young man Leos. As if she was surrendering to Isabel with her whole body.

Leos dragged Nicole's stiffened body under the shade of the tree.

Isabel sweetly smiled and placed Nicole's face on her lap.

"Leos, bring a sack from the storage. We can't handle her here. Put her in the sack and take her inside the building."

Isabel whispered as she stroked Nicole's cheek. Her giggling, madness-filled laughter defiled Nicole's ears. Nicole felt nauseous as Isabel's hand touched her body.

Leos hurriedly went inside the building, looking around as Isabel instructed.

"You know, the amazing medicine recipes that Mother knew. I made various medicines hoping to use them on you someday. Nice to see you again, Nicole. I will use them all for you today. Ah, don't make that face. What I just used is just a simple....."

"....."

"It's an anesthetic. How did I come back? Of course."

*I came back to become a hell for my sister. (Isabel)*

Isabel seemed happy as she spoke. The needle Isabel had pricked seemed to be an anesthetic needle. Nicole moved her fingertips.

And then the next moment, Nicole got up from her spot and slapped Isabel's cheek.

*Smack!*

"Eek!"

Just from that, Nicole's body became immobile again and she knelt on the floor.

"If it's an anesthetic, there should have been something better than that. It seems to have a slow effect."

The effect of this anesthetic was very short-term and could temporarily wear off, instead of having a big shock when it went in.

“You.....”

Isabel suddenly got slapped and looked at Nicole with a surprised expression. Isabel’s mouth was split open from the force of the slap.

*I should be the one to say nice to meet you.*

“You wasted the last chance I gave you. A chance to disappear from my life and at least save your life.”

Nicole whispered, looking at Isabel who had boarded a sinking ship.

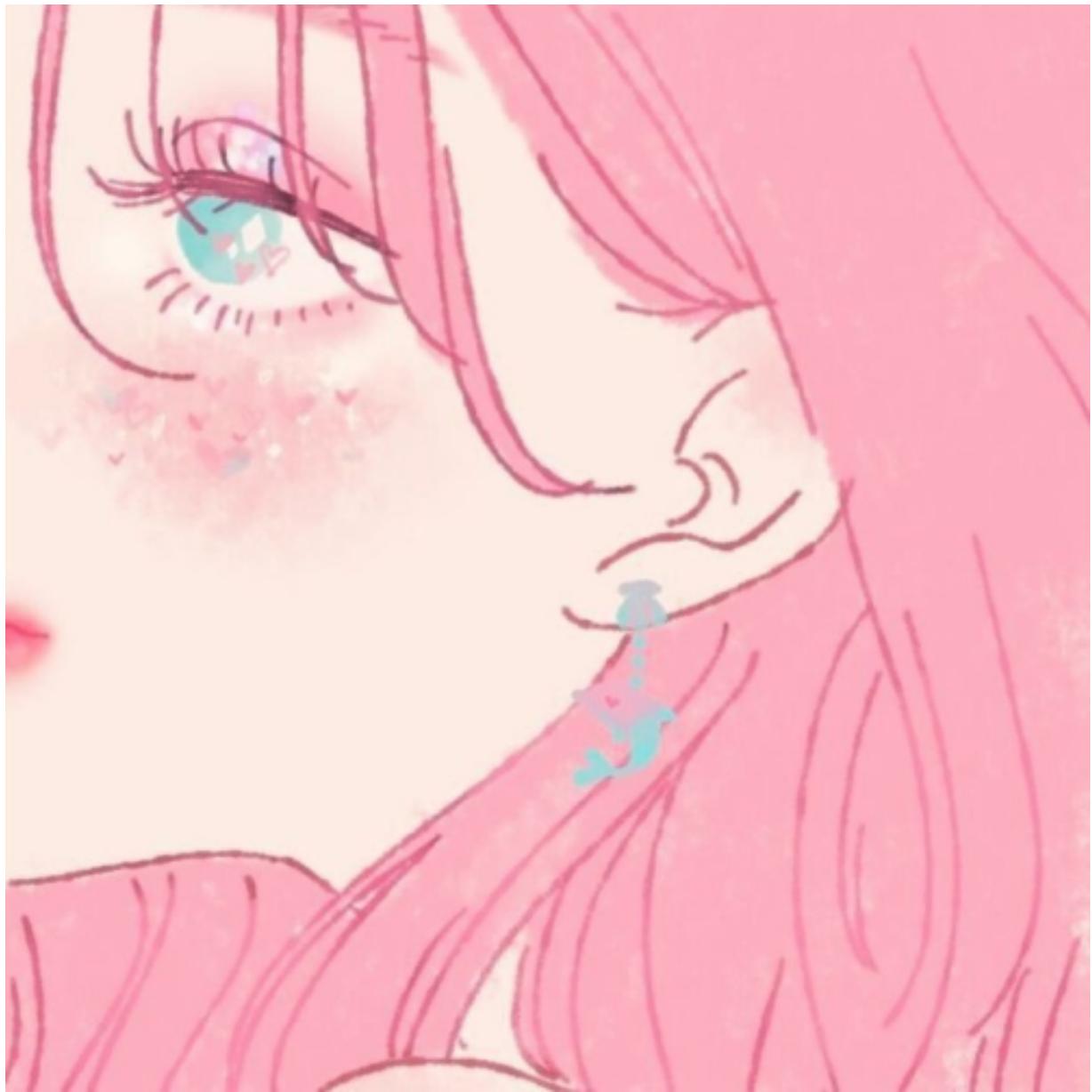
It was clear that Lady Lisbeth was a person with a rotten back.

Otherwise, she wouldn’t have brought along a devil like that snake.

Isabel, who had put her hand on her cheek, stared at Nicole and laughed once again.

The innocent beauty that she had in her previous life was now gone. Nicole faced that creepy smile.

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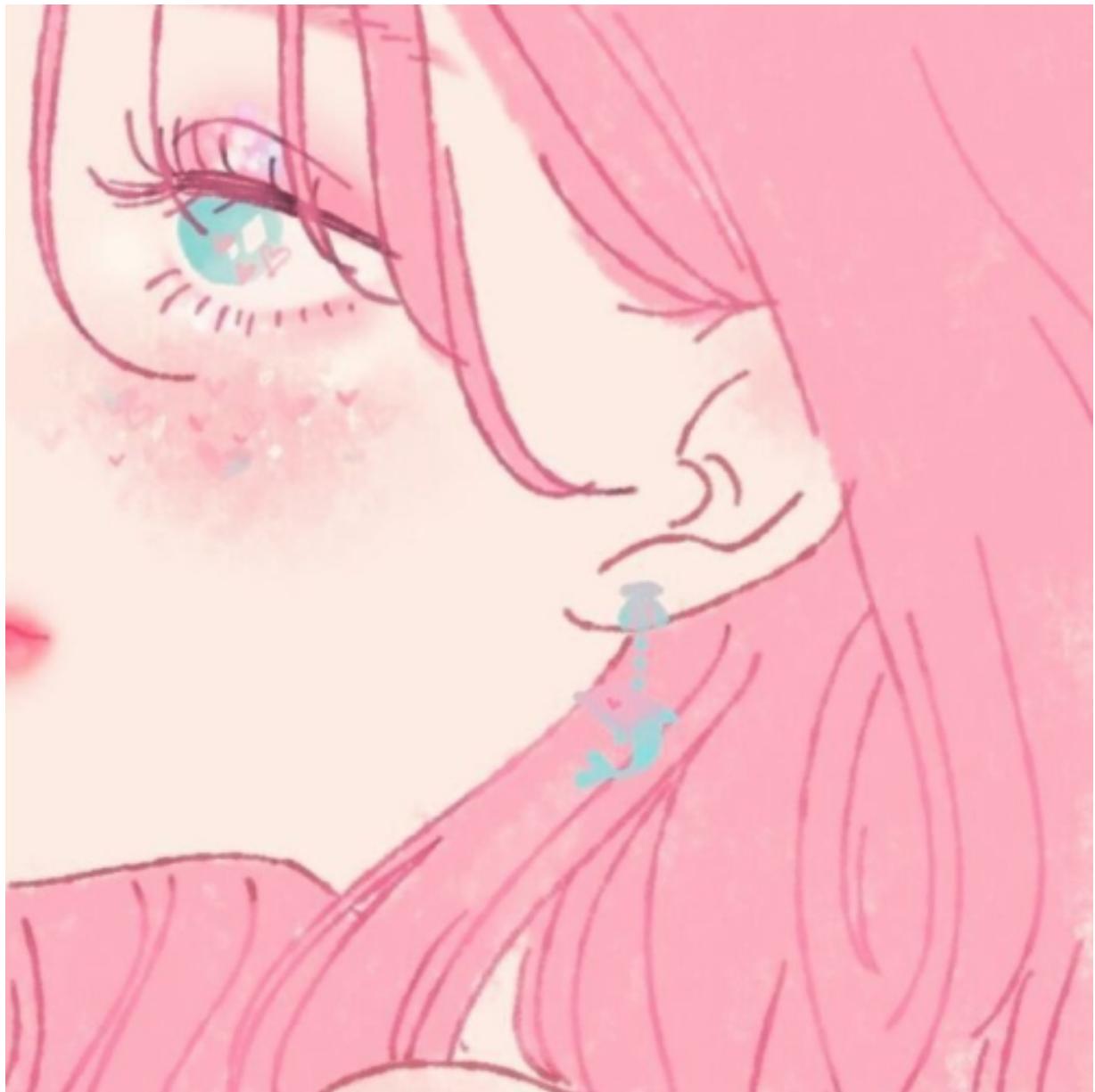


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# Chapter 92

Isabel, who had been slapped by Nicole, lifted her head.

“Aren’t you curious about what happened to Mother?”

Nicole said, and reached out to pull the necklace around Isabel’s neck.

“Don’t touch it!”

Isabel shouted sharply. Nicole remembered what that necklace was. It was a locket pendant that their mother, Freya, cherished.

Isabel had nagged and begged Freya for it years ago.

Regardless of what Isabel had gone through, she seemed to have kept this necklace dearly.

“Mother passed away. Of course, it’s because she inhaled too much smoke with a sick body. You killed Mother. The only person who loved a monster like you.

Now Nicole knew how to deal with Isabel.

Isabel, who had a habit of justifying herself, ironically couldn’t stand being directly pointed out her faults.

Especially when it came to their mother, who was a kind of obsession for Isabel.

"Shall I tell you Mother's real last words? She resented you until the moment she passed away."

"Stop lying!"

Isabel lunged at Nicole.

"Mother always loved me. Who would like a fool like you?"

"Who was the one who was easily fooled by this fool?"

Isabel's face hardened eerily. She looked at Nicole with a doll-like face and laughed bitterly.

It was as if cracks were forming on an old doll.

"Everyone should know your true nature, Nicole."

Isabel muttered lowly. The radiant beauty from her past life was gone, she looked like a literal demon standing there.

At that sight, Nicole instinctively took a step back.

Once again, her finger joints began to stiffen.

The anesthetic from the earlier was not strong. As soon as she consumed a small amount of the anesthetic, it quickly relaxed her muscles and she could move again.

However, as the anesthetic circulated through her body, its effects kicked in again.

Nicole turned around and started running. After all, she was in the position of a spy right now. There was nothing good about getting caught.

"Leos, catch her! She won't be able to go far because of the drug."

Isabel called out softly. Suddenly, Leos, who had a rope and a handle in his hand, appeared behind Isabel and started running.

"Ah!"

Not long after, Nicole was grabbed by the hair by Leos.

"We can't stand out in front of people. Hurry up and shut her mouth. There are bugs inside... No, I mean people."

Isabel spoke quickly. Leos did as he was told, covering Nicole's mouth and pinning her to the floor. However, his hand seemed to tremble in confusion.

"Isabel, is it really okay to do this? I've never seen this person before!"

"This woman is a devil. We must deal with her today!"

Isabel said.

"Leos, are you not going to listen to me? Think about your mother who is like a devil. You're the only one on my side!"

Isabel whispered to Leos without managing her expression.

Leos, who was in agony, had his pupils shrink. He nodded mechanically as if hypnotized.

"I understand. Isabel...."

"Eup!"

Leos' hand, which was covering Nicole's mouth, tightened.

'Strange, the gaze of that man named Leos is too familiar.'

Nicole felt a shock at that moment, as if someone had struck her skull. It was because some memory surged up like a bolt of lightning.

'This too... is a memory of a past life.'

<Isabel.>

That brief moment.

Nicole was in a room. That room was inside Isabel's house.

Nicole remembered the structure of the house clearly. Near the fireplace, there was a long green chair.

The color was so vivid that Nicole remembered it clearly. She was lying on that chair with her legs stretched out. Nicole, with her eyes slightly open, saw Isabel.

<Strange, why isn't it working?>

<If it's as recorded in the experiment log.....>

Isabel's figure shook two or three times. Isabel tilted her head.

<Is it because the test subject is such a foolish woman? *Sigh*. Don't resist. It's this stupid sister of mine. Leave everything to Isabel. You trust me, don't you? Why do you keep obeying and then stopping? If the Grand Duke finds out and I die horribly, will you be responsible, unnie?>

Isabel laughed bitterly. Nicole felt her emotions in the fragments of that memory.

Terrible obedience and love. Nicole felt such emotions towards Isabel.

As time passed, Nicole was again in Isabel's house. She was panting, as if she had rushed in.

This time, she was feeling intense confusion.

<Isabel, my... husband. That man saved me. From the Marquis of Saratheve. Could it be that he is not a bad person? While I was asleep, he said I was his owner, in other words, his true wife. I'm confused.>

<Unnie. What are you talking about? Have you forgotten who killed our parents?>

Isabel spoke as if it was absurd.

<Stop talking nonsense and tell me what you've heard. What about Raul? Where has he been going and what is he thinking these days?>

<Isabel, but...>

<Your husband is a devil. I'm the only one on your side! Remember that and behave well.>

At those words, Nicole blinked her eyes slowly.

*That's right, Isabel is the only one on my side. Everything Isabel says is right...*

'Did I make the same expression back then?'

Nicole, who had been silenced by Leos, thought. Short of breath, Nicole struggled and then relaxed her body.

"Did she faint?"

Isabel leaned in closer.

“It seems the anesthesia was weak earlier...”

Isabel whispered and brought the anesthetic needle to Nicole’s hand again. Leos’s hand relaxed.

*Sting.* It was the moment Isabel’s needle pricked Nicole’s hand again.

At that moment, Nicole’s eyes flashed open. And she pushed her hand, which was about to be paralyzed, into her bosom. What Nicole pulled out was a dagger stained black at the end. She swung it towards Isabel’s cheek.

“Kyah, Kyaaaaak!”

Isabel screamed. Blood flowed down Isabel’s cheek.

“My face! No!”

“Isabel!”

Leos let go of Nicole and caught Isabel. Nicole got up and started running away.

‘The anesthesia started to work properly.’

<Remember. Volunteers are absolutely not allowed to use the back door.>

The secretary said it several times. The back door could only be used by ‘beneficiaries’ and special guests.

In other words, there is a back door.

“Leos, chase after her! It’s not the time to take care of me.”

Isabel’s shouting could be heard. Leos hurriedly followed Nicole. People’s voices could be heard.

“Stop right there!”

Leos grabbed Nicole’s clothes. At that moment, Nicole and Leos’ eyes met in mid-air.

“Remember the Glassworm.”

It was a reflexive statement. Nicole didn’t even know what she was saying.

“What.....”

Leos’s eyes trembled at those words.

“You’re being controlled by the Glassworm.”

Leos stood rooted to the spot, unable to move.

“Manager, over here. There was a scream over there!”

For a moment, Leos tried to chase after Nicole again. But a panicked voice came from the building. Leos hid behind a tree for now.

\*\*\*

As she walked, the back door came into view. Luckily, the back door was open. By then, Nicole was already heavily under the influence of the anesthesia.

‘No, if I’m discovered by the people in this facility... It will be revealed that I’ve been messing around here... I might be kicked out of Sith during the mission...’

Then someone grabbed Nicole’s hand.

“That woman just now lives in hiding, she’ll run if she gets noticed by strangers. There are a lot of people at the back

door. She can't show herself in front of strangers."

That woman. It was none other than referring to Isabel.

Nicole looked at the other person with difficulty, bending her head down. A small child, almost dragging Nicole along, was taking her away with the sun at her back.

'The child named Arula who was scolded by the manager last time.'

Nicole recalled the child's name. The child had shiny black eyes and looked smart.

'The person who just screamed looking for the manager.....'

She wanted to ask if it was her, but her tongue stiffened again and Nicole couldn't continue speaking.

There were carts lined up in front of the back door. Nicole couldn't even think about what those carts were. Aru quickly looked around and said,

"Can you climb the stairs? Step on this and hide."

Nicole hid somewhere, half-dazed, as Aru instructed.

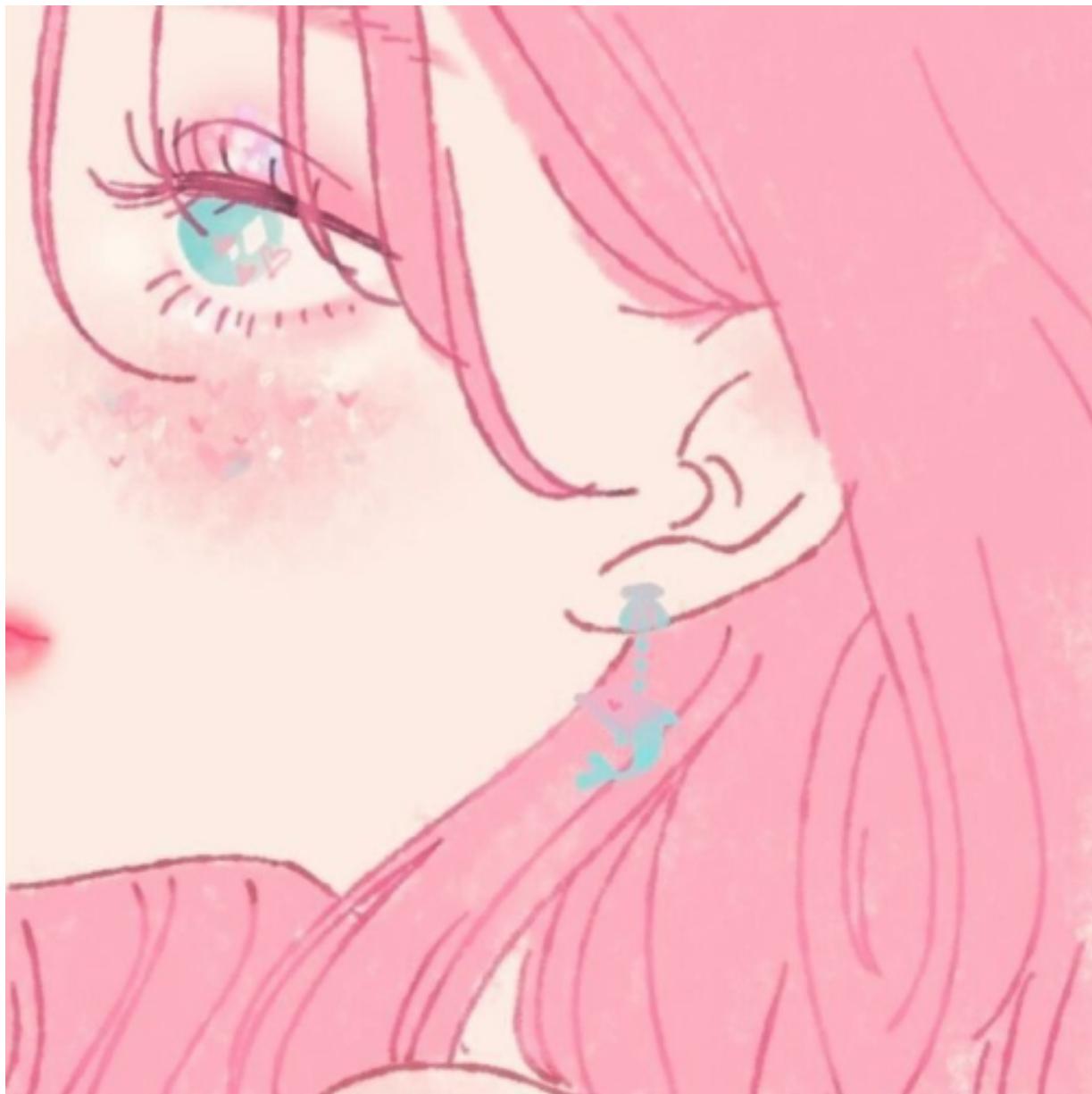
The place where Aru hid Nicole was one of the carts. There was no one around, perhaps the guards had gone to smoke. Aru covered Nicole with a cloth.

"Who's at the back door there! Why is the door open! Come here now!"

There was a commotion from the back door. It was the rough voice of the manager. Aru bit her lip and quickly entered the back door.

She looked back at the cart where she had hidden Nicole until the end. But there was nothing more the girl could do.

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# Chapter 93

Nicole felt something tickling her cheek. It was the touch of velvet.

“It feels like my head is going to split open.”

*Thump, thump.*

A constant vibration rang in her head. Then, a pungent smell hit her nose. At first, it smelled like something rotting, but after a few breaths, it turned into a suffocatingly thick fragrance.

Nicole took a deep breath and tried to wriggle her fingertips.

As expected, nothing goes well when Isabel is involved.

‘Moreover, what are these memories I’m recalling? Glassworms? Why do I even know such a word?’

That was the moment. The constant vibration stopped. Nicole then realized that she was inside a carriage.

“So, the child Arula hid me inside this carriage.”

Nicole quickly grasped the situation. Arula, the child, had hidden her in the carriage in a hurry.

“And the line of loaded wagons behind the house of charity today...”

<They say we will have carriages full of flowers waiting at the city gates to welcome the royal family. And the ladies of our charity organization will distribute flowers to the people. If we do well, we might catch the eye of the royals. Think of how much effort we've put in for today!>

One of the ladies clearly said this while making floral decorations.

Nicole was probably in one of those wagons loaded with flowers, into which the coachmen, unaware of her presence, had dumped the flowers.

Upon realizing this, Nicole stiffened up. Soon after, the carriage came to a halt with an ominous noise.

\*\*\*

The royal carriage arrived precisely on time, greeted by the applause of the gathered crowd.

Everything was proceeding exactly as planned by Duchess Lisbeth.

As the mounted party arrived, Duchess Lisbeth stepped forward with a broad smile.

"All of this is a testament to the capital's people's devotion to the royal family."

Duchess Lisbeth exclaimed. Raul, who was leading, pulled on the reins of his horse.

Beside him rode Crown Prince Martes, pale-faced, and Princess Sylvia, side by side.

Following them was the splendid golden carriage of the Emperor and his consort, as if in escort.

"You go to great lengths. It's not as if passing through the city gates is an unprecedented event."

Raul dismounted his horse.

He seemed annoyed by the whole event, but due to the large crowd gathered, he dismounted as a matter of etiquette and walked near the city gates.

This was the same even for the royal family.

"What's all this commotion?"

Martes looked around with discomfort. He was too frail to dismount without the help of his attendant.

'How old is he that he still can't dismount a horse without stairs?'

Princess Sylvia looked at the back of her brother's head as if it were a headache.

Soon, stairs were swiftly placed before Martes. He trembled as he carefully dismounted the horse and stepped on the stairs, treating himself as if he were a fragile artifact.

Meanwhile, Princess Sylvia waited for Raul to help her dismount. But when nothing happened, her face turned red with embarrassment.

Eventually, one of the observant guards approached and assisted her in dismounting.

Duchess Lisbeth detached the wagon from the horse and placed girls dressed like flower fairies on the coachman's

seat.

At Duchess Lisbeth's gesture, the girls descended from the wagon.

"These are the children I sponsor. Aren't they adorable? They will present the welcoming flowers."

"Quite the grand preparation, Duchess."

Princess Sylvia said with a snicker. It was quite a sight, seeing someone who once was at the center of power now fawning so. She found the duchess both admirable and pitiable.

"The royal family is this nation's treasure, so we cannot neglect the homecoming ceremony."

"I'll pass."

Raul gestured with annoyance. But the royal siblings seemed quite intrigued by the carriages.

One carriage, in particular, was laden with especially luscious red flowers. The Crown Prince peered into the nearest one.

"What will be done with these flowers?"

"They will be distributed to those gathered here. There are also food wagons waiting over there. Those who receive these will hold long-lasting gratitude towards our royal family."

"Is that so. I will convey this intention to His Majesty the Emperor."

The Crown Prince answered formally.

“His Majesty the Emperor and the Empress will not disembark from the carriage due to poor health.”

Princess Sylvia also approached and spoke. She genuinely admired the heap of flowers.

“Did the children make these floral crowns?”

“No, our volunteers made them. All are ladies of good standing...”

At Duchess Lisbeth’s signal, the volunteers lined up in a row behind her.

The women, dressed in mint-colored dresses tailored for the day, complemented Duchess Lisbeth’s bright red dress quite well.

They all bowed their knees and greeted the royal siblings and Raul in unison.

“These floral crowns have particularly luscious flowers.”

Sylvia said. A child standing next to the carriage handed over a floral crown while trembling severely. Sylvia received it.

“Wait a moment.”

Then Martes gestured.

“Why is the pile of flowers moving?”

At those words, the knights all approached the pile of flowers. The child holding the floral crown backed away in fear.

Raul also came closer.

“Search inside thoroughly.”

Martes said.

As one of the knights prodded the pile with the tip of his scabbard, the pile of flowers rustled.

Martes approached and peered in.

“It’s still moving—”

*Whoosh—*

Then, as the velvet cloth was pushed aside, the flowers cascaded down, revealing Nicole in a light mint-colored silk dress.

She was covered in flower petals all over her body.

“.....!”

Raul’s eyes subtly widened upon discovering Nicole.

*Rustle!*

As Nicole stood up, petals sprayed onto Martes’s face as well, who detested surprises due to his frailty.

“What have you thrown at my face! Ahh!”

Martes flailed in panic and bumped into the wagon, twisting his face into an odd expression as he let out a strange scream.

“My body is breaking. My body is breaking apart!”

Nicole was frightened herself, barely out of anesthesia, feeling as if she were dead. But the problem was the heap

of flowers piled on top of her.

There was a hole in the small space under the seat where Nicole had hidden. She could breathe at least, but the issue was that the wagon had stopped at a slight tilt.

As a result, a heavy pile of flowers had come down upon Nicole's face and body.

Nicole was on the verge of suffocating and passing out again, which is why Martes saw the slight movements as she struggled to survive.

"I, I'm....."

Nicole saw Raul looking at her with a terrifyingly expressionless face in front of everyone. Martes's bizarre scream seemed to tear her ears.

"Your Highness, calm down! Get away from the suspicious person!"

The knights drew their swords toward Nicole.

<The Crown Prince is like in a glass bottle. He thinks his own body is made of glass, always worrying about it breaking.>

At that moment, Nicole recalled a secret story Raul had told her. She bowed to Martes.

"Petals cannot break anything. Not glass, nor even something as fragile as paper."

Martes paused at those words. He stopped screaming and for the first time looked properly into Nicole's eyes.

He halted the knights who had drawn their swords.

“What did you just say?”

“Petals are carried away by the wind, fluttering down to rest wherever they may, unable to crush anything. That’s why I was safe within that pile of flowers. Look, I am not broken, am I?”

Martes suddenly tilted his head, looking at Nicole as if he had discovered something new.

Nicole found his gaze chilling; his hollow eyes made him look like a bizarre doll.

“Who are you?”

“I am a volunteer who came to present flowers to His Highness the Crown Prince. If I startled you, I apologize.”

The Crown Prince, as if enchanted, reached out his hand. Nicole placed one of the floral decorations on his palm.

“Red petals shine the brightest atop glass.”

Nicole whispered. Then Raul approached.

“Who is this woman?”

“She claims to be a volunteer of Duchess Lisbeth.”

Martes said, unable to take his eyes off her.

‘Has that woman gone mad? What is this act? How dare she orchestrate this?’

Duchess Lisbeth, watching from a step away, felt like she wanted to chew Nicole out.

“Duchess Lisbeth.”

Raul summoned her with an imperious gesture. Duchess Lisbeth walked over reluctantly.

“Do you know this woman?”

Raul asked coldly.

“Well, I...”

Duchess Lisbeth, for her part, wanted to pretend she did not know Nicole. However, Nicole was already officially enrolled in the charity organization. Many had seen her.

Moreover, today's volunteers had all been ordered to wear matching light mint dresses. Nicole had followed the order and worn a mint dress, so she could not deny it in front of her face because of the dress.

“That is, she is one of our volunteers... There has been a... misunderstanding.”

“I've never seen such a foolish show before.”

“What?”

“Did you intend to present a woman as a gift to His Highness the Crown Prince? Do you even think?”

Duchess Lisbeth realized that with just one word she could join the ranks of traitors or simply become a fool for making a mistake.

She was quick to notice and chose to be the fool.

“I was short-sighted. I thought everyone would laugh when this woman made a surprise appearance from the flower wagon, like a goddess of flowers. Ho ho... but the timing was a bit off.”

“This woman could have been torn apart right here as an assassin, along with whoever sent her.”

Duchess Lisbeth turned as pale as a corpse.

It was then. *Jingle*.

A clear and small bell rang, and people’s attention turned in that direction this time.

The source of the bell was the Emperor and Empress’s carriage. Someone who appeared to be the commander of the imperial guard hurried to the carriage.

When the commander came close to the window, the carriage window opened, and a hand wearing a white glove and holding a golden fan emerged.

‘The Empress’s hand.’

Nicole thought, frozen even at that moment. Soon the commander came and conveyed the Empress’s will.

“His Highness the Crown Prince is also to come to the carriage.”

“But I...”

“It is His Majesty the Emperor’s command.”

Martes, with a look full of regret in his eyes, surrounded by knights, headed towards the carriage.

“And that woman is to be detained and investigated.”

The color drained from Nicole’s face.

“I shall take care of it myself.”

Raul said coldly.

“The Grand Duke?”

“The reason I accompanied this time is to take charge of escorting His Majesty the Emperor and his family. My duty is not over until the Emperor returns to the imperial palace.”

The commander looked like he wanted to say something, but he could not bring himself to speak a few words to Raul and just nodded his head.

“Duchess Lisbeth, that woman is too nervous to even hold a bouquet properly. Next time you plan such a foolish act, you might want to employ someone with more nerve.”

Raul said. Duchess Lisbeth also closed her mouth. Raul gestured to Nicole.

“Come down here.”

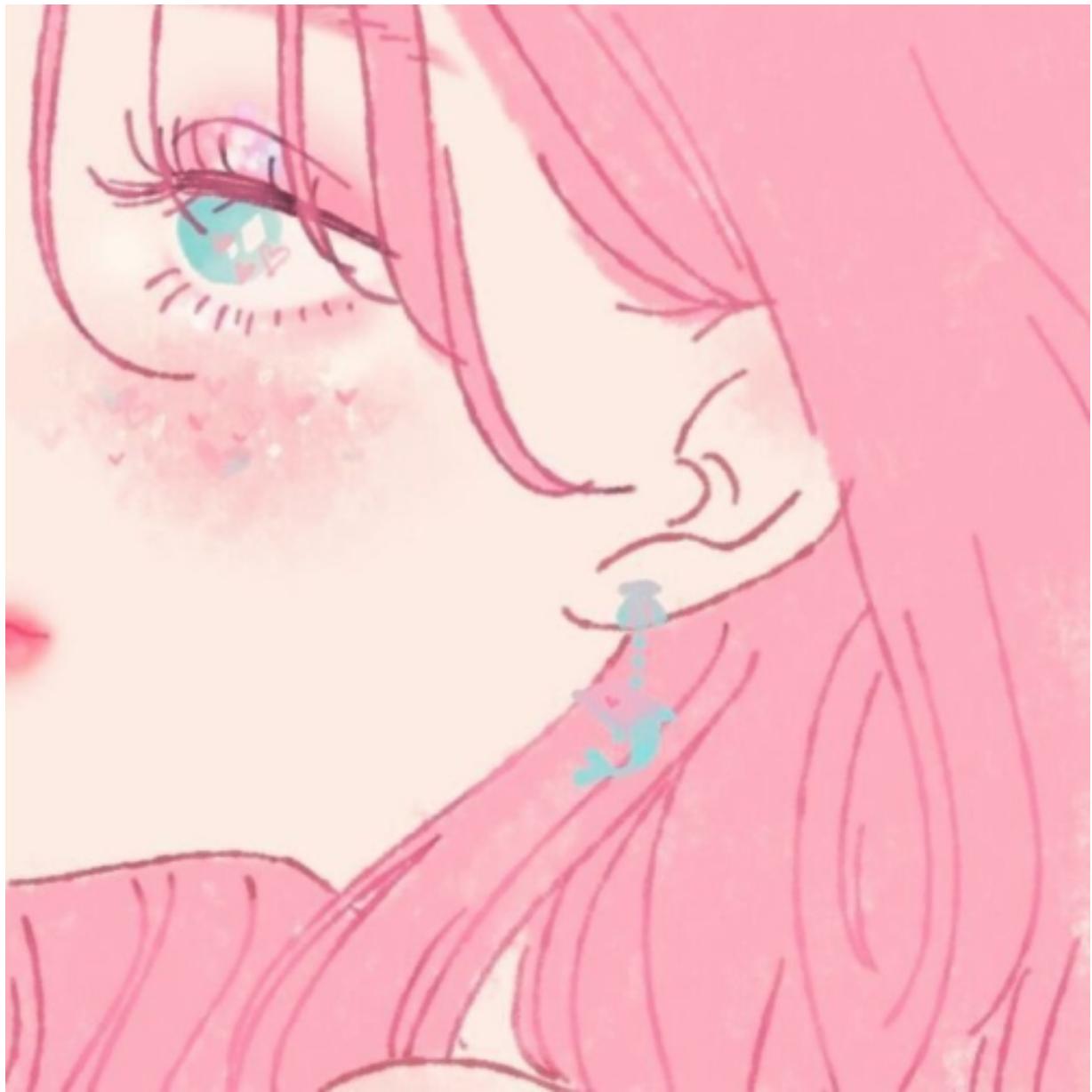
Raul said. Nicole was very nervous. Her body wavered as she descended from the wagon.

It seemed the effects of the anesthesia still lingered. Raul lifted Nicole in his arms and brought her down from the carriage.

“Prepare your excuses. I will not overlook this today.”

In a fleeting moment, Raul whispered very softly. Nicole felt chills run down her spine. She couldn’t even nod her head.

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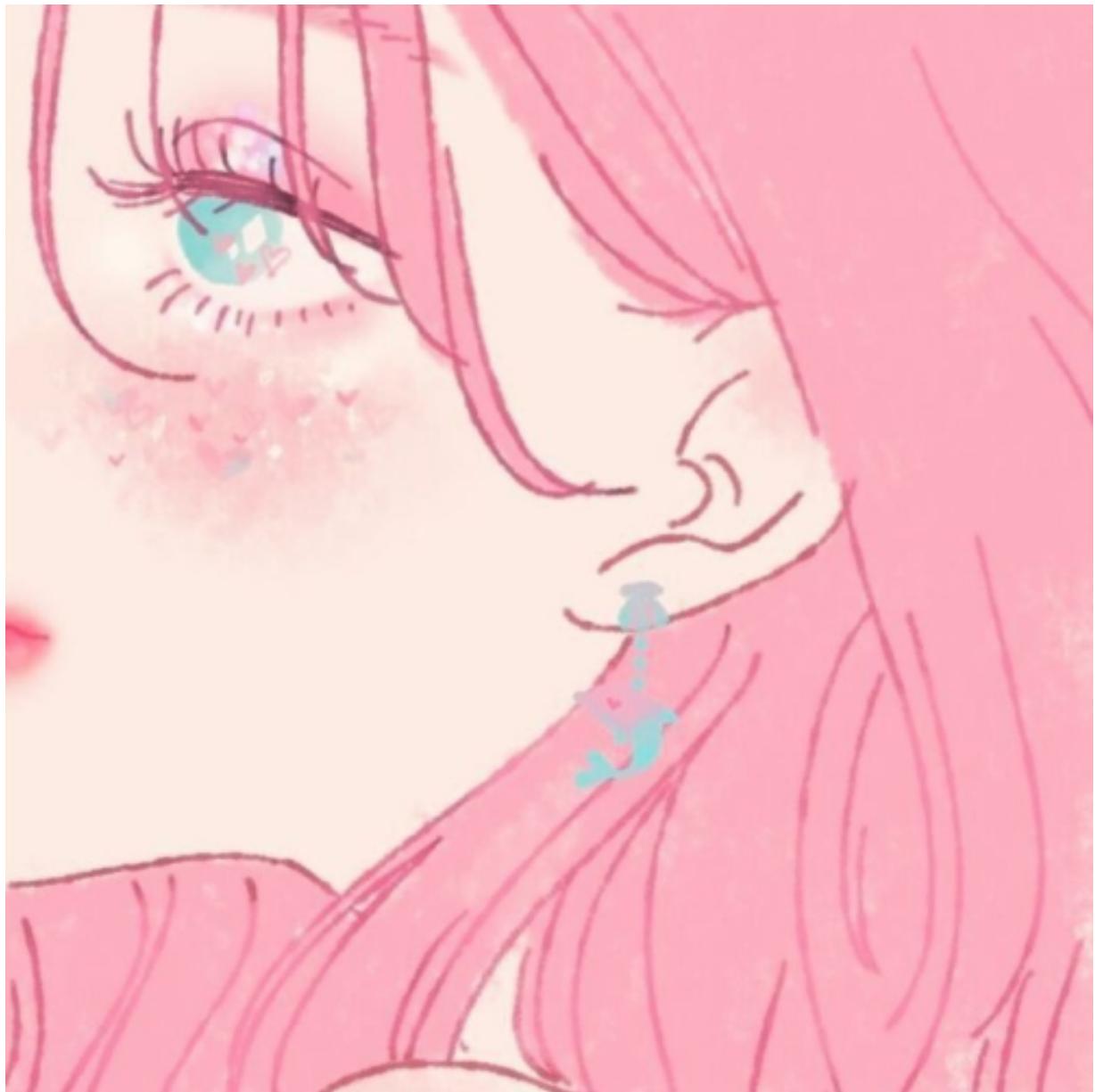


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# Chapter 94

Sylvia looked at Nicole, who was embraced in Raul's arms, with a chilling gaze.

'What's with that woman?'

She's either a mad ambitious person or a fool. That's what Sylvia thought. But she had a strange premonition.

The premonition that they should not overlook that woman.

\*\*\*

<The first thing you should never do as a spy and an agent.>

<To reveal your face publicly, to openly disclose your relationship with your master.>

<An agent whose identity is exposed is of no use and thus disposed of immediately.>

Raul handed Nicole over to a knight. The knight detained Nicole in a carriage.

Afterwards, the carriage started to run somewhere.

'If I go to prison, would Raul help me?'

Nicole's mind was blank. She was unlucky. It was the worst situation.

Aru would also since she tried to save Nicole.

Thanks to her, she escaped from Isabel, but in the end, she fell into an even more embarrassing situation.

She was not yet well-established in Sith. Therefore, this one incident could have led to her expulsion.

\*\*\*

Eventually, the carriage came to a stop. The carriage door opened with a dull sound.

The curtains of the carriage had been closed the entire time, so the light pouring in was blinding.

“Come this way.”

The one who soon showed his face was Bastard.

‘I feel strange.’

Nicole looked at Bastard in a daze. Confusing memories had been crossing her mind since earlier.

‘It feels like some important memory is about to resurface.....’

Bastard looked at Nicole and said,

“Are you all right?”

“.....Yes.”

Nicole then became aware of her surroundings. She was in the backyard of a building. Fortunately, it did not seem that she had been dragged into the security knights' headquarters or the royal family's secret room.

“Where is this?”

“This is the back entrance for employees of the hotel. This hotel is where the Grand Duke usually stays when he is in the city.”

Nicole understood immediately.

The Valentine Grand Duchy owned many properties in the capital, and this hotel was one of them. Raul often stayed here when he had business in the city.

However, in her past life, Nicole had never been to this place. This was always her husband’s secret space.

‘I never thought I’d come here like this.’

Bastard led Nicole through the back door. Majestic paintings hung all over the hallway, which was lined with velvet carpets.

“If I encounter someone else...”

“This staircase only leads to the top floor. No one but the Grand Duke can use it at will.”

Nicole felt a bit relieved. And she carefully observed Raul’s secretive space.

“Go inside and wait. The Grand Duke will come himself.”

Nicole answered softly with a ‘yes,’ but her fingertips trembled faintly.

A faint look of sympathy crossed Bastard’s face as he saw this.

"It will be quite a harsh punishment. But if he had intended to kill you, he would have left you there and then. Be mentally prepared."

".....I know. Thank you."

*Thud*, the door closed.

The penthouse room used by Raul consisted of a large living room, a study, and a bedroom. Nicole paced around the room.

'Bastard said I wouldn't be killed, but...'

Nicole knew she had caused a great deal of trouble. She waited for Raul anxiously.

\*\*\*

*Trudge. Trudge.*

Eventually, there were footsteps crossing the hallway.

Nicole knew that Raul walked so roughly when he was extremely angry.

*Flung open.*

The door opened. An extremely angry Raul appeared beyond the door. Nicole, seized by fear, took a step back.

"Speak."

Raul said as he closed the door.

"Why you did such a foolish thing."

"....."

*What should she say? Isabel, my crazy sister. I got caught by the woman who caused your death in my past life and got stabbed with an anesthetic?*

She couldn't possibly say that. If the connection between the two was revealed, it could eventually uncover everything about the YvesChapel family.

"It was a simple accident."

Nicole said quickly.

"Today, while volunteers were preparing flower decorations, I tried to investigate inside the building of the Duchess Lisbeth's charity. During that, I almost got caught by people and hurriedly hid in a carriage. And then....."

Nicole revealed the truths, excluding only the part about Isabel.

"Then the porters piled flowers over my head. I couldn't move at all, and it seems I fainted for a moment from suffocation."

"So you had no choice but to do something extraordinary, bursting out of the pile of flowers."

Raul said expressionlessly. Nicole flinched, but nodded.

"Your face was exposed to all the royal people, and I blatantly took you away from among them. This will be the only blemish in my work."

"I'm sorry."

"Should I continue to use you?"

Nicole felt like she was going to faint. He was too overpowering, and she was afraid. However, Nicole had to take responsibility for her mistake.

"Try to persuade me. If not, at least try begging."

Raul said expressionlessly.

"I will make it up somehow."

Nicole said.

"Duchess Lisbeth values people's reputations highly. My appearance there has become something that Duchess Lisbeth had planned. Since the situation has turned out this way, it's a weakness for her. So... I'll apologize to Duchess Lisbeth, and if she dismisses me, I'll threaten to tarnish the reputation of her charity."

"Is it worth doing that?"

"Yes, it is."

Nicole said.

"There is definitely something suspicious inside the charity. I've also found a way to investigate it on my own."

"....."

"Please give me one more chance."

Raul's enraptured eyes looked at Nicole.

He slowly sat down on a chair in the middle of the living room. *Tap, tap.* He tapped his elbow lightly with his fingers, then touched his face.

After a while, a dry voice came from Raul's mouth.

"Is that your way of begging?"

"....."

"That's not enough to appease your master's heart."

Raul's gaze shifted strangely.

"The punishment..."

"....."

"I will accept any punishment. Whatever you give me....."

Only then did Nicole feel her eyes moisten slightly. She did not want to appear as a whining child in Raul's eyes. Crying over a wrongdoing was something only a fool would do.

However, she couldn't help her trembling body. Finally, Raul glanced sideways at Nicole.

"I've already given you a lot of leeway. Just sparing your life now is a special treatment that will not happen again."

"I know."

Nicole said.

Raul was no fool. He wouldn't guarantee one's life just for a few mixed words.

Raul pressed his forehead once. He seemed to be trying to pull out his self-control.

"Even if I don't fire you right away, you have to be punished. That's fairness."

"Yes."

Nicole realized she might end up having an arm or leg cut off.

"I have never personally disciplined any of my Sith, except for children. But you have committed too many absurd acts. It's also the first time I'm personally giving punishment to a Sith."

Raul rose from his seat. And he gave her a simple command.

"Take off all your clothes and stand."

"Now, my....."

Nicole was confused. Was he going to strip her and tie her up like before? Or perhaps, he might give her an even worse punishment.

"I'm not so idle that I would force myself upon you under the pretext of punishment."

Raul smirked and then said,

"What I want to teach you is shame. At least the emotion necessary for reflection to ensure that you never do such foolish things again."

Nicole bit her lip. In truth, the idea of showing her naked body to Raul... wasn't that unpleasant.

After all, he was her husband in a past life, and even if he didn't remember, they had been intimate once.

The thought that Raul would force himself on her did not occur to her. Instead, what worried her was the fear of being

beaten until her whole body swelled from being disrobed, or being cast out as she was.

Raul was more than capable of doing so.

But she had no choice. Nicole undressed, layer by layer, in front of Raul.

She untied the straps of her mint silk dress and removed her chemise. What remained was a thin and short silk slip.

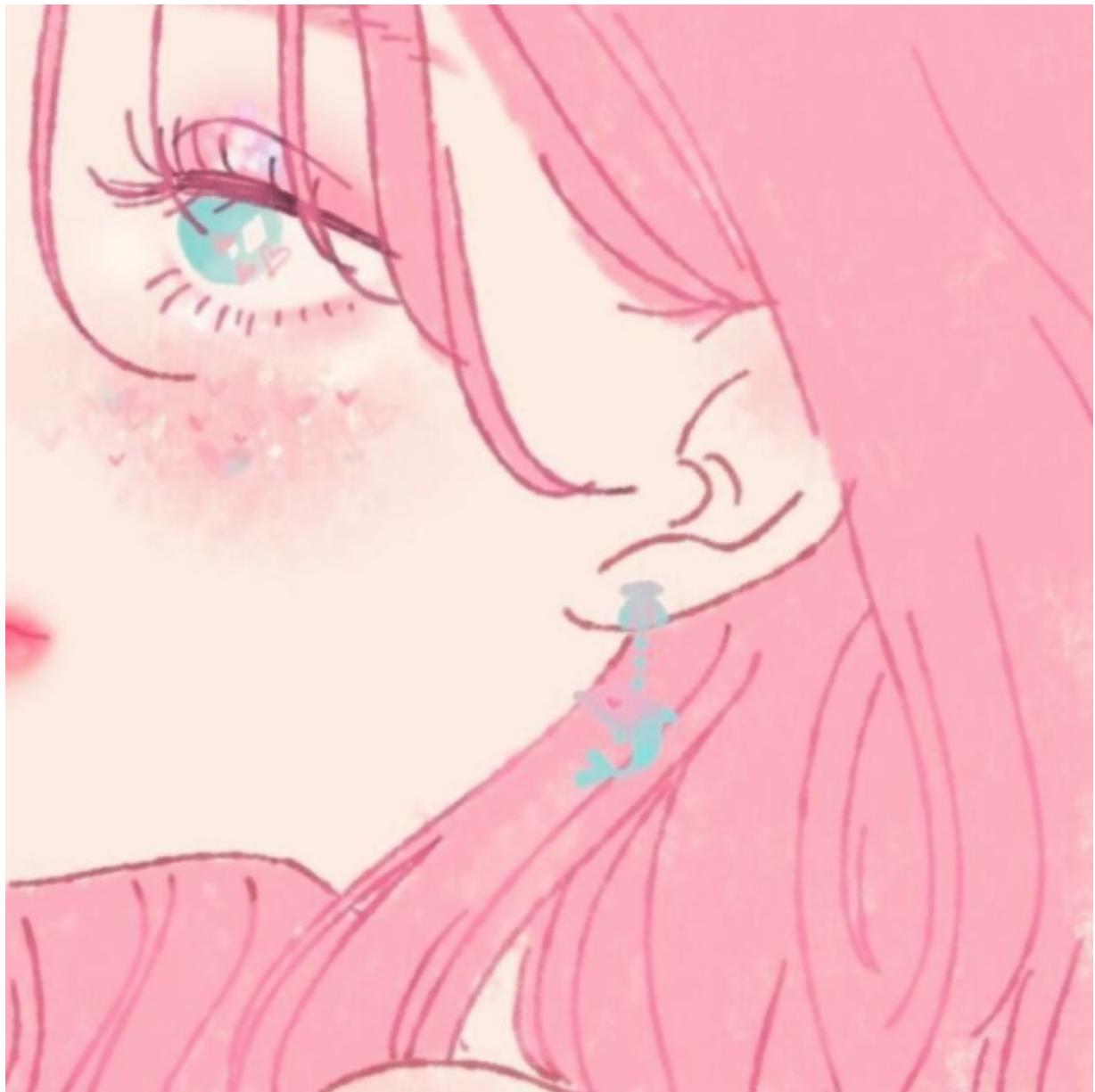
She hesitated a bit at that point but soon took it all off.

Her clothes lay scattered on the floor. And there Nicole stood, bare, in front of Raul.

“Come here.”

Raul commanded. Nicole approached him with a strange sense of fear and chilling tension.

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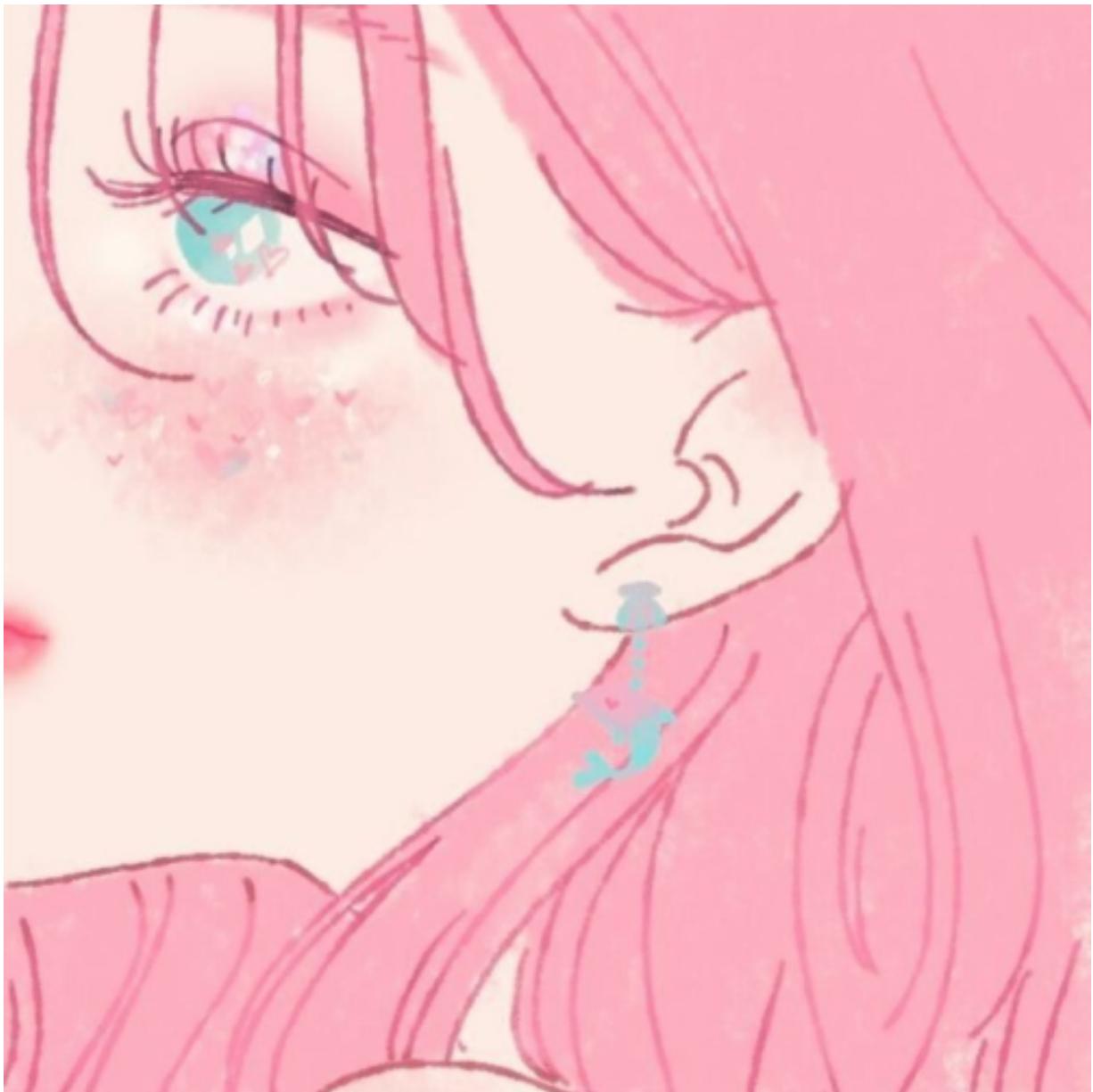


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# Chapter 95

“I’m going to punish you now.”

Raul said expressionlessly.

“You’re the first Sith to be directly punished by me. You can be proud. I didn’t know such a great talent would become my subordinate.”

At Raul’s sarcastic words, Nicole bowed her head.

And then Raul looked at the wall. Now that she sees it, there was a frame without glass hanging on one side of the living room wall.

In that frame, there were several horse-riding whips and thin swords decorated.

‘I should be prepared to be half dead.’

Nicole turned pale. But she didn’t think Raul’s punishment was harsh. Now Nicole has nothing to say even if she gets a solo at this moment.

“W, with what..... are you going to hit me?”

“Since you’re naked, I should whip you until your whole body turns red, right? Like dealing with a rude servant.”

At that answer, Nicole’s shoulders stiffened again.

“Can you endure it?”

“I’ll try to endure.”

At that, the corner of Raul’s mouth seemed to rise.

“Relax your body.”

Raul said. Nicole did as she was told. Raul pulled Nicole’s wrist and made her lie on his lap.

“Know that you’re lucky to be punished this much.”

Raul whispered without any hesitation, which was creepy enough.

“I’m going to hit you ten times, so hold on well.”

*Slap!*

Raul’s palm hit Nicole’s buttocks. When Raul’s big hand hit her buttocks, Nicole’s body jerked.

“Wait, just a moment. This is.....”

She would rather have been hit with a tool. It didn’t hurt that much, but the shame was great.

“If you move, I’ll start all over again.”

Nicole held her breath. *Slap, slap!* His hand hit her buttocks again.

Every time Nicole’s white, pale buttocks were hit by Raul’s big, hot palm, they jiggled.

“Huek, heuk!”

Each time, Nicole squealed with a thin moan, squirming her waist. Strength kept going into the inside of her thighs, and a strange sensation came up. Before she knew it, Nicole was rubbing her lower body against Raul's firm thighs.

"Have you learned shame now?"

"Heuk, yes....."

Nicole nodded her head. Raul put his hand down.

"You can get up now."

As soon as Raul gave permission, Nicole quickly stood up. The tears she had barely held back dropped abruptly.

She was embarrassed by herself, who had excitedly received punishment like a naughty child on Raul's lap.

She wasn't even allowed to cover her own body. Nicole stood still, her arms stretched out neatly.

Being stripped and scolded in front of him was the punishment Raul gave to Nicole.

"There's nowhere to hit, so I can't even whip you. What on earth should I do for your next punishment? Should I tie you up naked to the pillar at the Sith headquarters?"

"No."

Nicole shook her head. She couldn't even imagine showing her naked body to anyone other than Raul.

"Please don't do that. Please punish me directly next time as well."

"You should make sure there's nothing to be punished for next time, right?"

Raul said as if it was absurd. At his words, Nicole blinked slowly.

*Why on earth do I become a fool in front of this man?*

"I'll try to never be punished again. Next time....."

"Yes, if there is a next time."

Raul replied.

"Do you understand the seriousness of this matter?"

"Yes, I understand the weight of what I have done."

The Sith were not just Raul's bodyguards, but also a secret society.

The core members of the secret society were the Shadows. Nicole was one of them. If their existence was revealed to the royal family even a little, they would be suspected.

In the first place, these groups were created by Raul to keep in check the political forces including the royal family.....

If one is exposed, the whole may have to be discarded. That's what agents are. That's what I learned at the training center.

So today, due to Nicole's ridiculous mistake, the entire Sith could have been blown away if something went wrong.

Raul's words that it was lucky to end like this were not an exaggeration.

At the same time, Nicole found something strange in Raul's scolding.

Raul seemed like someone who was chiding her, as if Nicole might not understand the seriousness of the matter because he had given her a small punishment and ended it.

'Like someone who wants to move on without giving a bigger punishment.'

Nicole thought. And then their eyes met again in the air.

This time, Raul's eyes were not cold. Unconsciously, Nicole took a step towards him.

"If it were someone else, they would be rolling around dead on my carpet by now."

Raul said. His body naturally leaned towards Nicole.

"Please forgive me."

"Do you know why I spared you?"

".....Because you want me to take responsibility and clean up this mess?"

"You know that's not all."

Nicole closed her mouth. She had kissed Raul... and soon they would do more. Raul was going to embrace her without hesitation, and he was looking forward to it.

Nicole's chest tightened. She couldn't even put on a single layer of clothing. Her nipples stood erect.

"Then get dressed and leave this room."

Nicole reflexively shook her head vigorously.

“No, no.”

“Then?”

Raul said, tilting his head even more towards Nicole.

“I still, want to beg.....”

Nicole said bravely. And the next moment. Nicole tightly closed her eyes.

*Whoosh.* In an instant, Raul lifted the naked Nicole onto the table. She looked at Raul in confusion with her wet eyes.

She felt like a fool for being attracted to him even in this situation.

Nicole lifted her chin and kissed Raul first. It was the first time she had initiated a kiss.

As soon as their lips touched, a small sigh escaped her lips. Raul grabbed Nicole’s arm and pulled her towards him.

“Oh, uh, huk.....”

*Tsup, tsup.*

One of Nicole’s legs wrapped around Raul’s waist. At Raul’s devouring kiss, Nicole shook her head from side to side.

Nicole’s golden hair was strewn across the table like a spider web. The lower half of Nicole’s body rubbed against Raul’s shirt.

She’s going to be swallowed up like this.

About the time she had this thought, Raul pulled away.

And then Raul bit Nicole's soft breast hard.

"Ah!"

Raul's lips left her. Looking down at her chest, marked with a round bite mark, Nicole wore a bewildered expression.

"Your tongue is clearly the most expensive thing in the world. Because it made me take on all this bothersome risk."

Raul said. He put his hand in Nicole's open mouth and lightly pulled it out.

"Just with this tongue."

Nicole moaned and shivered.

She hadn't even fully clung to him yet.

Nicole tried to raise her body and touch Raul's lower half. She had learned how to use her hands before.

"You're being punished, you. Did you think this would appease my anger?"

Nicole looked at Raul distantly with her slightly aggrieved blue eyes. Then she spoke softly.

"At least you seemed to enjoy it last time."

"You really didn't repent."

Raul said. He put his hand under Nicole's knee and lifted her leg sharply. And then he pressed her clitoris with his finger.

“Ah, Hmph!”

And Raul’s finger slowly came down, long stroking her vulva. His finger began to violently invade Nicole’s lower body, which was already soaked, making a squeaking sound.

“Huh, Ahh!”

In the end, Nicole had to lie down after reaching climax twice with just his fingers.

\*\*\*

Raul gave water to Nicole, who was almost half dehydrated. Nicole barely drank the water.

“The maids will be here soon, so take a bath.”

Raul said. He straightened his clothes.

“Now... what should I do? Can I return to the scene right away?”

Nicole asked, covering herself with a dress.

“Don’t leave this room for a day.”

Raul said.

“I said I would detain and investigate you, so you have to take responsibility for that.”

Nicole obediently nodded her head.

\*\*\*

That night passed strangely.

Raul said he had to go out again and left. Nicole was left alone in Raul's penthouse.

Nicole went into the large bathroom attached to the bedroom. The luxurious bathroom decorated with marble had a large mirror framed in gold.

In such a high-end hotel, every room usually had water facilities. Nicole took a bath with warm water. Only then did she finally relax. When she came out, new pajamas were prepared. And there was food on the living room table.

'Even while being punished, he still takes care of my meals, should I be thankful?'

Raul.

That man has a generous side in strange places.

Nicole laughed bitterly. It was a day when she was severely scolded and felt embarrassed.

But... she was sure that Raul had looked at her. Was he really not interested in her?

Nicole ate the figs that were on the plate. They were quite sweet.

After a light meal, Nicole sorted out her thoughts.

'But if I'm to spend the night here, where should I sleep?'

Nicole looked around the room.

Indeed it was Raul's space, his frequently used items were placed in the bathroom and the wardrobe.

'You must have spent a lot of time in this room in your past life.'

Nicole found his private life, which she had just learned about, fascinating. Soon a wave of fatigue hit her.

'Is it because the effect of the anesthesia is still there?'

She sat on the sofa and eventually dozed off.

\*\*\*

When Nicole opened her eyes again, she heard someone moving. She, who had been curled up on the sofa, quickly got up.

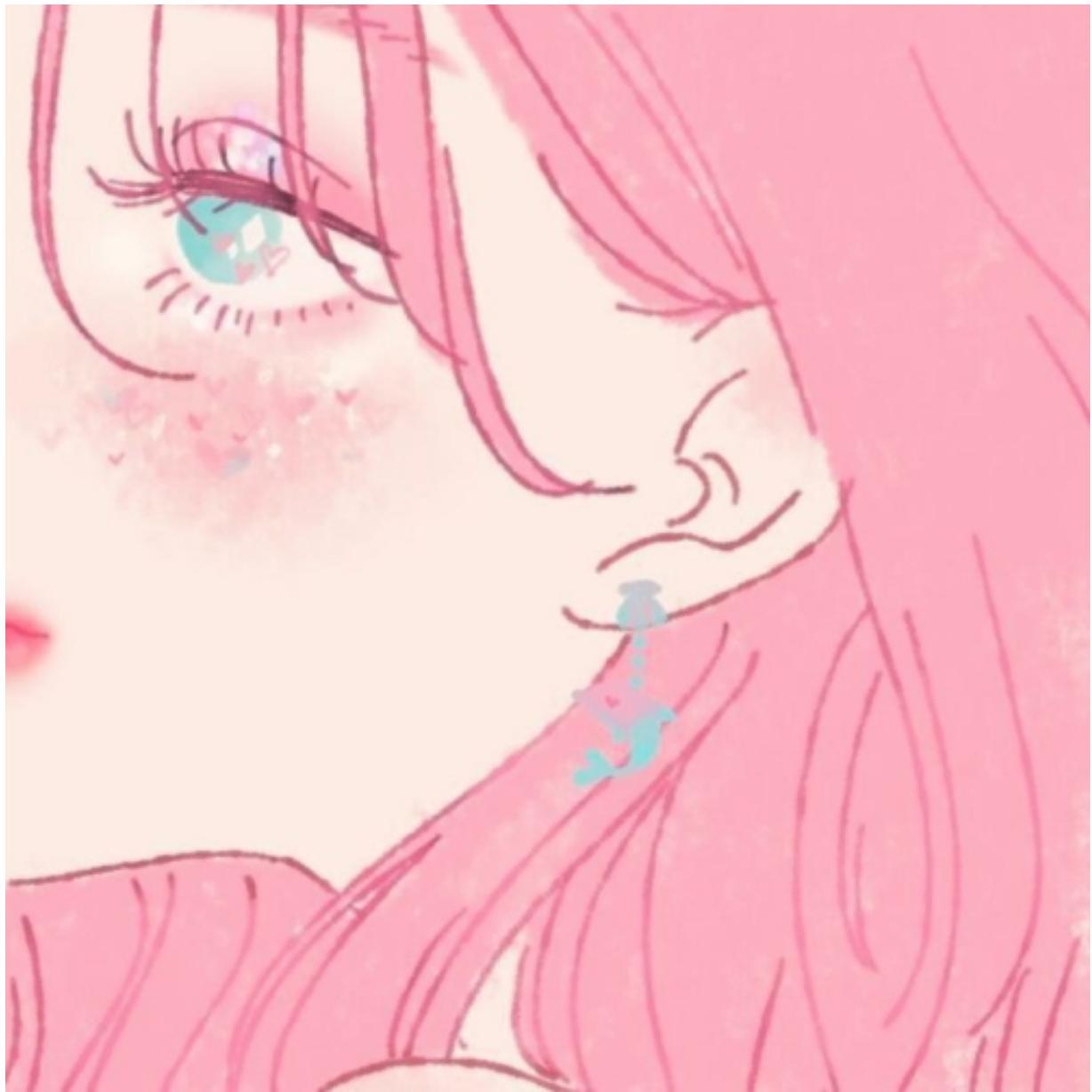
The sound was coming from the bedroom. Nicole cautiously headed there.

Raul was taking off his jacket in the bedroom.

"Are you going to keep standing there?"

Raul, holding his jacket in one hand, turned his head.

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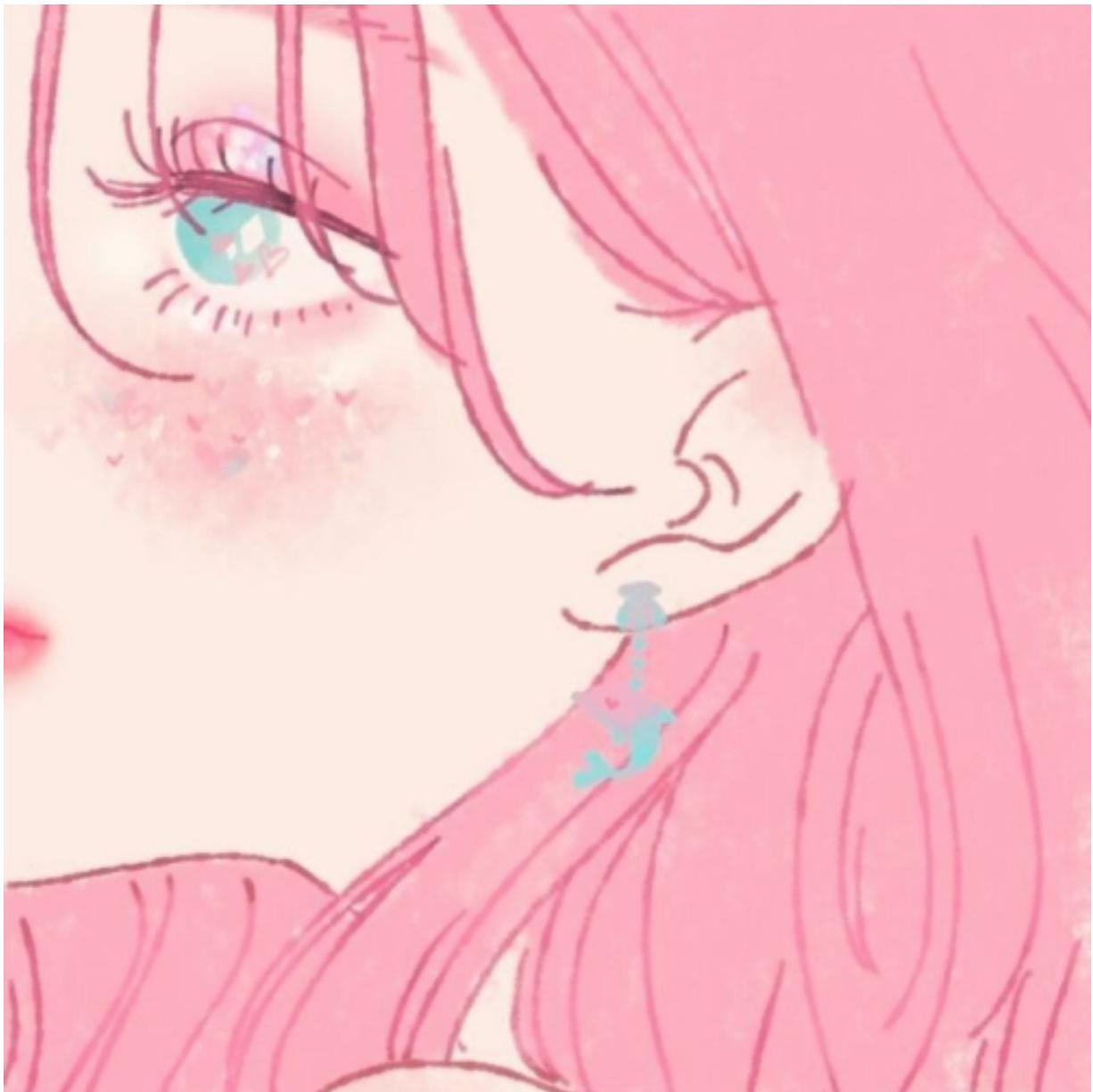


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# Chapter 96

“You’re back.”

Nicole took a few steps towards him and took Raul’s coat.

Nicole thought back to her childhood. Whenever her father returned from a long trip, her mother would always take his coat and prepare warm water for him.

‘I wish I could have welcomed you like this sometimes when I was your wife.’

Nicole felt a pang of regret at the thought.

What bothered her the most was the memory that surfaced when she was attacked by Isabel.

The memory of something unknown called a Glassworm.

‘Surely there were good memories with Raul in my past life. But I can’t remember any of them.’

Surely Isabel’s scheme was also there.

Nicole silently watched Raul unbutton his shirt.

Raul looked down at her in the dim light.

“I’ve reflected a lot.”

Nicole said softly.

"Really. I won't make such a foolish mistake again."

She was sincere. She would not make such a mistake filled with coincidences, even if she were reckless.

To achieve what she wanted, she had to be meticulous and cool-headed. Raul looked at her in silence.

"Wait for me, I'll be back after a bath."

As Raul took off his shirt, his perfectly toned body and muscles were revealed. Despite being dawn, he seemed slightly sweaty. Nicole felt a jolt in her belly at his masculine scent.

There was a small dressing room in the bedroom. Nicole went into the dressing room.

There were numerous medals on Raul's jacket. She looked at each one and hung it on the wall.

And when she came out of the dressing room, Raul was there in his robe.

Nicole lost herself for a moment looking at his wet figure.

"I didn't know you would come back."

"I have to fix what you've done."

Raul said indifferently.

"And it worked out well."

Nicole felt sorry again. Before she could say anything, Raul spoke.

"You're fearlessly in my bedroom."

“I was going to sleep on the sofa.”

Raul looked down at her. He gestured for Nicole to come, and lightly brushed her hair back.

“So where are you going to sleep now?”

His tone became slightly tender. The thing she had been putting off. Allowing him to have her body till the end.....

The thing he said he wouldn’t wait long for.

“Not today.”

Nicole felt the dryness in her mouth as she summoned her self-control.

“What a pity. It was an opportunity to completely vent my remaining anger.”

Raul spoke expressionlessly. But contrary to his words, he placed his hand on Nicole’s waist and pulled her towards him.

Before she knew it, Nicole found herself pressed tightly against his body. The pajamas provided by the hotel were too thin, and the night was quite chilly, making her shiver.

“Later... I want to do it when it’s a reward, not a punishment. So I won’t regret it.”

Raul swallowed. He gripped Nicole’s waist tightly, as if trying to exercise restraint.

His grip was so strong that Nicole let out a small gasp.

“It’s a ridiculous situation. I was supposed to dispose of you today, but instead of cutting your throat, I can’t even tear

this one piece of pajamas."

Raul said.

"So it's quite a regrettable situation for me."

Raul muttered. Nicole looked at him in surprise.

Nicole now knew how to scrutinize Raul's emotions quite sharply. He was truly confused.

Because of herself, not someone else—

Realizing this, Nicole's ears turned red.

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't want to hear an apology."

Raul said.

"You're the one who's confusing me. And that's not a good sign."

Nicole mustered the courage to take Raul's hand.

"I will be someone who helps you, Grand Duke. Definitely..."

Nicole pledged to herself.

She would help him achieve what he wanted in this life. She would prevent him from being forced into a marriage with the princess.

She wanted to make him happy. Just as she didn't know Raul in her past life, she wanted to know him in this life.

Then she would cleanly leave him.

“What about a kiss?”

Raul leaned in.

“I can’t resist sucking on your lips right now.”

Nicole nodded.

“.....I want to too.....”

“You’re driving me crazy, really.”

Raul chuckled lightly. He lifted Nicole in his arms and placed her on the bed in one go. Nicole looked at him with wide eyes.

His lips immediately covered hers. Nicole wrapped her arms around his neck and they shared a deep, passionate kiss. Their tongues entwined intensely, and it felt thrilling.

“Hmm, ah.....”

Raul moved his head to Nicole’s neck. It sent chills down her spine. Every cell in her body reacted sharply to his touch. Her thighs naturally rubbed against each other.

Raul reached out and hurriedly slipped his hand under Nicole’s pajamas. The hand that was stroking her thigh slowly touched the strap of her underwear.

Nicole looked into his eyes while holding his chin with her hand. She shook her head, meaning ‘no’. It was a refusal like a promise to herself. In fact, she wanted him more than anything else.

“How about this?”

Raul whispered something into Nicole's ear. At his words, Nicole, with widened eyes, thought for a moment and then nodded.

Having received permission, Raul slowly undid his pants. His large member sprang out. An organ she still couldn't get used to. Nicole was nervous at the sight of the monstrous and large thing that contrasted with his handsome face.

"It's going to sting a bit."

Raul said.

He stripped Nicole's underwear down to her calves. Then he admired the plump vulva and faint pubic hair that were revealed, with her thighs tightly closed.

Next, he found a tie at the head of the bed. It was what he had worn today. He used it to tie Nicole's legs together.

"Ah....."

Nicole wondered if she was becoming a pervert. She was actually excited today when Raul had spanked her palm. And she felt a strange feeling when she was tied up by him.

"Don't be nervous."

He soothed, gently stroking Nicole's cheek. Nicole blinked in affirmation.

Raul turned Nicole's body halfway to the side. He inserted his erect member, which looked like it was about to burst, between her thighs, which were tightly closed in her turned position.

Then he began to move his body back and forth without mercy.

*Thump, thump. Slick, slick.*

Raul's erect member rubbed ruthlessly and slipped between Nicole's white and soft thighs.

Each time he thrust roughly, his stiff member bumped against Nicole's folds. And each time his phallic-like organ rubbed over her clitoris, her lower abdomen quivered.

"Uh, ah....."

Nicole made a whining sound in confusion as she felt her own honey pot overflowing with sticky love juices. The inside of her vagina was itchy and the pressure kept building.

Soon after, Raul changed his position, placing Nicole's ankles in his hands and lifting them up.

He slid his hands down, holding her calves, and thrust his member more deeply and roughly between Nicole's thighs.

Nicole reflexively tightened her thighs. Her fair and tender thigh skin swelled up bright red. Nicole could no longer restrain herself and gripped the sheets tightly.

She wanted him. That was the thought that came to her in that moment. Raul's eyes, soaked in intense desire, were staring exactly at Nicole.

"Pull up your clothes."

Raul said coldly. At his command, Nicole felt even more strange.

As she rolled up her nightgown, her white breasts were exposed.

Raul closed his eyes as he looked at Nicole to the end. A groaning moan came out of his mouth and a large amount of semen was deposited on Nicole's white belly.

"Haah, haah....."

Nicole, not knowing what to do with the heat, looked at Raul.

Raul, straightening his clothes, brought a silk towel and wiped Nicole's belly. She was still breathing, dotted with tension and excitement.

Each time a hot breath flowed out, her perky nipples and white lower belly slowly rose and fell.

Raul, who was savoring the sight in front of him, spoke affectionately.

"Want to lie down?"

Nicole did so. Raul slowly looked at Nicole's back as she lay down. She became shy and barely turned her head to glance at Raul.

"It's red here from being hit, and now it's swollen up to here."

Raul caressed Nicole's thighs with his fingertips.

As he said, today her buttocks were worth seeing with Raul's handprints on them, and the inside of her thighs were all swollen up as if they were scraped. It was like a colorful autumn leaf.

“You don’t like to see it?”

“No.”

Raul said lazily.

“I like to see it. It’s pretty.”

Nicole thought to herself. This man might break her someday.

Right now, Nicole was not his wife. At best, she was a candidate for a wife. She was someone who didn’t need to be cherished or protected.

But Nicole was drawn to him. Sometimes to the point of feeling choked up.

“I don’t want it to be just painful. “

Nicole said in a small voice.

“I’ll keep that in mind. “

Raul said jokingly, smiling with his eyes.

He got into the bed. His heavy and large body took over the space under the blanket. Nicole also lay down facing him, pulling down her nightgown.

“.....I’ll sleep on the sofa. Just a bit..... I’ll rest.”

Nicole said quietly.

“Do as you wish.”

Raul said, closing his eyes.

But contrary to his words, Raul pulled Nicole close to him. Before she knew it, Nicole was lying in his arms, facing him.

"Move after I fall asleep."

Raul said. Nicole, who was lost in observing Raul's face, slowly replied with a yes.

Were this man's eyes always this deep? So this is what his eyelashes look like.

Nicole realizes that his mesmerizingly beautiful face has unexpected curves when looked at closely.

Then Raul tightened his grip around Nicole's waist, pulling her body closer to him. He gently held the back of Nicole's head and pulled her towards him.

Now Nicole could hear his heartbeat. She could feel his firm chest against her cheek.

'It would have been nice if I could have been in your arms like this in my past life.'

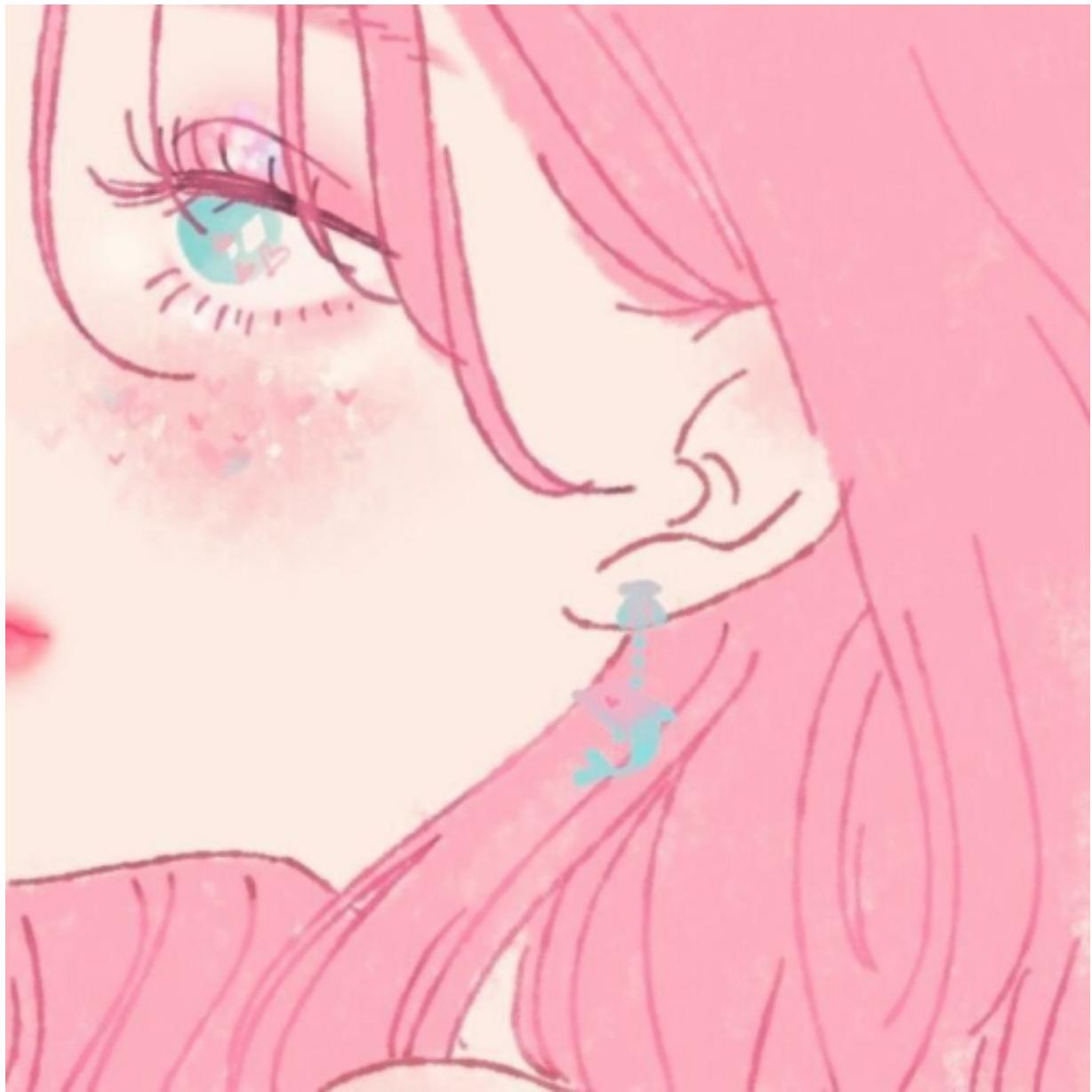
But strangely, Nicole felt overwhelmed. Her eyes had been stimulated since earlier.

It didn't have to be a touch just for pleasure. She just wanted to stay in his arms like this..... for a little longer.

'I wish this man would fall asleep a little later.'

And Nicole wished that time would pass slowly. She let out a small breath. Her secret wish melted into the deep night.

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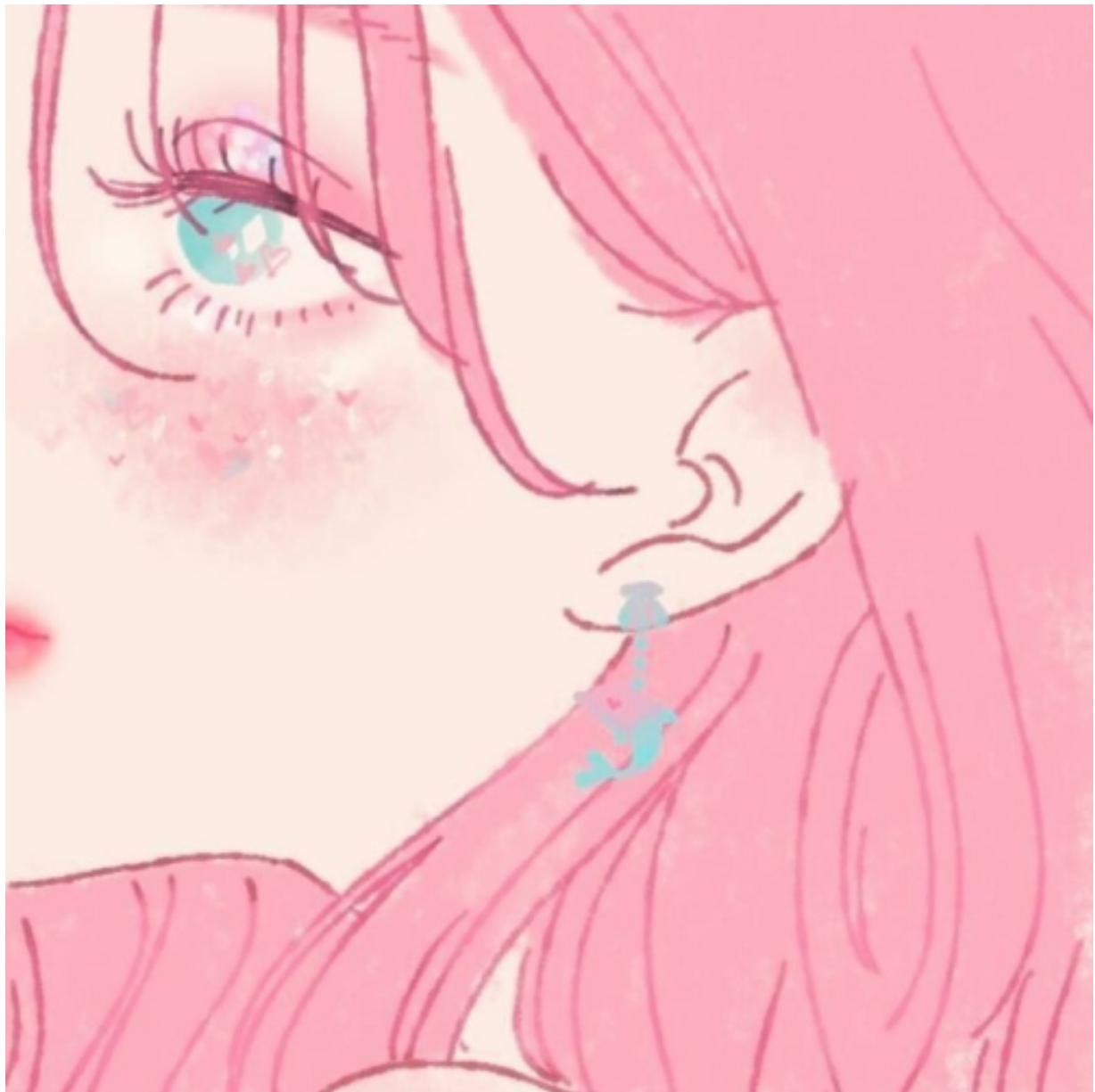


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# Chapter 97

Nicole woke up at dawn.

*Tap, tap.* Something was rattling on the window. Nicole got up from her spot.

'I fell asleep in Raul's bed.'

Her heart dropped. His side of the bed was empty.

'Where did Raul go?'

Nicole looked out the window. The outside was shrouded in a dense fog, making it impossible to tell the time.

She looked at the clock in the room, and it was already dawn. Nicole put on a robe. Suddenly, she thought she saw a figure flickering on the balcony beyond the curtain.

Nicole went outside.

"Didn't you sleep?"

When Nicole asked softly, Raul turned around.

There was a faint gas lamp lit on the balcony, and his broad shoulders were visible in its glow.

"Go inside."

Nicole was barefoot in the robe. Raul, who had glanced at her shabby attire, spoke coldly.

It seemed like dawn was breaking, but the morning light could not be seen due to the dense fog.

Instead of going inside, Nicole took a step towards him.

“Why are you here, Grand Duke?”

Raul stared into the void again. In the Empire, a floating object, a flame, was drifting through the fog. Today was a day when the flame floated unusually high.

“I was watching that.”

Raul said. Nicole took one more step towards him. Now, the two of them were standing side by side in front of the railing.

“It’s just a flame, isn’t it?”

The flame is a common sight in the Empire, often floating in the air, slightly more noticeable than the fog. Other than that, it had no particular characteristics. Even the so-called scholars couldn’t figure out what caused the flame. And no one in the capital was curious or amazed by it.

“Yeah, it’s nothing.”

Raul reached out and touched the flame. It sparked a small flame at his fingertips.

Nicole’s eyes widened. It was the first time she had seen the flame react to something.

“How did you do that?”

“It reacts when I touch it. It’s been that way since I was a kid. That’s all.”

“.....”

Was it because he was indeed the most special power holder in the Empire? Nicole found him fascinating.

“What’s with that look?”

“Just... To me, you seem more fascinating than this flame.”

Nicole thought the words she had blurted out sounded a bit stupid. And she was satisfied. She thought it was a remark quite fitting for her current identity as Karen.

“Now you’re even treating your master as a clown. And you’re not even dying of guilt. Even after being scolded like that.”

“But you were in a good mood last night.”

Nicole said quietly. Raul faintly smiled.

“The real ‘good mood’ hasn’t even started yet.”

Nicole worried her face would turn red again. She pretended not to hear Raul’s words.

“Let’s talk about work. How’s the target?”

Raul said lightly.

“Nothing special. It seems the state of the charity isn’t very good. It looks like Lady Lisbeth is blatantly embezzling charity funds. So, issues like operation corruption can be exposed quickly.”

“The royal family would know that much.”

Nicole nodded, knowing this. In fact, Lady Lisbeth's behavior has been famous since her past life. The words of the fallen royal family tended to attract people's interest.

Lady Lisbeth harshly extorted donations from middle-class women who admired the royal family and made connections.

“But it wouldn't hurt to have it exposed, so if there's double accounting, I'll get it.”

“If you want to bring her down, bring a definite weakness.”

“I understand.”

Nicole said quietly.

“To bring down a person in power, corruption or embezzlement won't do. I told you during the time of Marquis Saratheve. Besides, Lady Lisbeth is of royal status, so she can't be touched by just anything.

For example, devil worship, blasphemy, and drug-related crimes that are completely prohibited by the royal family.

And treason.

Those were the crimes that could decisively bring down an opponent.

The wind blew. Raul's black hair swayed lightly. Nicole stared at his captivating figure.

“In the end, Marquis Saratheve died absurdly. As if someone had a hand in it from behind.”

Nicole closed her mouth, feeling embarrassed.

“.....I’ve already been reprimanded for that matter. Don’t suspect me anymore. And don’t punish me here.....”

Raul chuckled again. Nicole felt like she had seen more smiles from Raul now than all the smiles she had seen in her previous life.

“You’re a really strange woman.”

Raul said after staring at Nicole for a while.

“You approach me even though you’re afraid of me. You do everything you can.”

Raul said.

“And the part about you that I find most puzzling is—”

Nicole held her breath and waited for Raul’s next words.

“If I wanted to, I could make sure you never see the light of the world again. I can do everything you refuse to do, and I can easily tear the pajamas you’re wearing now.”

Raul said. He spoke sweetly. Nicole knew this, so she shivered slightly.

“But you didn’t do that. And you won’t.”

“That’s what I find most puzzling. Our Miss Karen, you are too naive to trust a man. Haven’t you been through some hardships in life?”

Nicole knew that Raul’s light mockery was just a meaningless joke as usual.

And it wasn't wrong to say that Karen had really grown up in a harsh environment. But for some reason, she was upset.

"You sometimes have an expression like a child who knows nothing. It doesn't match. The environment you grew up in, and you."

Nicole was now used to Raul's boastful words. Her husband was always like this.

"Would it be good if I behaved rudely? Wouldn't the Grand Duke want a possession with at least some dignity?"

"Don't you know I'm not just talking about the attitude of a subordinate?"

Nicole closed her mouth.

"And you're not just a simple subordinate, since you have slept in my bed."

"Aren't there many women who have passed through your bed? Everyone wants you....."

"Do not exaggerate. You're cheeky."

Raul lifted Nicole's chin. He looked at Nicole carefully again. Nicole had no choice but to be nervous in case he hit her buttocks again.

"I don't bring just any woman to my bed."

"....."

"Let me tell you something. My biological mother, the late Grand Duchess, was of noble status. But that was it, and she was from a poor rural noble family. She was lucky to

marry my father just because she was a descendant of a fallen prestigious family.”

“.....What kind of person was she in terms of character or reputation?”

“No one would know that.”

Raul said.

“Since she never went outside freely after marrying my father, no one in the social circle knew who she was.”

The late Grand Duke had confined the Grand Duchess.

Raul said this as if it was nothing. Nicole realized what he meant.

“Why did he do such a thing?”

“My father thought that the best love was to make my mother a person suitable for the dignity of the nobility and to establish her in the high nobility society - to make her a member of the noble society. He tried to control every single action of my mother’s life. He was a weirdo, even though he was my father.”

“And.....”

“She lived a suffocating life and passed away when I was young. My father treated me like homework left by my mother. If I hadn’t resembled my mother, he would have left me alone, whether I lived or died.”

“But I heard that the previous Duke valued you greatly.”

“That’s because I resembled my mother. I realized it when I grew up. That person expressed love through control and

restraint."

Everyone in the social circle said the same thing. That Raul was just like his father.

And Nicole also lived confined by Raul towards the end of her previous life's marriage.

'Children unconsciously imitate their parents' way of life.'

Nicole thought about this.

*So was that Raul's love? Did he love me?*

'But he didn't lock me up because he was ashamed or hated me. Having grown up seeing how his father treated his mother, was that his way of protecting his wife?'

Moreover, Nicole in her previous life suffered from mental illness and acted out. So Raul would have had no choice but to confine her.

She hated and misunderstood Raul all her previous life. But in this life, just by sleeping a few hours by his side, Raul became sincere to her.

Now she could understand him to some extent. Nicole in her previous life never did that.

"Everyone says my father is a weirdo, but I understand him. Except for one stupid choice he made."

"What was that stupid choice?"

"If he wanted to monopolize the woman he loves, he should not have made her a Grand Duchess. If the Grand Duchess disappears, everyone will look for her. There are many who wouldn't do that, you know. Isn't that right?"

"You're teasing me."

Nicole said.

"Such cruel jokes should be reserved for lovers or wives."

"You shouldn't treat them like that, a lover or a wife."

*So, am I someone who can be treated like that now?*

Nicole thought a little gloomily. She wasn't really hurt by Raul's bad words. Anyway, Nicole trusted Raul.

This person was not someone who would abandon and kill her.

"Then instead of treating me like that, just give me one truth. I'm curious about something."

Nicole asked in a soft voice.

"You... You don't want to marry the princess, do you?"

Raul nodded his head.

"Then, is the reason you're not looking for another bride because of the royal family? Because the royal family would interfere no matter who you bring as a wife."

"I had a fiancée. Above all, shouldn't that engagement be prioritized?"

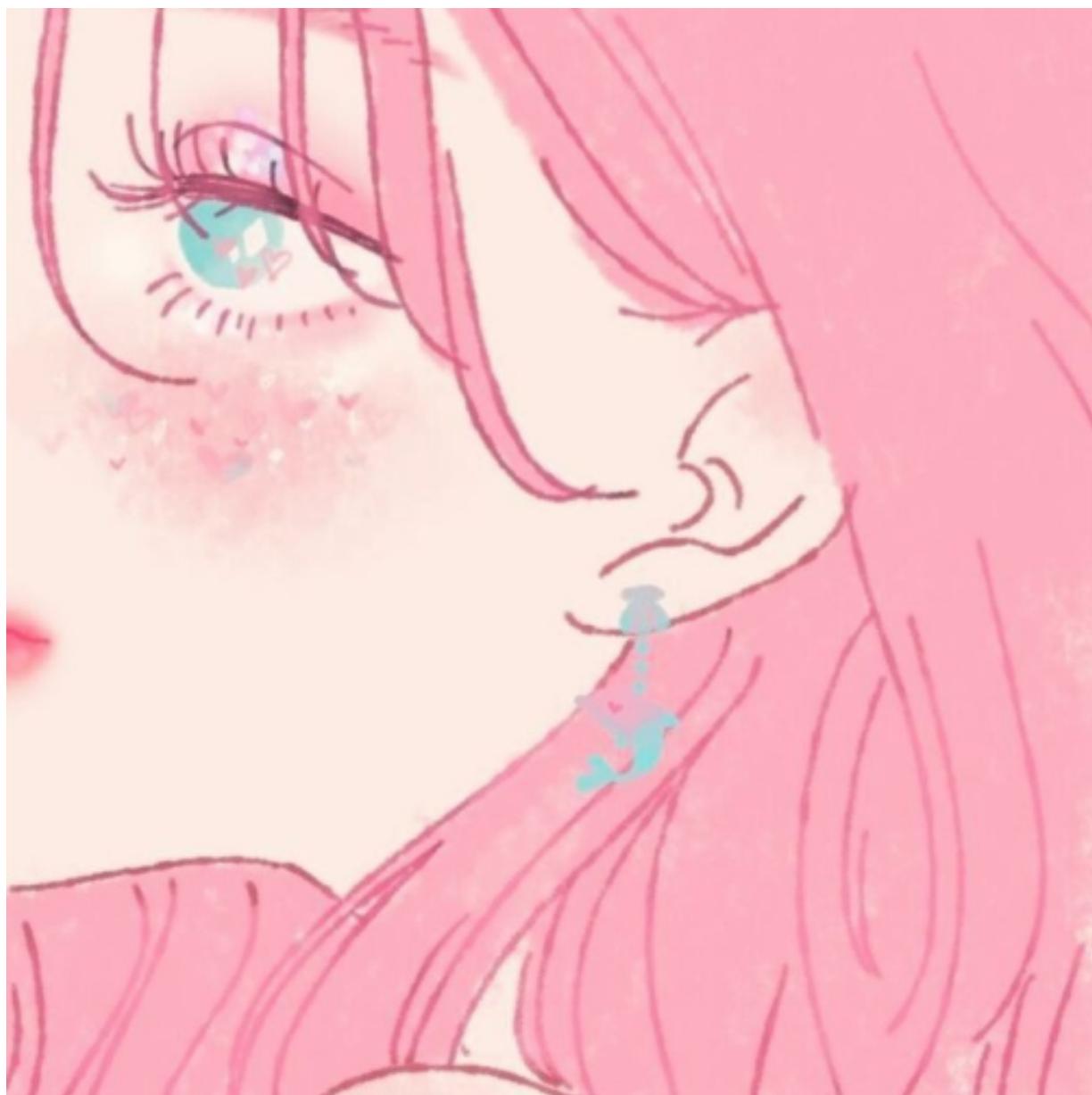
Raul said. Raul was talking about the eldest daughter of the YvesChapel family, who he believed to be dead.

"What if the daughter of the YvesChapel family is alive?"

She calmly stared at Raul. This time, she did not look away from Raul.

"If that woman is alive, no matter what state she is in, are you going to marry her?"

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# Chapter 98

In the thick dawn fog, Nicole gazed at Raul.

Raul found it most intriguing when Nicole had such a look in her eyes.

Like a frightened rabbit, she'd flinch, but in an instant, her eyes became calm to the point of severity. It seemed that within their depths hid a faint madness and even intelligence.

"My fiancée died in a fire. It was a regrettable death."

"What if that woman were alive? And she turned out to be less than expected? Foolish, greedy, or perhaps already a criminal... A person who has fallen to the bottom?"

Raul leaned toward her, this time meeting her eyes precisely.

"The Grand Duchess I need is a woman who will hold her position silently. A woman who could cause problems cannot become the Grand Duchess."

"But it's an imperial command. What if the marriage must happen regardless?"

"She must be killed. Or made to be in a position where she has no choice but to die."

Raul said.

“Even if a descendant of YvesChapel is alive, the royal family would kill her if she doesn’t marry me.”

Raul spoke coldly.

“And you are crossing the line again now.”

“...I’m sorry. I was just... curious. I didn’t mean to insolently interfere with my master’s marital affairs.”

Nicole’s eyes became docile again.

“Anyway, you have quite the nerve, Karen. Your skill in apologizing seems to be the only thing improving.”

Nicole flicked her lips. She has a habit of nibbling her lips slightly when she’s in trouble.

“Shall I kiss you to lighten your mood?”

Raul’s lips curled up despite himself, and at the same time, he fell into an even more confused state.

He hadn’t intended to, but in an instant, he only thought about pushing Nicole against the railing and undressing her nightgown.

This woman induced a kind of regression in him. She made him a child swayed by desires.

“Portia, you have no talent for jokes.”

“Don’t call me by that name.”

She said, strangely embarrassed.

Then Raul noticed her trembling shoulders.

Eventually, Raul closed the window and went into the room. Then she followed Raul into the room as well.

“Lie down.”

“Right now?”

She tensed up a bit.

“You’ll lie down alone. It’s time for me to enter the imperial palace now.”

Her nose turned a little red. The usual morning royal audience was at 9 o’clock, and Raul sometimes went to his quarters in the palace from 7 in the morning.

She wiggled into the blankets as instructed.

“Shall I help you dress?”

“Don’t do anything and just lie down. I have plenty of troubles even without you.”

“What troubles?”

Raul took off his robe. His well-built back muscles moved. He turned his head to look at Nicole.

“Why, will you solve it for me?”

“...That’s my job, isn’t it.”

“Thanks, but it’s impossible. How could you single-handedly apprehend the drug organizations that are a thorn in my side?”

“Drugs...?”

“Stay away from nightlife for a while. Pubs and social places where women often go are off-limits too. Drugs are circulating in the back streets of the capital.”

Raul said as he put on his shirt, speaking offhandedly.

“They are like worms entwined in an apple, eating away at this capital.”

“Dealing drugs isn’t something new, right?”

“There have always been those selling cheap hallucinogens. The problem is the free cities a day’s sail away. The drugs flowing from there are too addictive.”

The drug dealers settled in the capital now. They were a kind of criminal organization. In other words, they were organized like an army.

The capital was in overall turmoil due to the emergence of this new cartel.

“Do you have an army then? Just apprehend them.”

“It’s not easy. Moreover, those guys don’t hide. If money is involved, they’ll go after nobles or anyone. And there are forces protecting those organizations too.”

Raul gazed into space for a moment and frowned.

“Once drugs spread in human civilization, they can’t be controlled. Many ancient kingdoms have perished because of hallucinogens.”

Nobles are fundamentally educated from childhood on patriotism. Loyalty to the royal family, and a heart to protect the people....

However, Raul's sense of responsibility did not seem to be merely a product of education.

She propped herself up on her arms and inclined her body slightly.

"It's fascinating."

"What is?"

"That the Grand Duke is bothered by such matters. You could enjoy your position, yet you choose not to."

Ah, she's doing this again.

Raul was slightly displeased. When Karen began to speak, he would find himself staring at her as if drawn in, as if the world's focus was on her.

She is not the right woman. She might be a plaything, but she must not step into his world.

But even this time, he inadvertently revealed a bit of his inner thoughts.

"Who knows whose country it will become."

"Pardon?"

"Get dressed properly and go out. Don't go home until the person who will take you comes. When it's deemed safe enough, you'll go to the facility of Duchess Lisbeth."

Raul said. He buttoned up his shirt. Now it's time to change clothes, wash, and return to being the original Grand Duke.

When a man of Raul's status meets a woman of Karen's status.

It cannot be love. In the world he grew up in, such feelings are barely exchanged even among nobles. Karen can be a mistress, nothing more.

Knowing this, Raul still approached Karen. She was a woman he had never embraced before.

Yet, she who became the first woman to take his bed sat down. She blinked as if troubled for a moment.

And then she lightly kissed Raul's lips.

"Take care. Next time, I'll have good news for you."

Raul saw Nicole's earlobes slightly redden as she feigned calmness.

Raul smiled with his eyes. He was not displeased.

He quite wanted to bring this woman to his bed frequently. Her contradiction, not fitting the environment he grew up in, pleased him quite a bit.

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In the dim dawn, under the floating flame, Bastard was standing in front of the carriage waiting for Raul.

As Raul approached, Bastard lowered his voice and whispered.

"It seems the Crown Prince continues to look for Miss Karen. I don't know why."

"It's probably for some ridiculous reason."

Karen, the moment she emerged from the pile of flowers. She spoke in a soft voice to the frenzied Crown Prince.

Raul was a bit distant at that moment, so he did not know what was said. There were knights planted close to the Crown Prince, but none of Raul's people

"Just say I took her to a hotel. That she spent the night in my room."

"What? You have never done that before. People will gossip and speculate about Miss Karen."

In social circles, Raul's standing and popularity were unrivaled. The man whom no one had conquered brought a woman of unknown identity, prepared by Duchess Lisbeth, into his room for one night. It would be quite troublesome if rumors spread.

"Let them talk. If I don't, she might be taken by the Crown Prince. He wouldn't dare touch what I have claimed first."

Crown Prince Martes becomes obsessive about things he lacks. It would be the worst-case scenario for Karen to fall into the royal family's clutches.

Bastard, knowing the situation, nodded as if there were no other choice.

"That surely seems to be a way to protect Miss Karen, but later on..."

Karen might rise high as a member of Sith in the future. Then, Raul might eventually marry her off.

That implied that her reputation was of some importance.

"Reputation is not needed for Sith. This is not a finishing school for noble ladies."

Raul spoke languidly. He climbed into the carriage. As Bastard was about to follow, Raul gestured to him.

"Stay here, and when she wakes up, take her home. And watch to see that she gets inside safely. She's a woman who's unpredictable."

"Miss Karen...?"

"Why that look?"

Bastard concealed his confusion and bowed his head. However, he was still inwardly flustered.

Bastard actually thought that Raul might kill Karen. She had caused that much trouble.

But instead of killing her, to escort her? Bastard had never been tasked with such a duty before.

It was like serving someone who might be his master's woman.

\*\*\*

Nicole slept for a little more than two hours. The hotel staff sent new clothes and food for her.

She had no appetite, so she just drank a cup of tea and pretended to eat the food. Then someone knocked.

"I'm glad you're alive."

To her surprise, it was Bastard who entered. Nicole was bewildered. Why was Raul's close associate here?

"The person who was supposed to escort me today..."

“Yes, I will escort you home. A lot happened yesterday, after all.”

“But then, wouldn’t that expose my relationship with the Grand Duke to the public eye?”

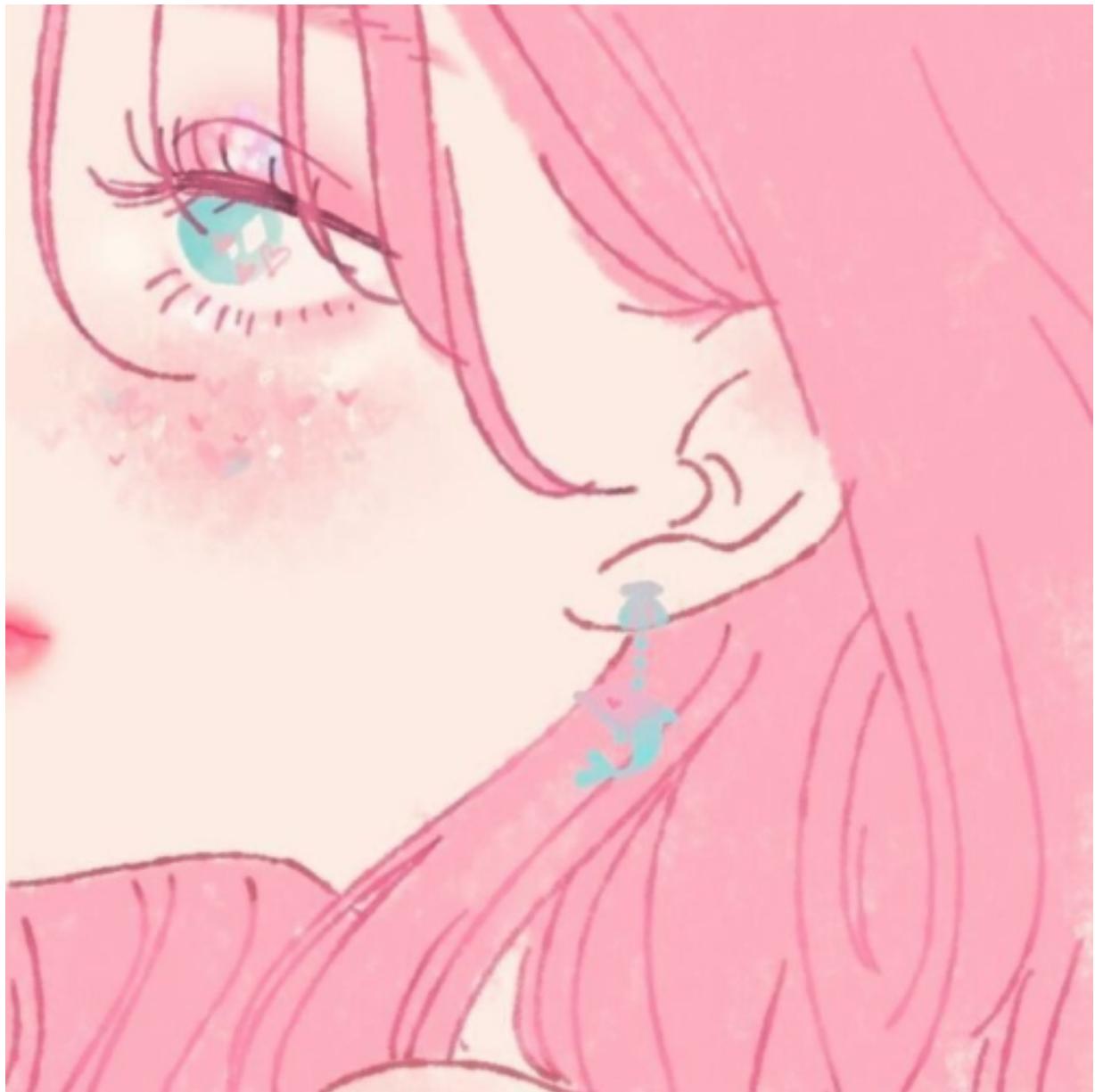
Nicole was puzzled by the situation.

“It’s already been exposed.”

Bastard said quietly.

“Maybe this will turn into a bigger issue, but you’ll have to accept that...”

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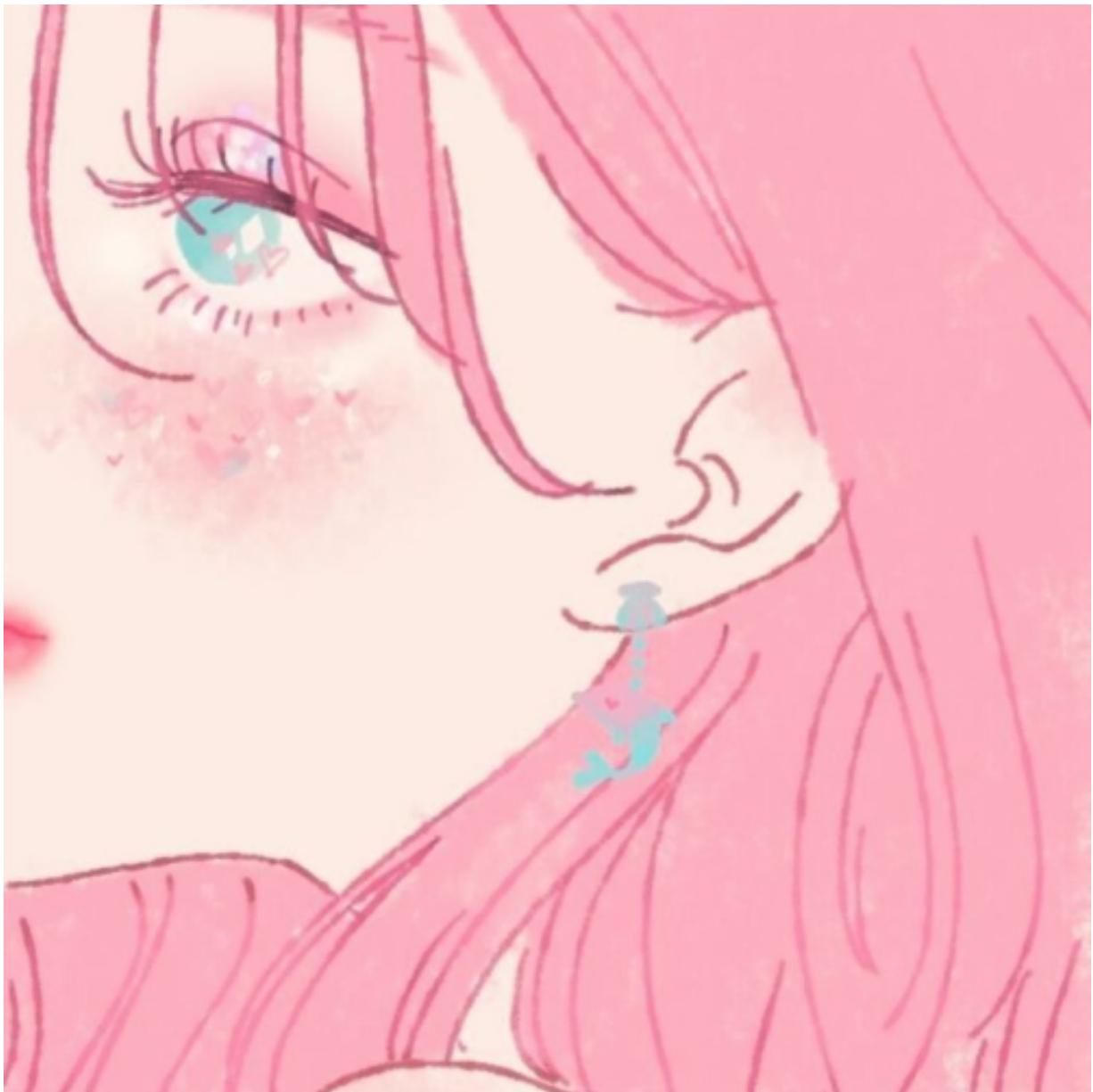


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# Chapter 99

Bastard respectfully said to Nicole,

“Miss Karen, your face has been exposed to the royal family. You won’t be able to continue working while changing your identity as before.”

“Yes, I’m prepared for it.”

“Your current identity is a noblewoman living alone in the capital. You will live with that identity for a very long time. The disguised identity will soon become Miss Karen’s life. And.....”

Bastard said,

“You will also become acquainted with the Grand Duke.”

Nicole nodded her head. It was all as expected from last night.

‘Did I in my past life know that things would turn out this way.’

Nicole briefly fell into contemplation.

‘My memories from my past life are not accurate because I suffered from severe depression and mental illness until my death.’

But I realized it when I was attacked by Isabel this time.

That I am distorting some memories and forgetting a lot.  
And that those things often suddenly come to mind in this life.

"Let's get going, the carriage is waiting."

"Yes."

The two went down the stairs without a word. At that moment, Nicole felt a strange premonition.

'I feel like I'm missing something about Bastard.'

There have been so many confusing things since yesterday.  
I also met a child named Aru. I have to find her again.....

Suddenly, Nicole recalled her past life memories again.

It was a memory of a bustling wedding.

'What is this memory?'

The loud applause of people. The regular knights of Sith in white uniforms.

A wedding held in an unnamed mansion. Bastard was there.

<Congratulations!>

Voices burst out from all over the place. And Nicole herself was wearing a very fancy dress that came up to her neck.

The dress, reflected in the sunlight, looked like a pure white wedding dress.

And then, Bastard with an awkward face approached.  
Bastard was wearing a blue jacket. The fancy jacket

decorated with gold was clearly a groom's outfit to anyone who saw it.

<It's a shame that it's a secret wedding.>

Nicole said quietly. And Nicole handed a bouquet to Bastard.

The officiant standing at the altar looked at them as if urging them on.

'What, why was I standing awkwardly decorated at a wedding with Bastard?'

What could be the occasion for Sith, always dressed in his military uniform, to wear such flamboyant clothes? Especially at a wedding. It would be understandable if it was his own wedding.....

Dressed in a splendid outfit and flipping his hair, Sith looked more decent than expected.

<Still, it's a happy wedding.>

Nicole said, looking at Bastard. The Nicole in her memory was feeling both fear and excitement.

'Me, with Bastard in my past life?'

Nicole had recalled many jumbled memories from her past life so far. But nothing was as absurd as this.

Walking down the corridor, Nicole suddenly stopped in front of the stairs, turned pale, and looked at Bastard with trembling eyes.

"Miss Karen?"

Interpreting Nicole's gaze somehow, Bastard spoke kindly.

“Miss Karen, you don’t need to be so scared. The Grand Duke is not one to abandon his subordinates. Once the Grand Duke calms down—”

Nicole shook her head.

“I’m fine.”

Nicole walked again, trying hard to shake off the awkwardness.

And the questions she had about the memory she recalled were answered that afternoon.

T/N: WAIT IM SO CONFUSED WHATT

\*\*\*

“Miss!”

As soon as she entered the house, Nicole’s maids, Bluea and Redia, ran towards her.

“We were worried. You didn’t come in last night without any contact.....”

“Because you don’t allow us to escort you when you go to the charity.”

They were escorts assigned by Grace. Nicole nodded her head.

“It’s going to get busy from now on. Get ready to dress up right away.”

Nicole gestured to them. As they hurried into the room, Nicole opened a drawer in the powder room.

Inside were the poison needles that Nicole had painstakingly made a while ago.

Nicole gently touched them. While Nicole made the poison, the two maids knew the technique to refine it into needles. Nicole took a deep breath.

From now on, it was crucial. Nicole hid the needles in her sleeve and garter belt.

\*\*\*

As soon as Nicole arrived, the Duchess Lisbeth immediately called her to her room.

She looked Nicole up and down. A small hat adorned with flowers, and a bright beige dress.

A naive blinking as if she didn't know what she had done. Seeing her like this, Duchess Lisbeth had an expression of disbelief.

"Speaking of yesterday, it was such an absurd accident. I can't believe someone popped out at the event I painstakingly prepared."

There was a look of contempt and disgust on the face of Duchess Lisbet as she spoke.

"That's right, it was an accident, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Duchess."

Nicole flattered the Duchess.

"As you know, I'm a country noble who hasn't had much contact with men. When the rough horsemen came in droves, I was so scared that they might be the delinquents

I've only heard about in the capital that I ended up hiding in the carriage."

Then she fainted from suffocation after receiving a baptism of flowers - a similar excuse to what she had told Raul.

"I wonder if you're really naive or just cunning....."

Duchess Lisbeth muttered as if she was fed up. Nicole pretended not to hear.

"The incident has blown up. Rumors spread that His Highness the Crown Prince was initially surprised, then very pleased."

"He was pleased? With what?"

"What else could it be? The surprise show I prepared!"

Duchess Lisbeth said.

"Congratulations on becoming famous. Thanks to you, I almost became the person who offered a beauty to His Highness the Crown Prince in the most foolish way in the world."

Nicole covered her mouth, pretending to be clueless.

"People mustn't misunderstand. Then I'll do my best to clear up any misunderstandings. Duchess Lisbeth is not such a person, you're truly a wonderful person....."

"Ah, I must be crazy!"

Duchess Lisbeth looked like she was about to grab the back of her neck.

"Just shut your mouth. Don't make the situation bigger."

“Duchess, but..... I..... What about your promise to me..... Are you going to kick me out of here? You said you’d help me make connections.....”

Duchess Lisbeth had already received a large donation after promising to debut Nicole in society. Moreover, Nicole was doing various volunteer work almost every day.

If she openly kicked her out, it would cause a problem for Duchess Lisbeth’s reputation. After all, the eyes of the world were now focused on this young lady and Duchess Lisbeth.

“Don’t worry. Nothing will change. I’ll help you make connections. Since you’ve become famous, things should be easier.”

In the end, Duchess Lisbet couldn’t suppress her anger and openly mocked her instead. Nicole wore a happy expression.

“Then..... what about tea?”

“Tea?”

“I..... You asked me to have a cup of tea in your office yesterday. I was looking forward to having tea time with the Duchess.”

‘Is she really clueless? Or is she doing it on purpose?’

Duchess Lisbeth looked at Nicole with exactly that expression. Nicole was very impressed.

As expected of royalty, she had a unique ability to convey emotions with just a contemptuous look.

“Well, there’s nothing I can do if the Crown Prince likes you.”

Duchess Lisbeth muttered as if she couldn't believe it. And then she rang the bell.

"Is there something you need me to do?"

The person who cautiously opened the door and entered was a girl familiar to Nicole.

A girl with dry, dark green eyes. It was Aru. Nicole looked at her closely.

Aru was also looking at Nicole. The two exchanged glances in less than a second.

"Why on earth are you here again? I told you not to leave your quarters."

"There are too many children with colds, so they said they needed someone to nurse them. Among the people at the second place, I'm the only one who knows how to nurse."

Aru said.

"Even now, I was running an errand for the secretary when I heard the bell....."

"I have to talk to something like you, what is the secretary doing?"

Duchess Lisbeth seemed to feel genuinely insulted.

"She was in the kitchen earlier."

Duchess Lisbeth went outside in disbelief. Aru quickly approached Nicole.

Nicole whispered in Aru's ear.

“From now on, I’m going to prick you with this needle. If you get pricked by this needle, symptoms similar to a skin disease will appear. Don’t be surprised, it’s a fake symptom.”

Nicole said.

“I will help you. Trust me.”

Nicole knew that Aru had been circling around her continuously, as if asking for help.

“I trust you.”

Aru extended her arm. Nicole looked down at the child’s hand that was extended without hesitation and quickly pricked it with a needle.

Soon, Aru’s arm swelled up and spots appeared.

Nicole handed the needle to Aru.

“I’ll take the opportunity to prick the other children as well.”

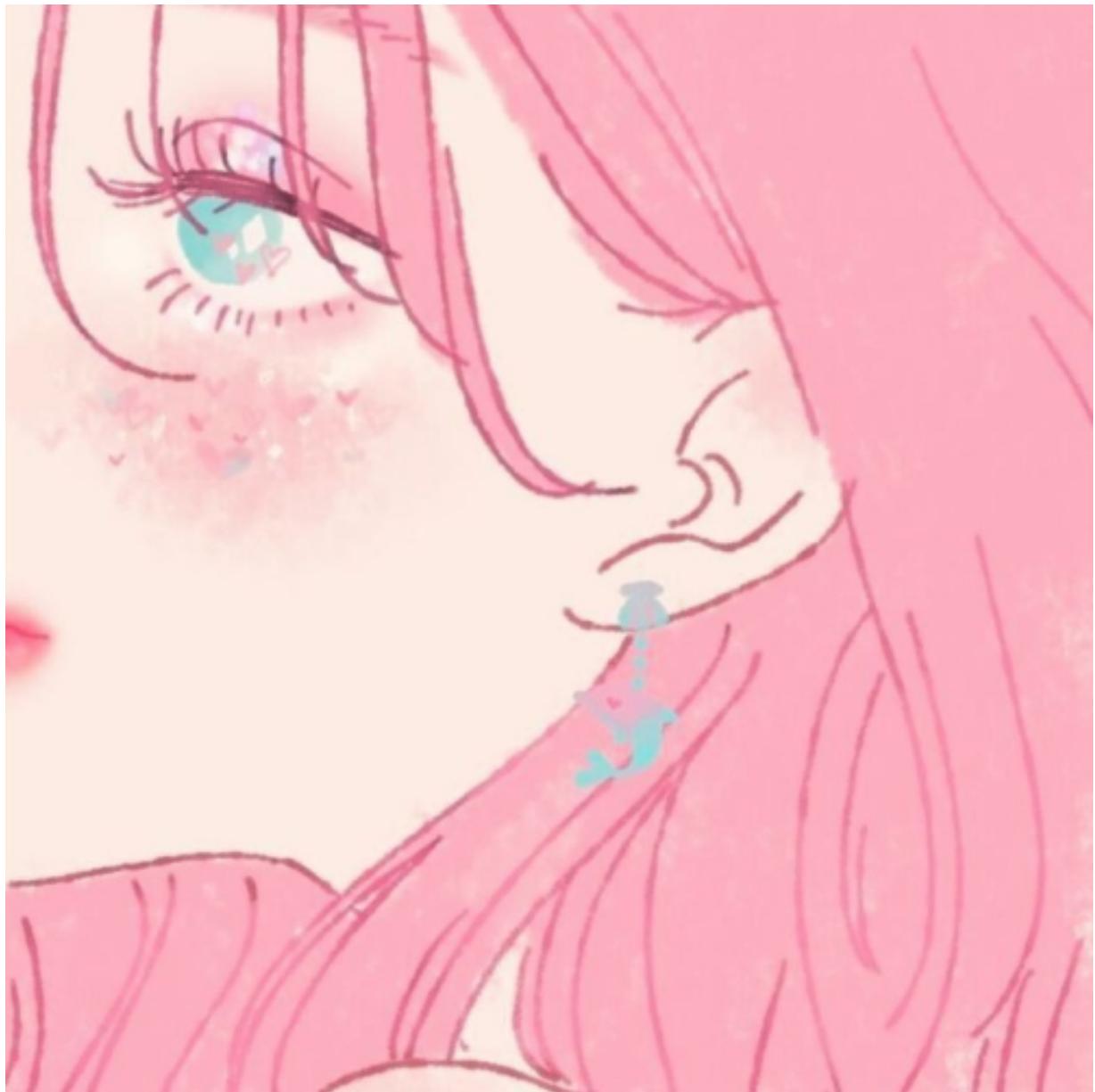
Aru whispered. She was an extremely clever child. What if the children didn’t just have a simple cold, but a contagious disease?

‘Then we would need someone with professional nursing skills.’

Like Maria now, a woman like Nicole with a fake identity.

It was then. Nicole suddenly recalled a memory like this morning. It was a memory of her past life.

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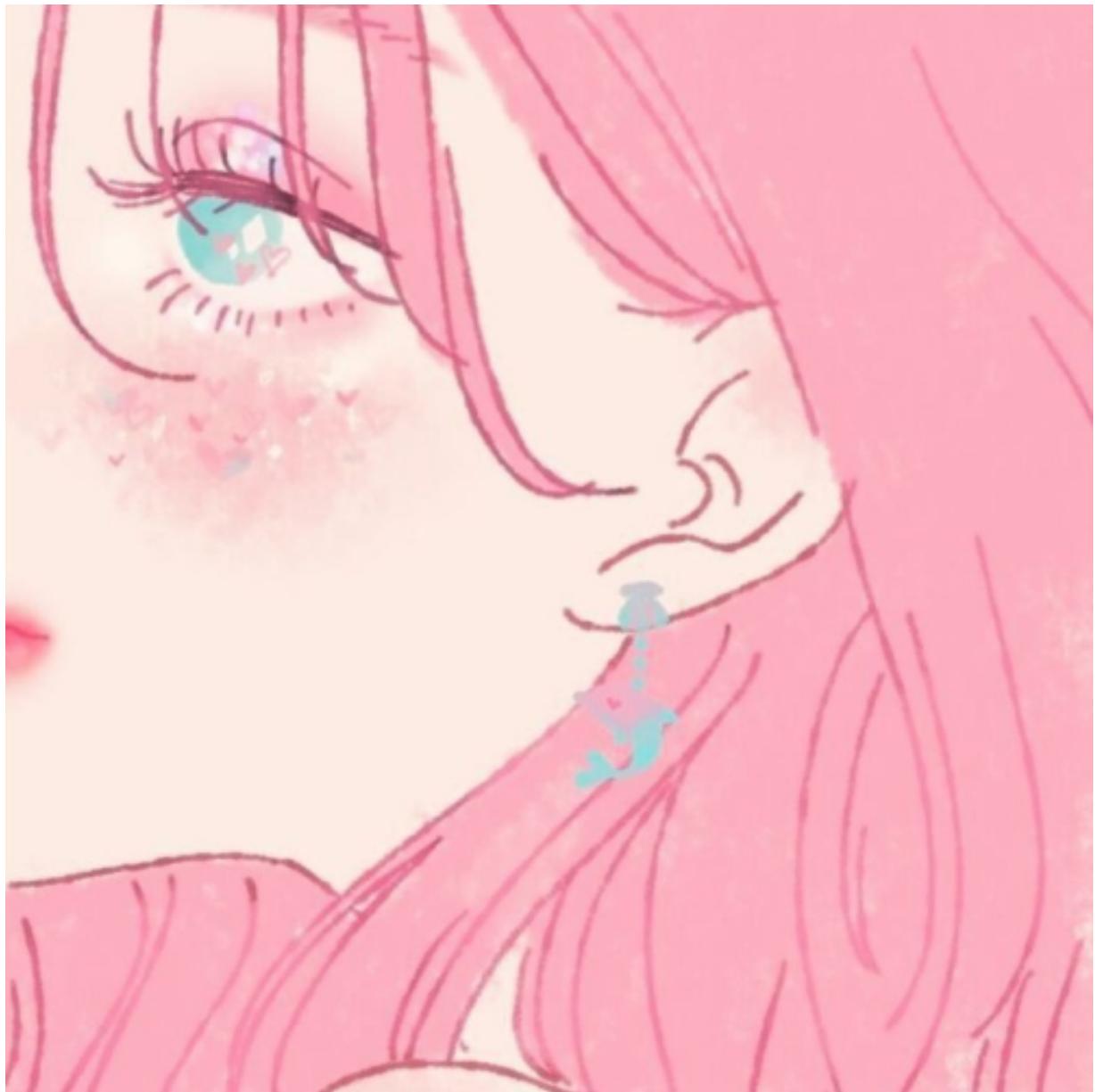


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# Chapter 100

Nicole watched the wedding hall as herself in her past life.

Now that she looked, a considerable number of the guests were people she knew. They were the Siths.

The place was somewhere Nicole had never been before. The pretty, small building looked like a villa.

In the sunlit garden, bright flower decorations were placed here and there. And a carpet was laid for the bride and groom to walk between the arch-shaped flower doors.

Shortly after, the clear sound of a bell followed by the voice of the priest was heard.

<The bride is entering.>

Only then did Nicole realize what she was wearing.

It was not white but a light gold. Fine lace was attached to various parts of the silk dress, and it looked as glamorous as a wedding dress.

The bride approached.

The freckles on the nose of the young bride in a wedding dress with a veil stood out. That girl was...

'Aru.'

Nicole realized it. Bastard's bride was Aru.

Aru looked at Nicole with eyes full of fear but spoke calmly.

<It is an honor that the Grand Duchess gives me a precious bouquet for my wedding.>

<This is the duty of the Grand Duchess.>

Nicole found it hard to say those words, so she spoke a little late.

And what should I do? Right...

Nicole was holding another flower besides the one she gave to Bastard. She handed it to Aru's hand. Just doing that made Nicole's back sweaty and dizzy.

At this time, her head was always a mess...

'It would be nice if Isabel was by my side.'

Nicole stupidly kept thinking of Isabel.

'Isabel always shows me the way, doesn't she? If Isabel is by my side, there's nothing to be afraid of.'

At the same time, she wondered why she was dressed up and here.

Bastard married a bride without a family. She didn't even have a grandmother and wasn't of noble status. So, someone needed to act as the bride's family.

In such cases, the noblewoman who took on the role of the bride's chaperone would attend instead and act as a parent.

The responsibility fell into Nicole's hands. It was a natural procedure, as she was the wife of the lord.

It was a duty of the Grand Duchess that she was taking on after a very long time. For nearly two years, Nicole had done almost nothing.

The mere act of placing Nicole in this position indicated Raul's special treatment towards Bastard, his confidant.

It was natural for the young bride to be intimidated at a wedding where she has practically no family or relatives.

At that moment, Nicole felt sympathy for Aru. It was because of the early death of Jay that came to mind.

'Right, that happened. Why did I... forget about it?'

Nicole felt as if her heart had stopped. Moreover, Aru, Bastard's bride, said she was doing something important.

A task secretly carried out under Raul's orders.

Aru was actually the name Bastard called her, and she said she was using a different name now.

'Azalea.'

It was the name of the Azalea flower. Aru was exactly Sith's shadow.

\*\*\*

Suddenly, she remembered what happened before standing at this wedding venue.

<Even if you have to drug her, keep her standing. I'm tired of hearing that the Grand Duchess is not sane, especially

from my subordinates.>

Raul said. He raised his head.

His sharp gaze stopped at Nicole. Nicole was hiding in the doorway, eavesdropping on Raul's conversation.

At that moment, Nicole felt a strong hostility and hid in her room.

It was a day in their fourth year of marriage.

\*\*\*

"Why are you doing this?"

Aru asked.

Nicole quickly shook her head as if nothing was wrong. However, she was secretly sweating profusely.

'How old is this kid, anyway?'

Bastard, I didn't see him like that...

Nicole wanted to sigh. But there was no time to catch Aru and explain everything in detail.

This was because Lady Lisbeth, the Duchess, soon entered the room, strutting with the secretary.

"Duchess, I'm truly sorry. I'll do something about this unruly child. She should just do what she has to do, but she keeps running away and doing other things."

"Do it right."

Duchess Lisbet looked at the manager with a chilling gaze.

“You should know who you’re dealing with. Why can’t you handle a child properly? Isn’t the reason we moved the kids here in the first place because you couldn’t manage the second branch well?”

“Yes, yes.”

The manager smiled cravenly and tugged at Aru’s wrist.

“You should know that you’re going to be severely punished this time. Huh?”

At that moment, Nicole blocked the manager.

“Excuse me, this child. Is this supposed to be on her hand?”

“On her hand?”

The manager finally looked at the child’s hand. There were red spots like hives swelling on the back of her hand.

“Oh my, what is this?”

The surprised manager shook off Aru’s hand.

“Don’t touch it, it could be contagious.”

Nicole said.

The manager was startled and let go of her hand.

“Where are the children who have the flu?”

While the manager hesitated, Aru answered instead.

“Um, young lady. The children are gathered in the building at the back, to prevent spreading the flu to others.....”

"Are there any other children complaining of stomach pain or with these hives?"

"I didn't look closely, but I think there are."

Nicole nodded.

"It might not be a simple cold. I've seen these symptoms in children in the countryside before. It's a kind of skin disease. At first, it spreads among children, then later it spreads to adults too. If it's severe, the hives spread all over the face and turn into scars."

The word 'scar' startled Duchess Lisbeth.

"Get rid of this child right away. And check the condition of the other children!"

"Yes, uh, understood."

The manager was startled.

"I know the symptoms of that disease well, shall I go and check if it's contagious?"

They all looked at Nicole at the same time.

"If it's definitely contagious, then we can call a doctor. If it's contagious, we'll have to pay the doctor a lot of money."

"Then go and check it out quickly. It's a relief that we have someone who knows the symptoms."

A large amount of medical expenses. Hearing those words, Duchess Lisbeth changed her complexion.

It was a look of fear, more at the thought of money being wasted unnecessarily than of an epidemic.

\*\*\*

<If you want to get your foot in the door of the social world, it would be best to unconditionally obey my words from now on. Understand?>

That was the last thing Duchess Lisbeth, who covered her mouth with a silk handkerchief, said to Nicole.

Nicole was not at all surprised by Duchess Lisbeth's nature, as she had experienced worse in her past life.

\*\*\*

Aru led Nicole towards a small building, the largest one that could be called the main house of the charity house.

Behind it, buildings lined up like tombstones in a communal cemetery.

As Nicole walked with Aru, she sorted out information in her head.

'It's almost certain that Duchess Lisbeth and Isabel are related.'

'Who on earth was the young man who was with Isabel? I've never seen him before.'

'Isabel is with Duchess Lisbeth, but they probably don't completely trust each other yet. Because it doesn't seem like Isabel has blabbed to Duchess Lisbeth about meeting me.'

Aru, who had been keeping her mouth shut as if she were conscious of people's attention, only opened her mouth when she entered the building.

“This is where the sick kids gather. If the flu spreads in winter, people could die from it. So, the sick are sent here right away.....”

The wards were too shabby and children were coughing in the old beds scattered here and there.

“They don’t usually call a doctor.”

“It’s quite a harsh environment.”

Nicole thought about the substantial amount of money she had donated.

“This, it really disappears, right?”

Aru asked with an anxious face. Nicole, who was scanning the ward, replied.

“It’s just a fake drug that swells the skin. The symptoms disappear quickly. It’s not even itchy, is it?”

Aru obediently nodded her head. However, she spoke with a dark expression, as if she had some unpleasant memories.

“I absolutely hate medicine. Any kind of it.”

Then, like a squirrel, she quickly moved from bed to bed, whispering something. Then she pricked the children one by one with a needle.

After finishing everything, Aru approached Nicole.

“Will it be okay?”

“It’s okay because the kids owe me a lot. They’re all fearless.”

Nicole nodded her head.

"I've been watching you from the beginning."

Nicole spoke softly.

Aru was impressive from the first day I saw her.

First, her face was very familiar. I couldn't shake off the thought that I had definitely seen her somewhere.

It was not from this life, but from the previous one, even from her lost memories.

And another thing, she seemed to want to tell her something.

So, when Nicole went to the orphanage with Dagger, she casually asked Dagger.

'Can a minor become a shadow?'

Nicole knew that she needed an internal collaborator for this. From then on, she had a strong intuition.

That this child Arula would be of help to her. Come to think of it.....

'It's obvious that she will become Sith's shadow in the future. My intuition and unconsciousness judged it that way.'

*Then why did this child try to contact me?*

"Why did you help me?"

"Among the outsiders who recently came in, you were the youngest, unnie. And I thought if I showed you that I know

medicine, you might get some medicine for my mom. I thought I had nothing to lose no matter what I did.....

The intuition to choose someone who can help her in a short time. And the rational judgment to calculate the benefits.

As expected of a future Shadow, she was not ordinary even at a young age. Nicole nodded her head.

“You deliberately threw a toy at me on the first day, didn’t you? What was that about?”

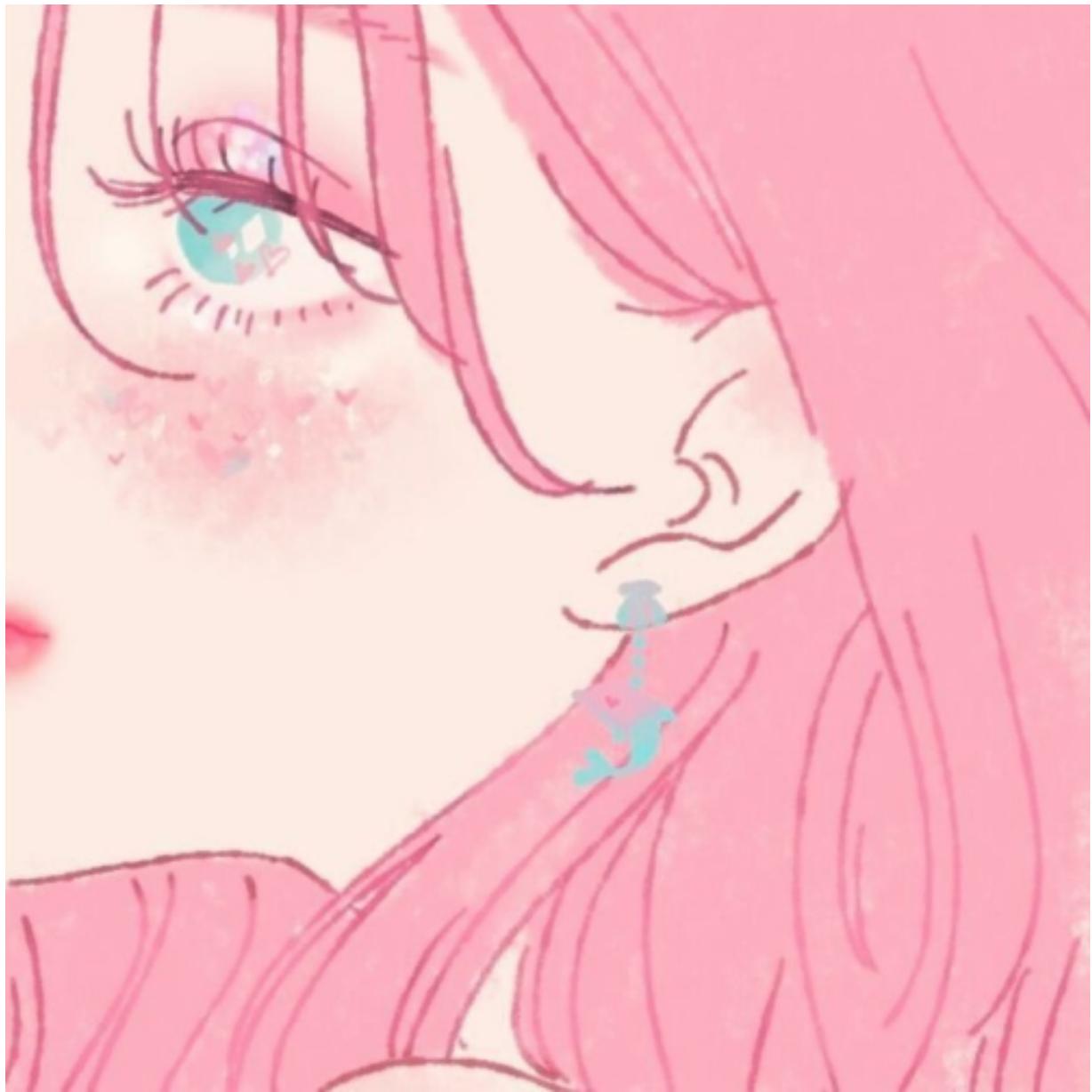
“That’s because.....”

Then there was a loud knock on the door.

“How’s it going?”

It was the sensitive voice of the secretary.

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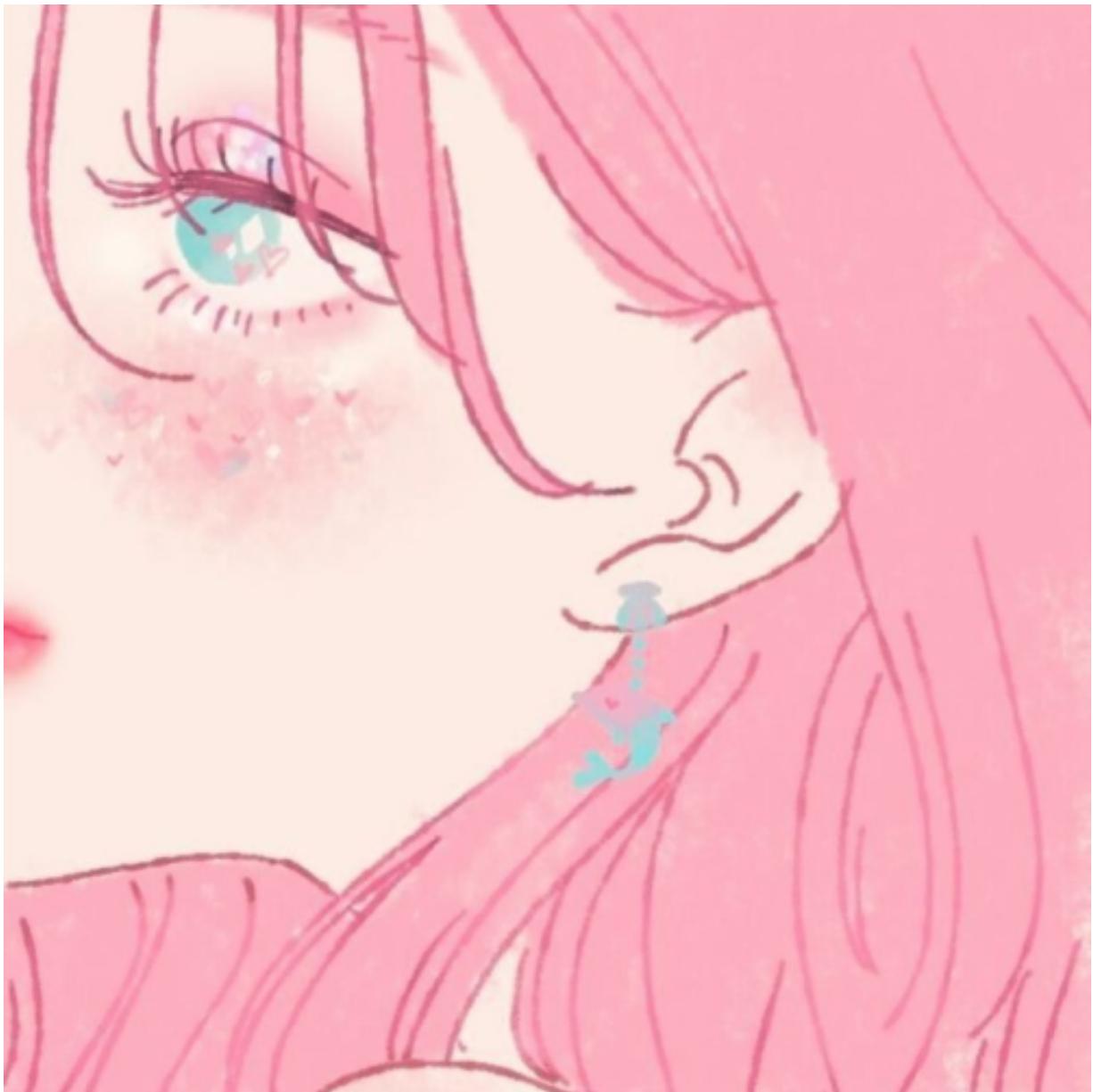


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# Chapter 101

“Other children are also starting to show symptoms of hives. I think we need to keep an eye on it. We also need someone to nurse them.”

Nicole opened the door slightly and said.

“If we’re not careful, it could spread instantly even within the same room.”

Hearing that, the secretary frowned openly.

“What should we do then?”

“We need to ventilate well and give them some fever reducers. They also need to eat enough meat. I’ll clean up the sickroom a bit. Cleanliness is important for this disease.”

“Anyway, those dirty kids.....”

The secretary left only saying that she didn’t want to go in there at all.

Now Nicole had time to talk comfortably with Aru.

“I’ll send you some medicine. I should be able to do that much.”

“Thank you. Unnie.”

Aru's face flushed. The more Nicole looked at her youthful face, the stranger she felt.

Aru took Nicole to a small room next to the bedroom. It was very dirty, and there was no one there.

"Aren't all the children here with their mothers?"

"Yes."

Aru explained quickly. These children are all from the second branch.

"We have something in common. Our mothers are sick."

Nicole knew what the second branch was like. It was a place where women with health problems, especially those suffering from alcohol addiction and mental illnesses, were accommodated.

"Why were you separated from your mothers?"

"I don't know. After giving new medicine to our mothers, they drove us here."

"....."

"I think the people here are doing strange things to my mother..... My mother is an alcoholic. She's also very weak to drugs."

Nicole wanted to sigh.

Puzzle pieces that shouldn't fit fell into place.

"Keep talking."

“The medicine I showed you is actually my mother’s medicine.”

She whispered.

“The day my mother’s medicine changed, I stole some of it. It was strange because they explained it as a sedative to treat my mother’s alcohol addiction.”

Aru said quietly.

“It’s what these kids’ mothers say. Despite their different symptoms, they all get the same medicine. It’s like a toy jewel.”

Another piece of the puzzle fit. The medicine Aru tried to secretly pass to Nicole.

Nicole realized where she had seen that medicine.

<Can I openly make the medicine?>

Not the current Nicole, but Karen from her past life. The woman who wore a loud red dress like a clown and had a vulgar laugh.

Karen fiddled with the jewel-like medicine and spoke.

Nicole was lying on the desk.

<My sister. She’s really stubborn. It seems the Glassworm effect comes and goes.....>

Isabel spoke as if she was bored.

<This medicine, is it still selling well overseas?>

<It's not selling a lot because I'm afraid the Grand Duke will find out, but it's worth the call.>

Isabel paused for a moment in thought. And then she continued speaking.

<How can I avoid the Grand Duke's surveillance? Anyway, I've spent years establishing the line. It's been very successful... As long as it's not discovered that I made the drug. The organization will take care of the selling. As Mr. Snake says.>

Isabel chuckled.

<Isn't it funny that humans are crazy about this drug? It's a hallucinogen made by refining various poisonous herbs. The potency of the poisonous herbs gradually kills people while showing hallucinations. Moreover, I sold this abroad, and it gets imported back with a higher price!>

<You're incredibly good at controlling it>

Karen in the red dress said lazily.

<At first, I also thought it was a poison without side effects. This, it's called a gem. It's too pretty for a drug.>

She added grumblingly.

<Isn't it too much to make it as pretty as a kid's toy?>

<Ugh, but- I like pretty and shiny things. Very shiny.>

The Grand Duchess Nicole, who was in a daze, slowly opened her eyes. *What did I do today?*

*As soon as I got here, Isabel gave me a new sedative she just made...*

*Right, the Bastard's wedding. We talked about that.*

'I think I did as well as Raul expected. I mean, the role of the Bastard's bride's chaperone.'

Hearing that, Isabel spoke in a fiery rage.

'Are you going to surrender to that man who is our family's enemy? You should hate him. That's the only way for you to live. Look at how terribly I'm suffering. It's that man who made us unhappy!'

Nicole thought she was a fool at that time. Nine out of ten times, she hated Raul, but sometimes, a feeling other than hatred surged up.

When that happened, Nicole would look for Isabel. Everything was okay when she talked with Isabel.

'Remember the Glassworm.'

Nicole muttered to herself. And then she realized.

Isabel is conducting an experiment by feeding hallucinogens to the women staying in the second charity house, the mothers of these sick children.

'You're really a devil.'

Nicole wanted to laugh. She was becoming a devil faster and more excessively than in her previous life.

The difference from her previous life was that Isabel was impatient for some reason. So she had quite a good look at the gap.

'I have to deal with Isabel's existence without letting Raul know. And I need to reveal the connection between Duchess

Lisbeth and the hallucinogenic drug.....'

Overall, it's going to be quite a difficult task. And once again, she'll have to deceive her master to some extent.

However, she didn't think it would be impossible.

Because Nicole had an internal collaborator who would become a future Sith.

"Do you know a woman named Isabel?"

"Yes."

Aru quickly nodded and said.

"Everything got strange after that woman came."

Aru spoke quickly. It was as Nicole had expected.

"Isabel was always accompanied by a young and handsome man. Even when she was at the second branch, or at the main house of this charity, she hardly showed herself. She seemed to be hiding on the orders of Duchess Lisbeth."

Nicole thought Isabel would be stuck underground.

She must have set up a laboratory in there.

"I understand the situation."

Nicole said to Aru, who had a worried look in her eyes.

"You said your name is Aru, right? It seems like Duchess Lisbeth is experimenting on your mother. I'm talking about the hallucinogen. And that woman named Isabel is leading the experiment."

Aru's pupils shook greatly. Nicole quickly covered Aru's mouth that was about to scream.

"I can help you. And I'll help you get out of here, too, Aru."

"How?"

"From now on, whatever you do, you must keep it a secret."

Nicole quickly told Aru.

"I have a powerful person behind me. Someone planted me by Duchess Lisbeth's side."

Hearing this, Aru perked up her ears.

"Are you like a spy from a book?"

Nicole nodded.

"Aru, you have a good sense, right? The sense also known as survival instinct. That's probably why you've survived in a tough environment so far."

Nicole spoke quickly.

"Didn't you feel something from me from the start?"

Aru's pupils shook. Soon, the girl's pupils calmed down. Aru nodded slightly.

Nicole liked Aru. And Bastard is.....

'He's not an ordinary person either. He must have married her because Aru is a trustworthy person.....'

Nicole thought.

“If Aru handles this matter well, I’ll help you lead a new life. You might even live as well as the merchants or nobles on the other side of the road.”

“I... I can do anything.”

Nicole was satisfied with Aru’s answer.

Afterwards, the two quietly exchanged stories.

“I think I’ll be staying here for a while, unable to go to the second branch. The kids are sick...”

They exchanged various pieces of information, including where Isabel was staying, and decided on how to contact each other in the future.

Nicole asked this last question amidst the pressing time.

She’s older than she looked. Nicole was relieved at her answer. According to the Empire’s standards, girls became adults at seventeen. And her marrying Bastard would be a matter of a few years from now...

[T/N: Good thing Bastard is not an actual bastard lmao yes pun intended]

‘It’s not a crime... But I should advise Aru to make a discerning decision about her future after watching over her...’

Of course, she could only give such nagging advice, which was almost an interference, after this matter was resolved.

*Thud thud*, then the secretary knocked on the door again.

“How is it going?”

Nicole looked at Aru.

“Yes, I’m done.”

Nicole winked at Aru and left the room.

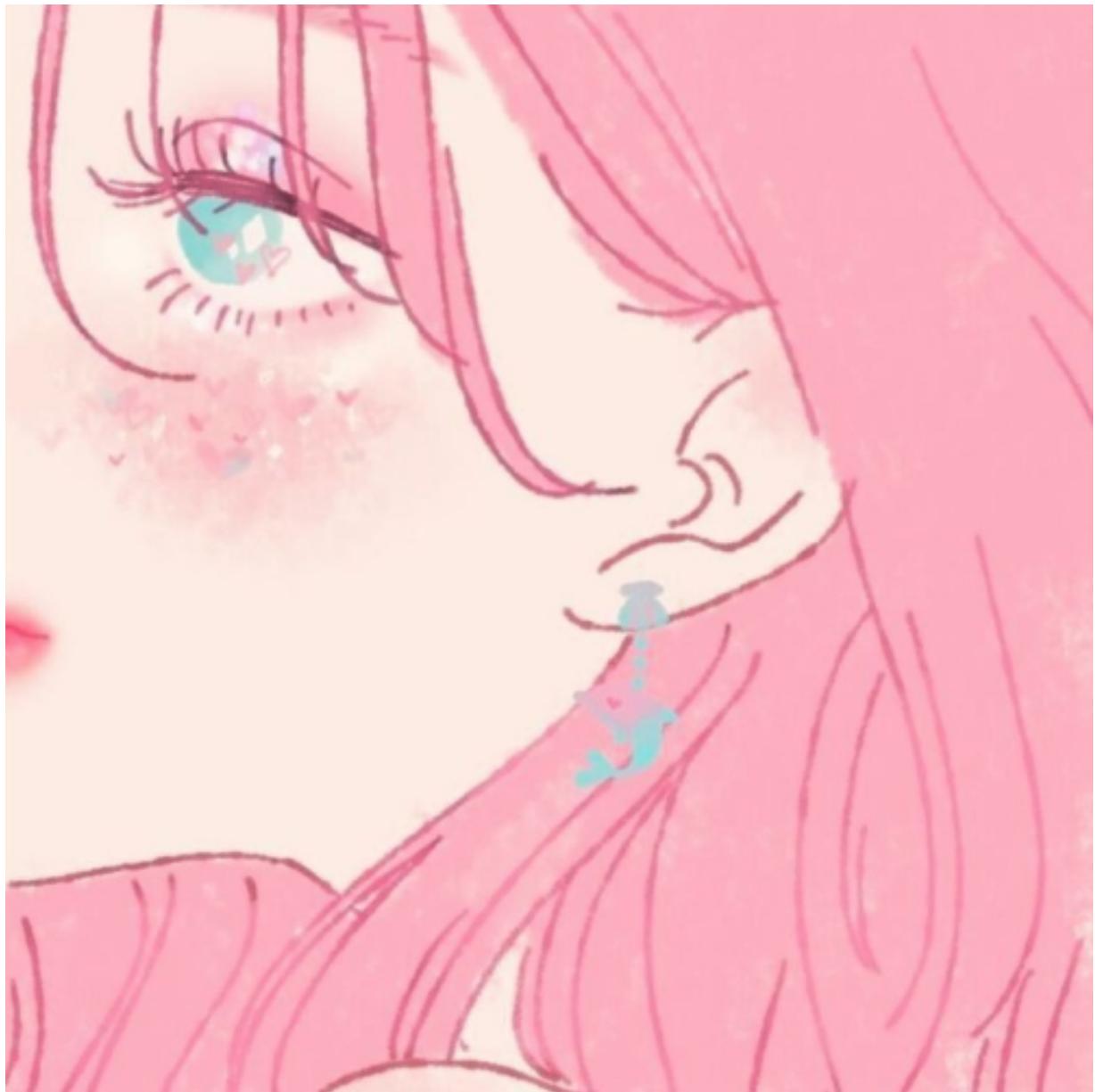
The corners of her mouth, moving quickly, were faintly raised.

She had finally decided how to draw this picture.

And it would be quite a wonderful painting, just like during the time of Marquis Saratheve.

[T/N: EXCITED AT WHAT MY GIRL NICOLE IS COOKING]

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# Chapter 102

“It seems that the children’s symptoms are not severe. Cleanliness is important, so I’ll send an ointment after washing the children. The ointment with herbs is effective. It would be enough to ensure they eat well for a day or two and control the access of outsiders.”

Nicole came out of the sickroom and spoke calmly. The secretary listened carefully to her words.

But she kept grumbling.

“Just do as you’re told... Ah, really...”

“Why do you say that, Madam?”

“I mean, you popped out of the flower pile, you didn’t do it on purpose, right? Fortunately, the higher-ups didn’t make a big deal out of it. Thanks to that, I’m dying dealing with the anger of Duchess Lisbeth. She believes that the accident of you getting into the flower pile happened because I was lazy on the job.”

“That’s not possible. It was really an accident.”

“Do you understand my troubles now? To do such a thing to anger the royal family.”

It was the first time Nicole heard the secretary talk this long.

A plump body gives the impression of no deep thoughts.  
And round glasses.

Does this woman know about hallucinogens too? What if she tells Raul to kidnap and interrogate this woman?

"Oh no, Duchess Lisbeth is looking for me again."

"How do you know?"

"She's ringing the bell. When the bell rings from that position, the light reflects on the glass window. She's definitely looking for me."

She let out a deep sigh. And then she spoke to Nicole.

"Today, don't go anywhere and just go home. Especially these days, Duchess Lisbeth is sensitive and has fired a lot of horsemen and guards... It's a crucial time."

The secretary hurried into the mansion, sweating. Nicole stared at her retreating figure.

Of course, Nicole wouldn't just go home. She grinned. She was lucky today. Thanks to the secretary showing a gap, she could now roam freely among these tombstone-like buildings.

Nicole walked slowly towards the back door. And she looked at the tree where she had met Isabel.

Nicole hung a small pouch on the tree. And then she went out through the back door.

\*\*\*

"Noona, you said there was a problem. Did you handle it well?"

Nicole was regularly meeting Dagger in town. It wasn't particularly for work, but to know how Dagger was doing and her recent situation.

The place was always the same. In front of the newspaper stand at the crossroads of the capital, Picar.

Today, Dagger, looking more mature than usual, appeared from the shadows of the alley. Nicole bought a newspaper and pretended to read it as she responded.

"I've been disciplined."

"I was so worried that the Grand Duke might finally kill you this time."

"He didn't kill me... instead..."

Nicole's face was all flushed. Earlier when she changed her clothes, her entire buttocks were red, and there was a large handprint left by Raul.

In fact, she felt embarrassed every time her buttocks would heat up whenever the carriage shook on her way here.

'He wouldn't believe me even if I told him.'

The fact that Raul had put her over his knee and spanked her himself to punish her, as if dealing with a misbehaving brat.

"Did something happen to you?"

"I was... scolded. And reprimanded. Fortunately, I wasn't excluded from this job."

Nicole answered. Then she studied Dagger's face to see if he had noticed anything strange. And then she was

surprised.

“What happened to your face?”

“I had an unavoidable accident during the mission.”

Dagger grumbled.

The last time Nicole met Dagger, he didn’t tell her what mission he was on. But what Raul has been focusing on lately...

“Are you involved in the hallucinogen distribution organization?”

“How did you know?”

Dagger leaned in and whispered.

“It was a top-secret mission.”

“.....Do you know someone named Snake?”

“He’s my target. He’s a rapidly rising power, so most of the Shadows are involved in this. He’s very dangerous because he has a backing and he’s a madman who doesn’t care about consequences.”

“I guessed because the capital has been noisy lately.”

Nicole sighed.

‘It seems that this Snake, the head of the organization, is also one of Isabel’s future intimate friends.’

But the difference now is that it seems Isabel has chosen Lady Lisbeth, the Duchess, as her partner, not the terrifying head of the organization.

“But who is this madman?”

“The 20th district is where they mainly operate, and they have blatantly killed several officers of the security knights of that district. One of them was from a prestigious noble family. He was also a hallucinogen addict but oddly enough, he was good at his job.”

“.....Is that possible?”

“The security in that area is so bad. And there is someone behind them. A big fish at that. Power holders and such people are usually closely intertwined.”

“Surely, you didn’t get hurt by that person?”

“If you go into an organization and do undercover work, you’ll get hurt a lot. Anyway, it’s his fault because he got hurt in his organization.”

Dagger shrugged his shoulders. Nicole felt sorry for Dagger’s wounds. The man known only as Snake became more detestable to her.

Even though Dagger was stronger than Nicole, he still felt like a boy who needed to be protected to her.

“Should I give you some medicine?”

“You know, I have healing powers. If I heal too quickly, it would be suspicious, so I just left it.”

Dagger grumbled. He glanced at Nicole’s worried expression and feigned ignorance out of embarrassment.

“Compared to when I was training at Sith, this place is like a vacation. Don’t worry.”

“.....Dagger, you’re really mature. You’re my boss and my senior after all.”

Dagger coughed awkwardly.

“Did you want to ask me about Snake’s activities? ”

“I was curious about that, and also..... When I first join as a Shadow, I received a manual. I heard that you can borrow magic tools if necessary. The ones stored at the Sith headquarters.”

“What do you need? They usually don’t lend those out.”

Dagger shrugged his shoulders.

“And noona, this mission is long-term so there’s still plenty of time. But you seem anxious.”

“.....I’ve become a bit rushed. I made mistakes and I want to produce results quickly.”

Nicole’s job this time was originally to stay as a spy by the side of Duchess Lisbeth for a long term.

However, when she suspected that Duchess Lisbeth might be involved in a crucial matter, drug trafficking, her heart became impatient.

Moreover, if she was conducting experiments, hallucinogens would be administered to the women staying at the second branch.

Since they were originally in poor health, they could lose their lives at any time.

‘In the memories of my past life, Aru said she had no family.’

That meant her mother wouldn't live long. It wasn't clear if she would die because of this incident, but it was certain that she was in danger.

'I guess I'm weak when it comes to mothers.'

It must be because Freya's death remained as a bitter memory. Just like Isabel indirectly killed Freya, she didn't want to see someone's parent being taken away.

'Besides, if Isabel is caught, my name might come up. I need to deal with this quickly.'

The situation had changed in many ways. Nicole opened her mouth.

"Dagger, I....."

"Call me if you need me. I'll do anything as long as it's not caught by our master. And Estock will cooperate too."

"....."

Nicole was silent for a moment. Estock, who stood out too much like a walking signboard, was a bit.....

"Anyway, thank you, Dagger."

"Did you find any clues?"

"I won't officially report it, but I think I can catch a big fish. And I also found an internal collaborator."

".....Be careful when creating an internal collaborator. If the collaborator causes a problem, you'll be held jointly responsible. Especially if that person stabs you in the back....."

“If I do something wrong, my head could fly off too.”

Nicole smiled briefly. But she wasn’t too worried. Not anyone could become Sith’s shadow.

Even if it’s a matter of the future.

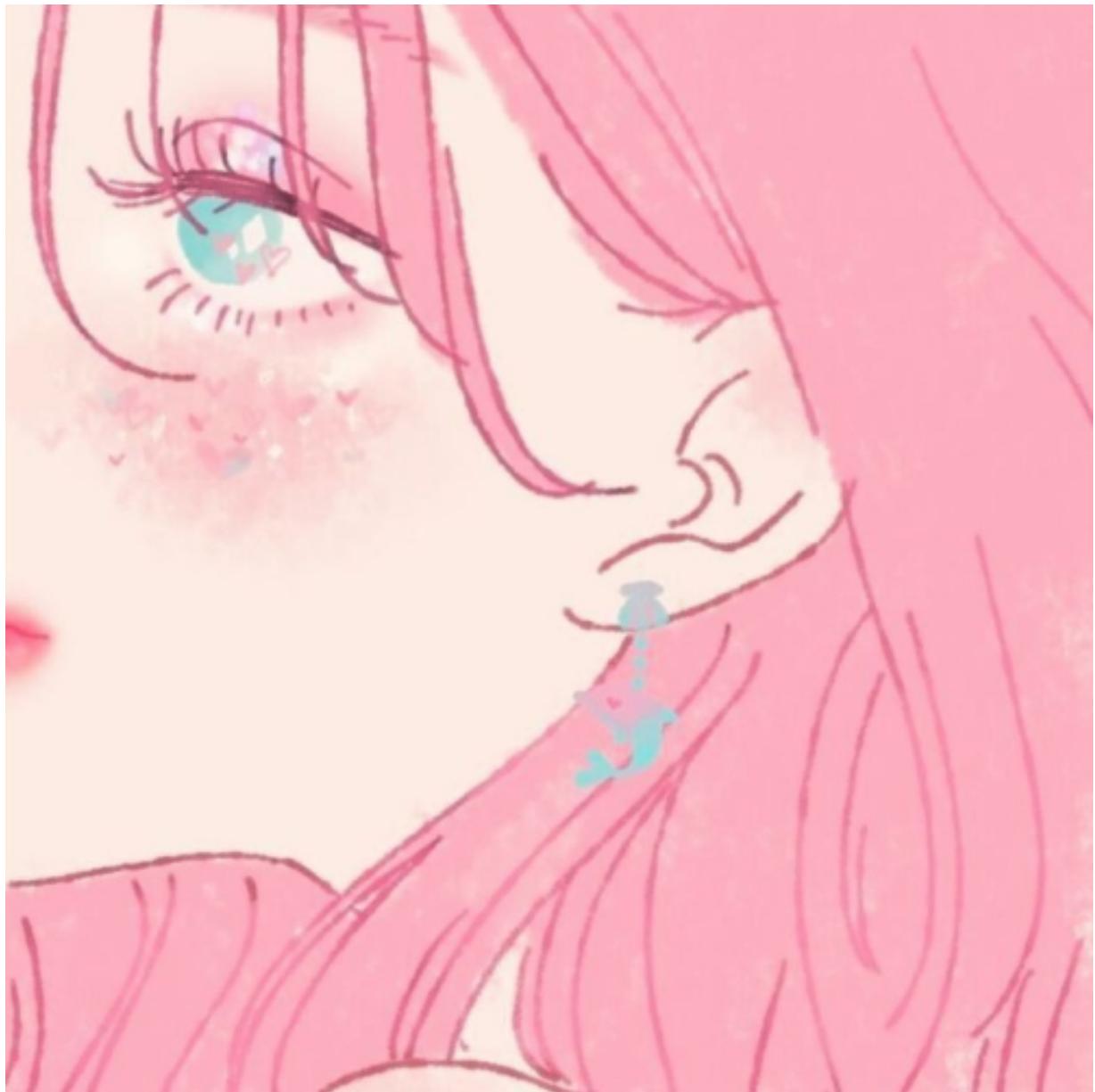
“I’ll go now. I’m on a mission too.”

Dagger, who checked the large clock on the street, said.

“Don’t get hurt, Dagger.”

The two exchanged glances and quickly parted ways.

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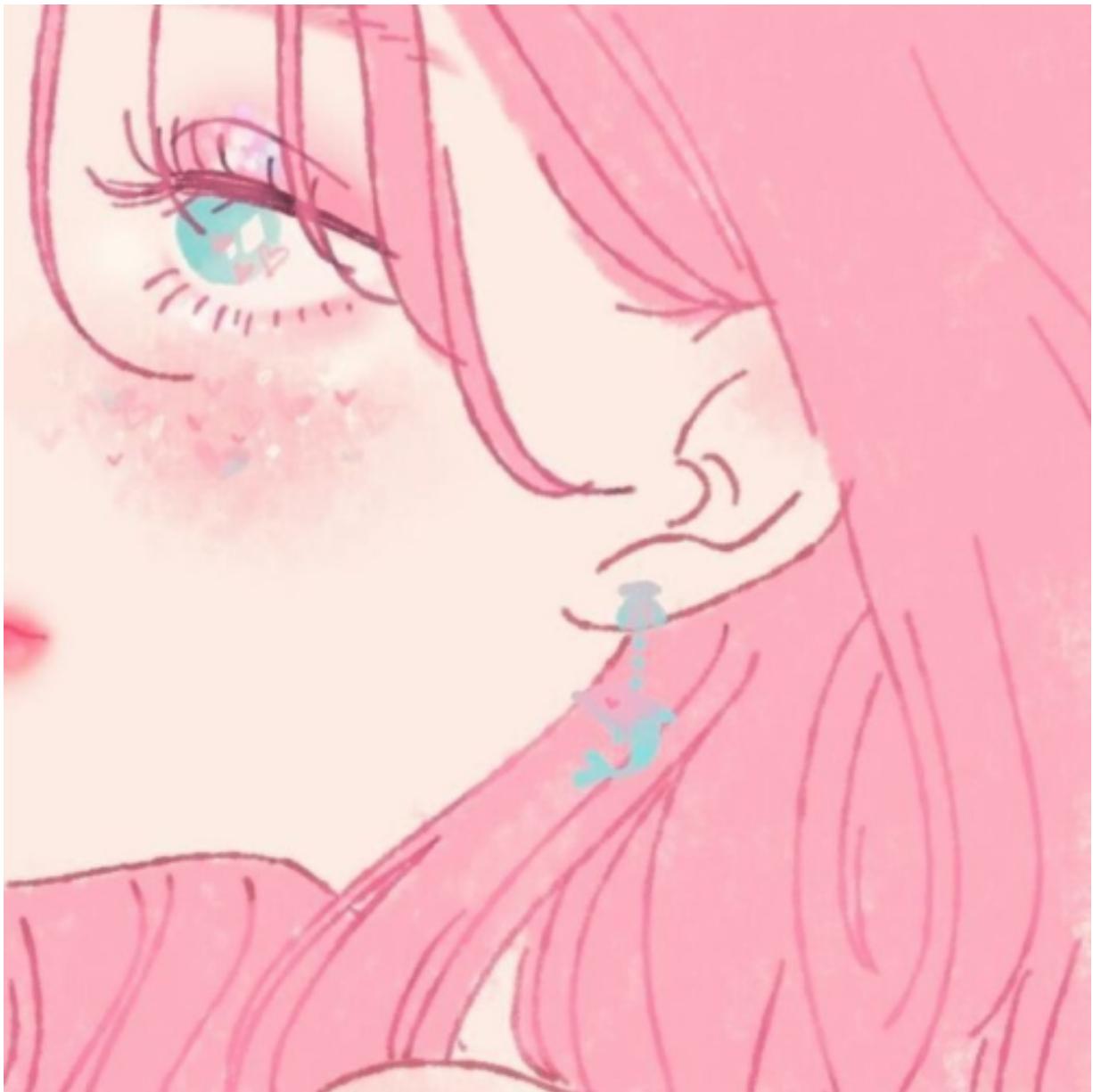


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# Chapter 103

Nicole immediately headed for the Sith headquarters. In the process, her memories of her past life gradually became clear.

Nicole learned how Bastard met his bride, Arula, while watching him prepare for his wedding.

Although Nicole was almost confined to Raul's room, she often had the opportunity to come out while fitting her dress and preparing for the event.

Of course, it was merely a pretense of taking on the event preparation, which was superficial at best.

Bastard said softly to the butler.

'I switched that contraceptive pill that the Grand Duchess was forced to take. It was just the same color, a cold medicine with a terrible taste. So, thanks to me, the Grand Duke's family will safely have descendants and will prosper in the future. You owe me a debt from the past, so you should take me in—'

A pathetic woman who came to the noble's house and talked nonsense.

It would have been fortunate if she had been beaten and driven out at once. But the one who welcomed that girl Arula was Bastard, who was rumored to have the best temperament in Sith.

Bastard is said to have listened carefully to her words. And he helped her so she could take the entrance exam of Sith.

The one answering in her memory was Las. Codename Lasp.

And he was there in front of Nicole, who had just awakened from her thoughts.

“Hello, butler.”

Nicole bowed her head and greeted him.

It turned out that he, who was Raul’s butler and also the leader of Sith Shadow, was also called a butler within Sith.

The reason was not anything else, but because the pronunciation of the first letter of Raul’s name and his codename were exactly the same. Therefore, it was an unspoken rule that everyone called him the butler.

[T/N: Las’ name is spelled as 라스. This could be translated either as ‘Ras’ or ‘Las’, so when I first encountered this character, I chose the latter. If I knew there’s a line like this in the later chapters, I would have chosen Ras but it’s too late to change it now ̄(\*°▽°\*)̄ My bad ܁܁ ]

“I hurriedly requested a meeting because I have a favor to ask.”

“That’s sudden. Aren’t you on a mission? It’s our policy to avoid visiting Sith headquarters while on a mission.”

“I urgently need to borrow some magic tools. A listening device and a video stone.”

The butler frowned when he heard about the magic tools Nicole was asking for. Then he spoke gently.

“I understand that you want to use the spying tools in the Grand Duke’s house. They are very precious and useful items. I also understand that you want to establish your merit as soon as possible. However, they are not items that just anyone can use. They are not allowed to be rented unless it’s very important.”

The magic tools Nicole needed were items called a listening stone and a video stone.

The listening stone was, as the name suggests, a tool that could be used for eavesdropping. It was an ancient magic tool that could steal any sound from the place it was attached to and monitor the conversation of the other party.

The video stone was a tool that could capture scenes in addition to sounds. There was something similar called a camera, but it was a general invention, not a magic tool invented by the Empire.

However, it could not capture moving images and it took a very long time to take a single shot.

Even this was only allowed to be owned by national institutions or credible newspapers.

Therefore, the performance of the magic tools stored at Sith headquarters was far superior.

“There are only a few of those items in the entire Empire. They are ancient heritages owned by either the Imperial family or the Grand Duke’s family. If they are found outside, it will easily reveal the connection with the Grand Duke’s family.”

“But I absolutely need them for this mission.”

Nicole insisted.

"If that's the case, I will contact the Grand Duke. It seems that his permission will be needed for this matter. If you fill out an application, I will pass it on."

"...To the Grand Duke, directly?"

"Yes. That's the only way. However, if a new shadow such as yourself makes a mistake, it will only take a moment to fall out of favor with the Grand Duke. Act carefully."

The butler's words were not meant to scare, but seemed like genuine advice for Nicole.

"The opportunity to send a note directly to the Grand Duke is not common even for the Siths. You should think it over carefully."

Saying so, he handed her a piece of paper the size of a palm with the Grand Duke's coat of arms engraved on it. He then added an explanation.

"The Grand Duke will probably return around afternoon tea time after being at the royal palace. I'll deliver it as soon as he arrives."

The application form was simple.

There were only two lines. The small size of the paper probably meant to persuade with a concise reason.

Raul would not easily grant Nicole permission to use the precious magic tool. Nicole had already made a mistake in this mission.

So Nicole did not have the confidence to persuade Raul with just one note.

'I need to meet him in person.'

But in this life, the gap between Raul and Nicole was insurmountable. He was not someone she could meet just by inviting him.

So she needed a very strong... statement that could lead him.

Nicole closed her eyes tightly and took a deep breath. Then she thought of Aru's trembling hand.

'I have no choice.....'

And she scribbled words on the note. It was just one line.

\*\*\*

Raul stared blankly at the line written on the paper.

The note that came with the report that Karen urgently wanted permission to use the magic tool had only this one line written on it.

At first, he doubted his eyes, and the second time, he was flabbergasted.

The third time, he started to get angry. And he wondered whether receiving such a note was a trick or a mockery.

Did he act too gentlemanly in a situation where he didn't need to treat her like a lady? He's been generous so far without taking off even one of her haughty undergarments.

Is she playing with him? Or is she acting like a mistress?

“Your Grace?”

“Did you see the content of this note?”

“No, Portia, that is, Karen said it would be better for Your Grace to see it first, so I haven’t seen it yet.”

“Good.”

Raul said. He wore a sarcastic expression and tore the note in half.

This woman seemed too arrogant. She must have picked up bad habits. He had to ignore this note.

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, Nicole spent her usual time at her home in the capital. Nevertheless, she had given orders to the maids.

“It’s hot, so prepare some tea and make sure the house is tidy. Prepare for going out and receiving guests at the same time.”

Nicole’s maids seemed to think it was a bit of an odd command, but they simply said yes without any comment.

Nicole firmly locked the door leading to the basement.

And she dressed neatly, nothing more or less than usual. If Raul reacted to the note, he might call Nicole, and then she might go out.

If he were capricious, he might burst into her house. But nothing happened until midnight.

‘Did I push him too hard?’

Sending such a note, which might be perceived as having a blatant intention, in a situation where she might already be disliked... Even she thought it was reckless.

Nicole went out to the garden. When she was at her residence in the capital, she spent a lot of time in this garden.

After her living expenses became plentiful, she set up a small pavilion in the garden where she could comfortably rest.

It was a white pavilion in the ancient style that is fashionable in the capital these days.

She hung a fabric under the roof and lit a lantern, brightly illuminating the night.

Inside the pavilion was a long and large chair and a table, enough to be used as a daybed. When she had spare time, Nicole sat there and trimmed herbs and flowers.

Tonight, Nicole trimmed many flowers as she felt restless for no reason, and the garden table was full of groomed flowers.

These flowers would all be beautifully packaged and delivered to Grace's residence tomorrow morning.

It was Nicole's own way of alleviating the disappointment of not being able to meet often because she was on duty.

'As expected, the note was ignored.'

He's someone who does tremendous things that control a whole country. He wouldn't just meet or give permission because of one note of hers...

Kkiiing-

At that time, Nicole heard a strange noise from the entrance. By chance, there were no maids nearby, so Nicole was alone in the garden.

‘Has someone intruded?’

Nicole approached the entrance. Near the entrance, it was relatively dark because no lights were on.

Then, from the darkness, a hand suddenly sprang out and grabbed Nicole’s wrist.

“Ah!”

Nicole was startled and swallowed her breath. The one who grabbed her wrist was none other than Raul.

Even in the semi-darkness, Nicole recognized his good scent and firm touch right away.

“Grand Duke. How did you get here.....”

“Did you think I wouldn’t have the key to this house?”

After all, this house was also given by Raul, so it’s no different from his house.

Even if the registration is in her own name, it won’t change anything..... The moment she thought that, Raul lifted Nicole up.

“What are you doing!”

Nicole was horrified. Raul carried Nicole and walked briskly to the pavilion where she had been sitting. He put her down inside the pavilion.

Inside, the scent of flowers was intoxicating.

“Grab the pillar.”

Raul put Nicole down and coldly ordered her. Treated like a light doll, Nicole let out a small scream.

However, thinking that obeying the command was the priority, she instinctively grabbed the pillar of the pavilion.

Smack!

“Ah!”

Raul ruthlessly lifted her skirt and struck her buttocks. This time there was no warning.

“Get into position.”

Raul said. Nicole, on the verge of tears, barely got into position.

Now she was being treated openly as a fool by this rascal. But knowing she had done something to deserve it, she couldn't protest.

Smack!

A big hand struck her buttocks again. Nicole shivered.

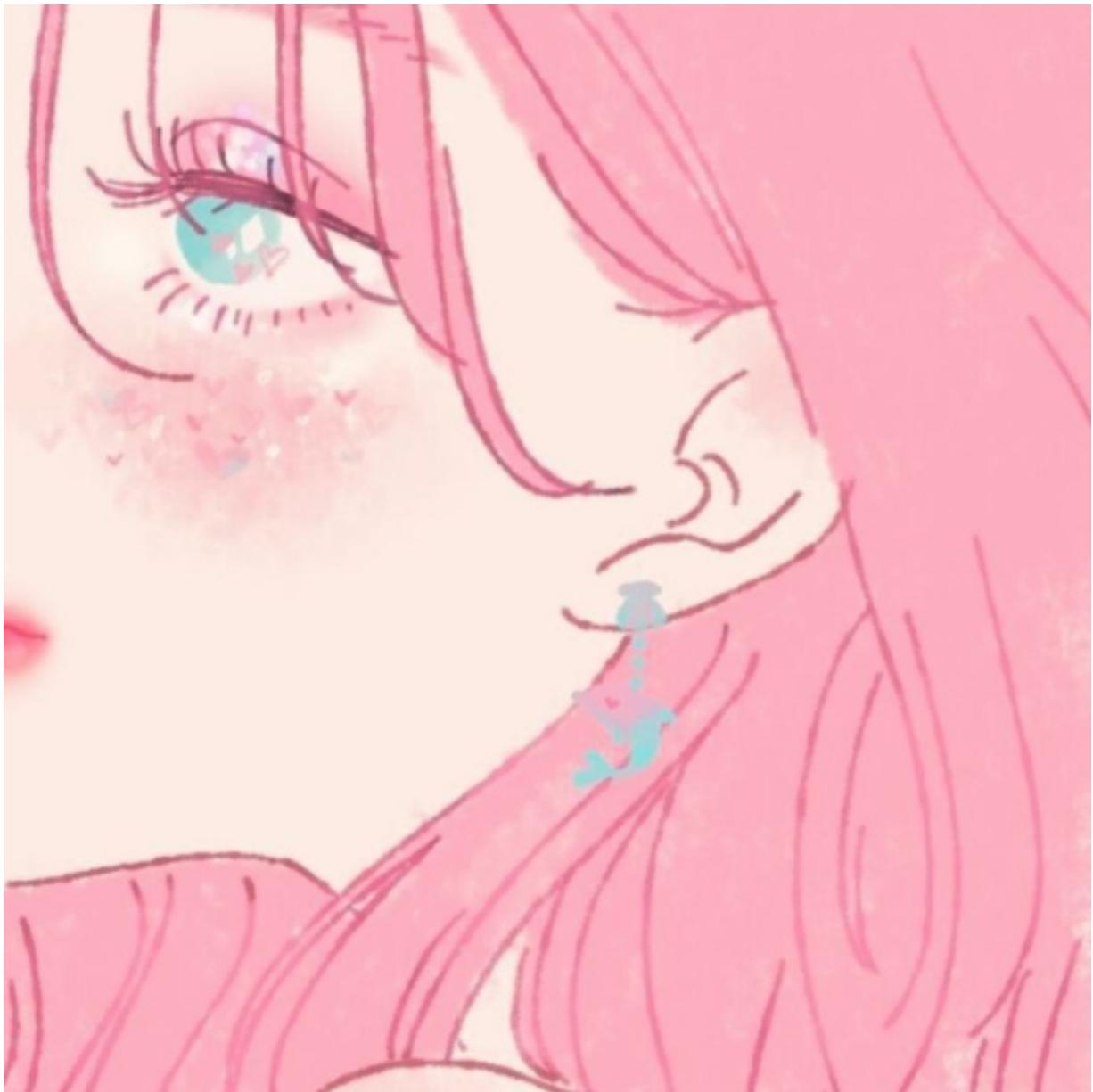
“Stand up.”

Raul commanded. Nicole stood up properly. She put strength into her waist and looked at Raul, subtly glancing at him to gauge his mood.

“It's only been a few days since you were scolded, and you're trying to deceive me with an official note? Do you

take me for a fool now?"

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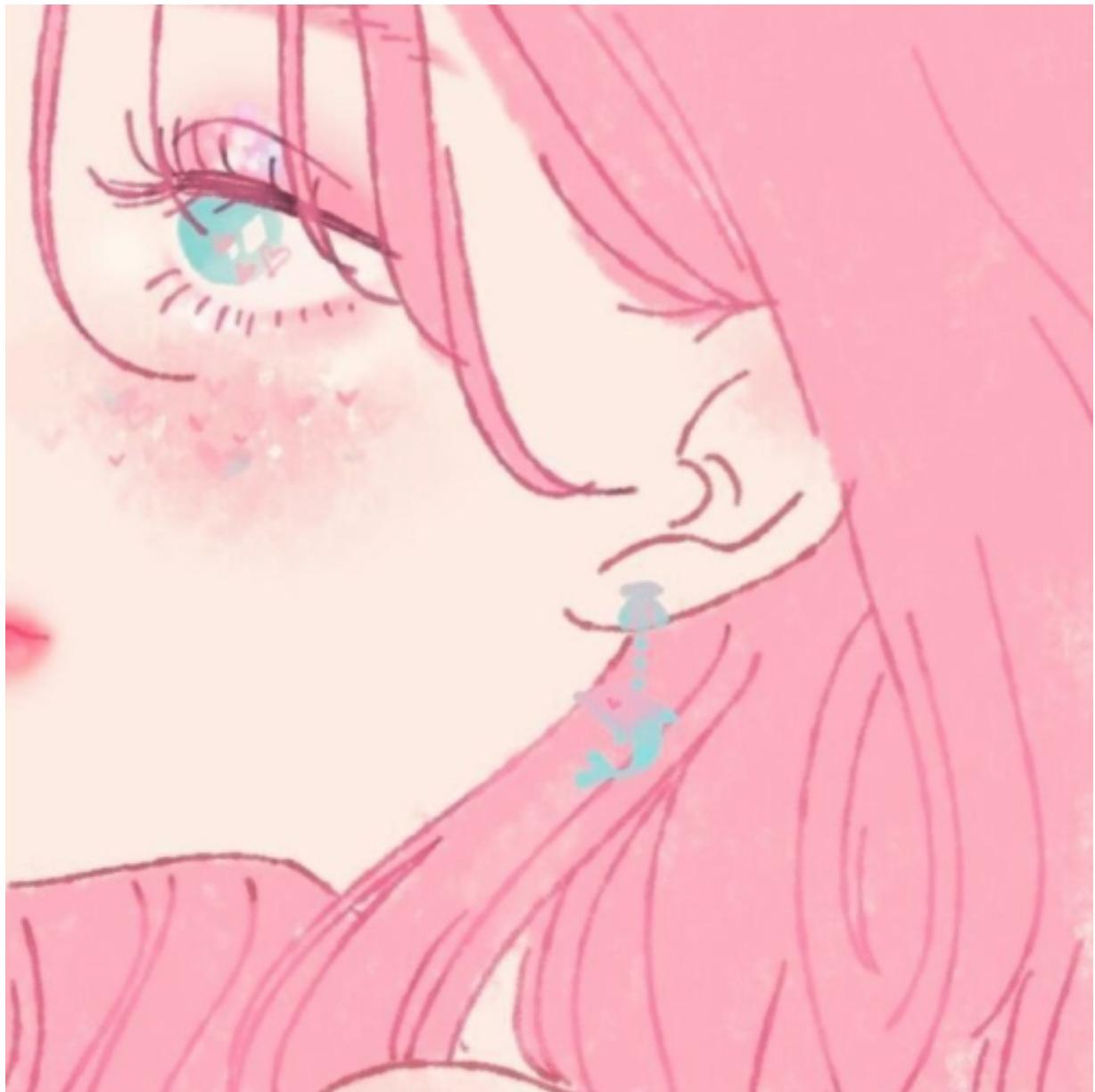


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# Chapter 104

Raul looked at Nicole.

Caught off guard, Nicole quickly said, “The note meant, I wanted to talk about something.”

It was a defense regarding the note Nicole sent saying <I want to do it again>.

Raul turned Nicole’s body around.

As their eyes met, Nicole shrank back.

“Are you playing with me?”

Raul tightly gripped Nicole’s cheek.

His hand held just enough force that her lips pursed like a bird’s beak.

‘Did he have this side too?’

In her previous life, Raul was always sarcastic to Nicole.

No matter how much she provoked him with her anger, he ignored her.

He thought she was not worth treating as an equal.

‘Because he had no reaction... I thought I would be ignored again this time.’

Or he might order his subordinates to punish her. She thought it would be to that extent.

But now, Raul was showing quite an emotional anger.

As if it was a very personal matter. His anger was not like that of an ordinary man, but it felt like a tingling chill.

"Answer me, Karen. Was there really no intention in that note?"

As Raul's hand loosened its grip, Nicole quickly shook her head.

Excuses that wouldn't work on this man didn't pass.

".....I'm sorry. I wrote a note that could be misunderstood. It was quite intentional..... However, I really wanted to meet you. I had something to show you."

Raul closed his mouth for a moment.

"How can I teach you shame? Even if I strip you and spank your butt, you still don't know shame."

"I grew up in a world where I don't know such things....."

Nicole said in a small voice.

In fact, Nicole was surprised at herself these days.

'If my mother hadn't raised me in the countryside to be a child who restrains her emotions, I might have lived recklessly like Karen... Do I have that kind of tendency?'

Especially when Raul was involved, Nicole often did reckless things.

Nicole quietly lowered her eyes and waited for Raul's disposition.

Raul took a step towards Nicole. Reflexively, Nicole took a step back.

He approached again.....

Nicole flopped down onto the long chair behind her.

Raul bent down and gripped Nicole's chin as if to crush it.

"Ah, ung, ah!"

Raul bit Nicole's lips.

Very roughly and fiercely...

It was enough to leave bite marks around her mouth.

Nicole moaned in pain. Raul, without any hesitation, grabbed the hem of Nicole's shirt and tore it open like he was angry.

"Huh, uh...."

The buttons flew off with a clattering sound and the shirt was easily undone.

When her white chest sprung out, he bit down on it this time.

It seemed like he might really bite her.

She might have bled. The shirt fell off without resistance. Her perfectly proportioned upper body was exposed.

Raul bit her side, which was slender but had enough flesh to form a curve inward.

'He's going to eat me up like this.'

Nicole pushed Raul's shoulder away.

"Can't I receive the punishment after I speak? Please?"

Only then did Raul back away. He wiped his mouth. And then he stared straight into Nicole's eyes.

Nicole's bright blue eyes were trembling.

The bitten areas gave off a strange sensation as they swelled all over.

'I don't want to be hated by this person.'

Nicole had such a thought for a moment.

And she also didn't want her entire body to be covered in bite marks.

How was she supposed to carry out her spy mission with such a body?

Raul leaned towards Nicole with his palms on the chair.

'No! Stop.'

Nicole hugged Raul's neck in a hurry.

She buried her face in his shoulder.

She thought frantically.

'Is he really going to get angry?'

Raul's tight muscles tensed up.

He held his breath for a moment.

A few seconds passed.

Nicole's slender and delicate upper body was exactly attached to Raul's solid body.

Was it an illusion that his heartbeat had quickened a bit?

Raul slowly detached Nicole.

He was looking at her with a frown on his face.

But his eyes were slightly softened.

"You're not a child. Are you trying to get out of this by acting cute?"

Nicole wanted to excuse herself that it wasn't like that.

But she thought it would only provoke Raul's temper more.

Instead, Nicole pleaded earnestly.

"Please don't be angry. I was trying to do well... I didn't mean to play a joke on you, Your Grace."

As Raul seemed to feel a bit better, Nicole continued calmly.

"I just... I was in a hurry. I wanted to complete the task you gave me perfectly."

Nicole realized that she was tightly holding onto Raul's wrist.

It was almost an unconscious action.

Raul stared at his wrist.

Her white hand, tightly gripping his sturdy wrist, suddenly trembled.

As if caught doing something, her white hand fled from the back of Raul's hand.

And in the next moment, their eyes met again.

"Ah, um, uh...."

This time, like magnets, their lips overlapped.

Nicole, pinned to the chair, was subjected to his rough kiss for a while before she could finally break free.

"After... after... let's do it then."

As Raul's hand moved under her skirt, Nicole grabbed his hand and spoke.

Raul obediently withdrew.

"If you provoke me one more time, there will be no forgiveness next time."

"Yes....."

Nicole nodded.

Nonetheless, Raul was surprisingly gentlemanly.

He was the same even when dealing with women who were not ladies.

'Does this side of him keep making me reckless?'

In fact, Nicole didn't get hurt even when she was punished by Raul.

In her past life, Nicole even owed her life to Raul.

What's the point of hating such a man for trivial things?

It was just embarrassing that he treated her like a child.

Sometimes it was embarrassing to feel strange.

And she was worried about how Raul would see her.

'Am I really a fool? Even though my whole body is being bitten, I'm worried that Raul might hate me.'

Thinking like that, her eyes welled up with tears, and she hastily adjusted her clothes and covered herself with the shawl that had been draped over the chair.

Raul took a step back, leaned his hand on a pillar, and looked her up and down.

"Alright. Let's talk about work."

Raul said bluntly.

"It seems Duchess Lisbeth has gotten herself into big trouble. It seems to be related to drugs. Now that her husband is going to take office, she will need a lot of money, so she's doing reckless things."

"Evidence?"

"Testimony from an insider. The women in the facility are being administered drugs."

Nicole briefly explained what she had learned.

It was about Duchess Lisbeth getting involved in drug trafficking.

Raul wasn't particularly surprised by the mention of drug trafficking.

"Aren't you shocked? After all, a royal member of a country is trying to engage in such illegal trade."

"Originally, the husband of Duchess Lisbet was a smuggler. He was from a fallen noble family that was only prestigious in name. Moreover, he barely inherited the title after his older brothers died one after another."

".....If you live with a lowly person, does your own status drop to their level? Even if they are royalty."

"Yes."

Raul said.

But, to punish Duchess Lisbeth— even if that's the reason, to marry a royal to a smuggler...

Nicole always thought that the royal family was truly atrocious, no matter when she heard about them.

"All the victims are under the control of Duchess Lisbeth. They are women who have lived in Duchess Lisbet's facilities for a very long time."

"In such cases, it's difficult to deal with them as witnesses."

Raul continued.

"When it's crucial, they might take Duchess Lisbeth's side or else....."

"Yes. If things go wrong, Duchess Lisbeth's side might kill or hide the witnesses. It won't be easy to approach them either."

"Moreover, as you know, Duchess Lisbeth is a royal."

"Yes."

Nicole nodded, understanding why Raul was emphasizing that fact.

"If we attack poorly, it will be seen as a challenge to the dignity of the royal family. It won't be easy to confiscate or search the charity organization either. Even if we pursue tax evasion within the charity organization, the royal family members have immunity."

Moreover, Raul has something to gain from this matter.

It's about preventing Duchess Lisbet from replacing Marquis Saratheve and taking military power into her hands.

Duchess Lisbeth is truly a worthless and incompetent character. So the royal family will appoint her as a representative and start operating the army directly.

As Duchess Lisbeth has not been treated as a member of the royal family for a long time, there is justification for the royal family's action of 'promoting and honoring Duchess Lisbeth.'

The private soldiers of Marquis Sarathevr will ultimately fall into the hands of the royal family. If that happens, Raul will have to directly compete with the royal family for military power in the capital.

“Duchess Lisbeth is a pathetic character that I could wipe out in an instant if I wanted to. It’s not that I can’t, it’s that I’m not doing it.”

If Raul were to expose or harm the corruption of Duke and Duchess Lisbeth now, it would clearly look intentional. He would face criticism from the world for showing ambition for military power.

Nicole thought.

There would be only one exception to this situation.

“If Duchess Lisbeth commits a very serious crime, like the devil worship of Marquis Saratheve, the story changes. It’s a level that the royal family can’t tolerate. The severity of the crime is so great that it had to be exposed; there’s no other way but to go with that narrative.”

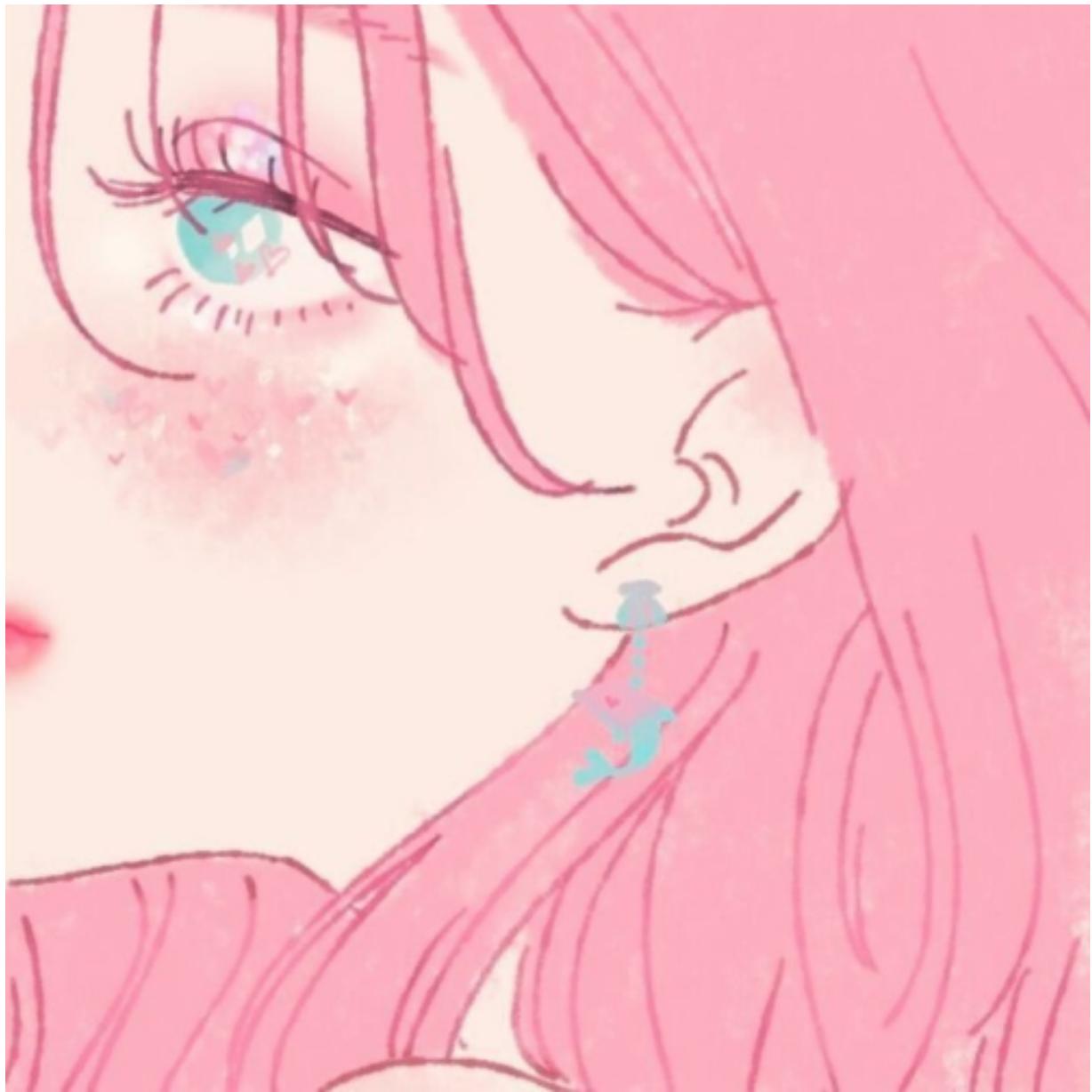
Nicole said quietly.

“So we need strong evidence. A recording or video footage. Duchess Lisbeth is not originally involved in major crimes or power struggles. So her actions will be clumsy and she’ll be caught quickly. Please allow me to use magical tools and perform surveillance.”

Raul fell into thought for a moment. Nicole’s words made sense.

However, this was somewhat of a gamble for Raul as well. The key was how much he could trust Nicole.

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# Chapter 105

“You know that I want to sleep with you, right?”

Raul said.

“Quite a lot, actually.”

“.....I know.”

Nicole blinked her eyes. And regrettably, Nicole also wanted to sleep with Raul.

“So I’m contemplating.”

“.....”

“Whether this is favoritism or logic. Or if you are a talent or a mistress.”

Nicole didn’t know how to respond to Raul’s enigmatic words. In the end, she confessed honestly.

“I’ll do my best..... for you.”

Nicole suddenly thought of the glassworms. The ones Isabel would have used to control her.

Thinking about it made her heart ache.

Surely, in her past life, she had ignored Raul’s kindness and misunderstood him.

Perhaps, because of Isabel.....

So in this life, she wanted to do well without lacking anything. Nicole's unrequited love-like feelings were deepening as days passed.

Fortunately, her status in this life allowed her to express these feelings as loyalty. Thanks to this, she could become stronger.

"You are my master, Grand Duke. I would..... risk my life for my master. In any way, I'll help pave the way for you....."

".....I'll permit it. But if you fail, the punishment will be the same as for anyone else. It won't end with just a spanking on my knee. I won't be able to save you then."

Nicole nodded quietly.

"Thank you. And one more thing. If I succeed in capturing the evidence, please move up the general's appointment ceremony of Duke Lisbeth by just a few days."

Nicole spoke in a whispering tone. Raul said he would think about it and then he rose from his seat.

"Are you forgiving me now?"

Nicole asked impulsively, knowing that Raul was a person who was clear about his decisions.

"First, if you succeed in the mission, I'll decide what punishment to give next."

Raul added.

"I've come to know that you enjoy lewd jokes."

Nicole's face turned red.

Inside Raul's arms, she feared what kind of woman she was becoming. And she missed the timing to make excuses. It was uncertain whether he would listen to her excuses, though.

\* \* \*

The next day, Nicole headed to the charity house again.

The basket on Nicole's arm was filled with medicine for the children and foods like cookies and bread she made with the maids.

"What is this?"

The secretary who received the basket from Nicole asked.

"I wanted to share some food with the children... These are nutritional supplements. The children need to be healthy to prevent skin diseases from returning."

"Hmm, it's not even a regular volunteer day, yet you came. Your passion is truly impressive. And so many donations! I'll speak well of you to Duchess Lisbeth."

The secretary's gaze at Nicole had significantly changed.

It was because the secretary had been treated like a slave by Duchess Lisbeth, who had been involved in suspicious activities and various external engagements lately.

Amidst this, there were concerns about being held responsible, as contagious skin diseases along with influenza were spreading among the children.

However, thanks to Nicole's proper handling, the children's skin diseases disappeared. Consequently, it seemed that the secretary judged Nicole to be a helpful person.

Moreover, Nicole always responded patiently whenever the secretary complained. Then the secretary increasingly began to hold onto Nicole and started rambling on various topics.

'In fact, it was me who pricked the children with a needle and created a fake skin disease that naturally subsided over time...'

But sometimes ignorance was bliss.

"I also brought some snacks for you. I made them myself. This is also a silk handkerchief I made."

"...There was no need for that. But anyway, I'll accept it graciously."

The secretary was visibly delighted by the gifts Nicole subtly offered.

"But the atmosphere today is... quite different."

Nicole said as she looked around.

It wasn't for no reason; there were men armed with swords and clubs loitering in the garden near the house of charity. It was quite an odd scene.

The house of charity is a facility for poor single mothers, yet she heard that the entry of people is strictly controlled.

"What else could it be, but the Duchess's escort? It's normal for royalty to have this level of escort."

The secretary said, in a tone that seemed to be lecturing Nicole outright.

"The general has been promoted, so he insisted that his wife should also have an escort. There will be many political enemies in the future. Oops, he's not yet a general... since the appointment ceremony is not conducted yet."

The secretary said that dignity is important and the distinction between men and women should be maintained, so those men would only roam around the vicinity of the largest building of the house of charity, near the Duchess's office.

'Nonsense.'

Nicole snickered. If the Duchess was really involved in drug dealing, she would slowly start to feel a chill down her spine.

The drug trade in the capital is currently tightly controlled by a man known as Mr. Snake. They say he's a terrifying man with a scar on his face.

That man is said to ruthlessly punish anyone dealing drugs besides himself.

Moreover, being appointed as a general and taking charge of the capital's military power is like openly turning Raul, the Grand Duke of Valentine, into a political enemy.

So, it would be no surprise if they started to get scared.

The result is an excessive defense with guards surrounding the house of charity.

"Anyway, there have been many unusual events recently, so... it seems you've become more thoughtful."

"Still, how fortunate it is to have someone like you, the secretary, by Duchess Lisbeth's side. You always serve the Duchess with sincerity. The Duchess must think so too."

The secretary beamed as if not displeased by the praise.

But that was short-lived, as they soon began to grumble again.

"It's a joy to see my master's status rise... but I'm also unmarried. These dark-clothed men keep coming and going, and it scares me to death. What about my reputation? You see, this morning, a coachman tried to enter the main house by mistake, and they beat him so badly they broke his leg. I must be careful..."

Women raised in the conservative environment of the Empire were reluctant to even speak with men without a chaperone. It seemed the secretary was no exception.

Perhaps because of that, the secretary seemed to have emotional ups and downs. She was a bit scatterbrained to begin with.

While dealing with the secretary, Nicole's thoughts were entirely on the duchess's office. Installing a bug there was her goal for the day.

However, of all days, today the guards started patrolling around.

Nicole saw the clubs hanging from their waists.

If caught, she knew she might be struck on the head immediately.

Nicole's status was nobility in name only, from a humble family, while Duchess Lisbeth was royalty. If she were beaten to death here, the duchess would pay no price, and Nicole would die a dog's death alone.

Nicole continued to be conscious of the bug in her possession, letting the secretary's words go in one ear and out the other.

"Anyway, there was a time when I was quite popular too. Although now I've gained weight and aged."

"What's important is not that but finding your destiny. Someday you will meet someone good for you."

At those words, the secretary looked kindly at Nicole.

"Did you come through the duchess to build connections? Because you want to get married?"

Nicole feigned embarrassment at that blunt statement.

"...Yes, if things go well."

"Hmm, why? Do you have a man you like? You seem a bit odd."

"Ah, what?"

Nicole was at a loss for words upon receiving such a direct question from the office manager. Someone she liked.

If one were to insist on specifics, she... Raul... him...

But she dared not entertain such thoughts. Just the fleeting consideration made Nicole feel breathless.

“The rumors are rampant, young lady, that you stayed in the Grand Duke’s room and then left.”

Nicole took a moment to choose her words before responding.

“Still, it’s best to be aware of one’s station. Matters of love and romance are only feasible among those of similar status.”

“Oh my, goodness. So it was true. Really?”

Nicole shook her head.

“I only saw him because I was being interrogated. But... he truly was a beautiful person. For a moment, I thought it would be worth spending a lifetime just to spend one night with him.”

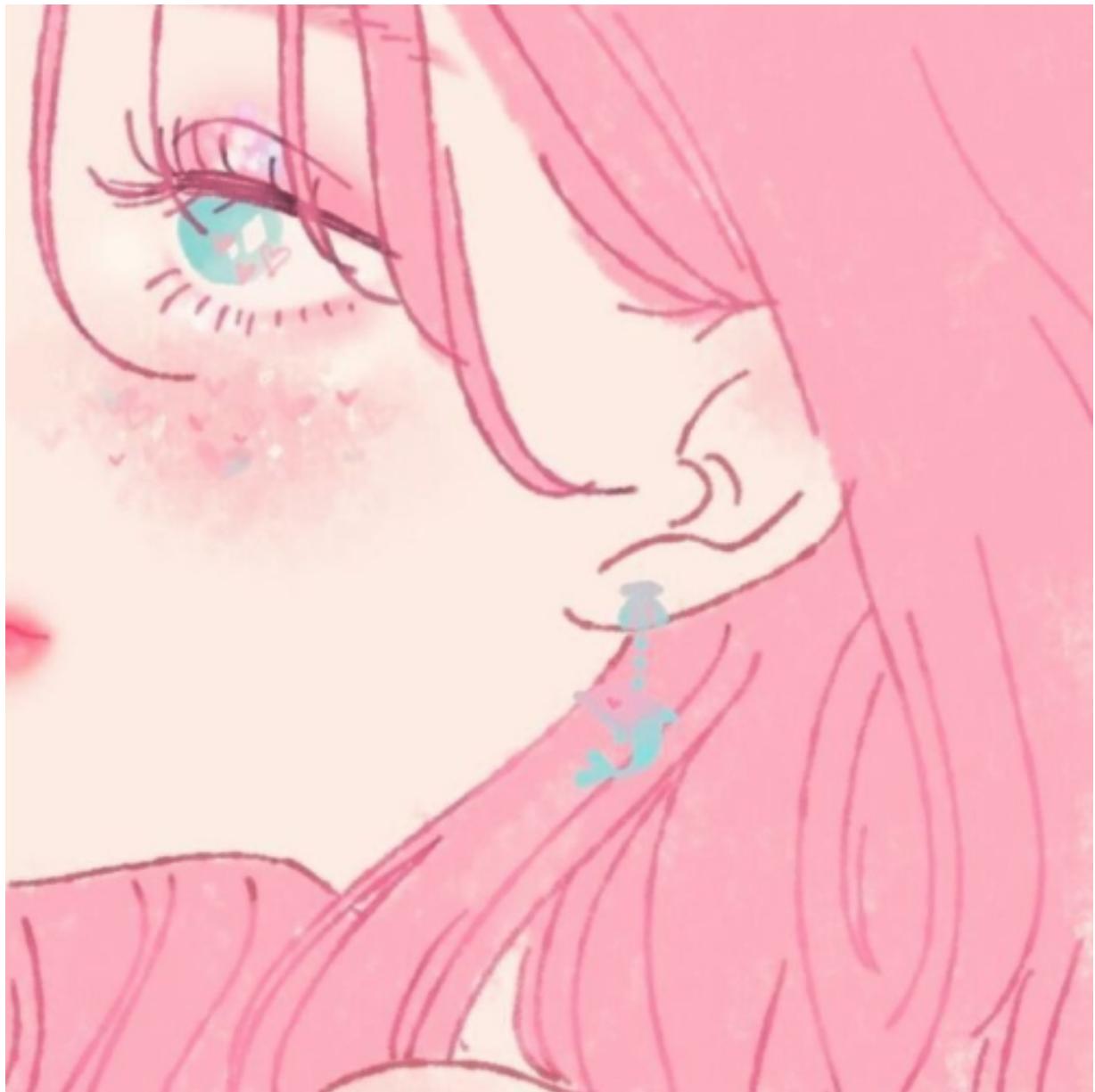
Nicole’s rather provocative words made the office manager’s eyes sparkle. But then, the sound of heavy footsteps from outside made her frown.

“Those guys must be patrolling the corridors again. Ah, I’m so tired. As if there’s anyone suspicious here. It feels like they’re watching me so closely I can’t even catch my breath, let alone go out... It’s been so long since I could...”

Upon hearing that, Nicole cautiously opened her mouth.

“If it’s alright with you... may I help you with your work?”

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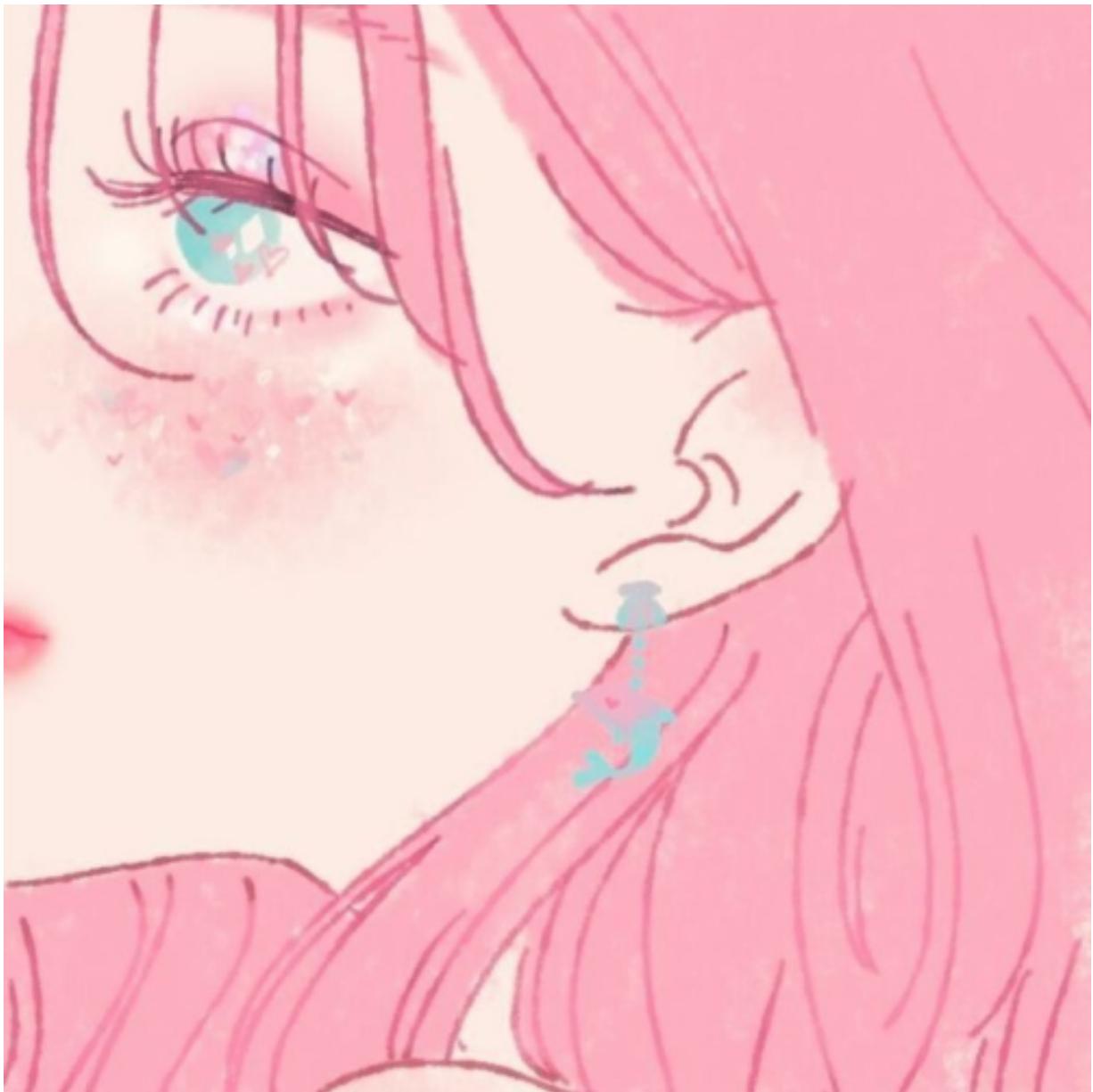


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# Chapter 106

The secretary was primarily in charge of the consultation desk, that is, the counter, and at other times, was bound to serve Duchess Lisbeth day and night.

It just so happened that Duchess Lisbeth had entered the Imperial Palace today.

Nicole tempted her by saying she would take care of the counter, so she should go out for a while.

“I heard that the streets are very bustling right now. Ever since the Royal Family’s return ceremony, the capital’s people have been excited. There are discounts in shops here and there, and wherever you go, there are lots of people.”

“But still... if someone who wishes to donate comes...”

“I have learned by watching too. If a donor with some money comes, I’ll keep them entertained with at least a cup of tea. If admission consultants come, I’ll do a health check and take good care of them.”

The secretary couldn’t resist the temptation, as it sounded quite reliable.

“Then please take care of it for a moment. I’ll be back in an hour or two.”

The secretary said cheerfully.

"But you must not wander around inside the building. You know there are guards, right? An unmarried young lady catching the guards' eyes won't be good for her. And the Duchess has been very sensitive these days. Make sure no one even loiters around the third floor."

The third floor was where the Duchess's office and her personal spaces were located.

"Don't worry. I'll stay right here."

Nicole answered with a kind smile.

-Of course, it was a sentiment far from her heart.

Since it was morning, there was little chance of someone coming by.

Nicole waited quietly for her moment before stepping out from behind the counter.

She carefully made her way up the stairs, taking care not to encounter any guards.

*Creak, creak.*

While ascending the stairs, Nicole almost ran into a guard patrolling the second floor. She quickly hid her body in the corridor beyond the stairs.

'It seems he didn't see me.'

This building was so old that even a little force while walking would make the wooden floorboards tremble.

*'Phew.'*

The guard passed by the stairs and disappeared into the corridor.

Perhaps because the duchess was out, the third-floor corridor was empty.

'It's locked.'

Nicole, stopping in front of the duchess's office, tried turning the doorknob. It didn't budge.

Fortunately, picking locks was a basic skill for Sith's shadow.

'The training from the academy is proving to be so useful.'

The lock wasn't very sturdy and was quite old.

*Click, click.* Nicole easily picked the lock and entered.

'Activate this listening device so it's not noticeable yet close enough to clearly hear people's conversations...'

Pressing the bottom part of the magical device surely activates it, causing light to enter the magic stone inside. Of course, it's designed to prevent light from leaking outside. Just attach it to a flat surface and it's done.

*Thud, thud.*

Then, footsteps were heard from outside, stopping in front of the door.

'Seems like it's the guard.'

Nicole took a breath. The person outside didn't open the door and come in. *Please don't come in.* Nicole hid under the desk.

'Now that it's come to this, I must at least succeed in installing the listening device.'

Even a very slight sound might cause the guard outside to come in. But Nicole had already activated the magical device.

'Please let there be no loud noise when it attaches.'

Nicole closed her eyes tightly and attached the magical device under the desk.

*Rustle.* Fortunately, the listening device was attached under the desk without making any noise.

The next moment, there was a commotion outside.

<What's going on?>

The guard outside spoke to someone in a gruff voice. Nicole's shoulders tensed up.

<Someone came? But it seems like this door is slightly open... Wasn't it surely locked?>

But beyond that, the commotion grew louder. The guards' heavy footsteps faded into the distance.

'I was lucky.'

Nicole let out a sigh of relief.

Once it quieted down outside the door, Nicole stepped into the hallway with muted footsteps. Soon after, the murmuring sounds drew closer.

Nicole realized why the guard at the door had hurried away. It was because of a man coming up the stairs with creaking

steps.

'That person is.....'

Nicole's eyes widened. It was the Crown Prince, Martes.

"You, it is indeed you. I thought I could find you if I came here."

Martes approached Nicole with his eyes flickering.

"Come on, you look healthier than me, so come on down here. I don't like climbing stairs."

Nicole hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to obey that command or turn around and run away from there. And she sighed inwardly.

While Nicole had momentarily left the counter, the Crown Prince had burst in.

As he began to wander the hallways, babbling incoherently, the terrified guards gathered around. And surely someone among them recognized the Crown Prince.

"Y, Your Highness the Crown Prince."

Nicole hesitantly descended and greeted him from a distance.

"Come closer."

The Crown Prince gestured with his hand.

'Did he really come looking for me?'

Why?

The Crown Prince pushed past the guards and approached Nicole closely. From the man emanated a faint scent of cinnamon and polish.

"Are you the same as me?"

"Pardon?"

"Were you not born as delicate and fragile glass like me? That's why you recognized me immediately, pitifully so. I was born a noble Crown Prince, so I had many to look after me, but not a lowly one like you, I suppose. It must have been hard with a fragile body that could break at any moment."

*-At some point, only those with lunacy or defects were born in the imperial family.* Raul's words came to mind.

'What on earth is this man saying? Is this man the next Emperor of this country? Is this madman really going to rule this nation someday?'

Nicole felt a fundamental fear.

"Your Majesty, I am... not of noble stature like you."

At that moment, Martes turned his head to the side. It was a motion akin to an owl tilting its head on a tree branch in the middle of the night.

And he looked at Nicole without even blinking.

"Then how did you 'recognize' me?"

"Pardon?"

"How did you immediately know that I am a glass person\*? It doesn't make sense unless you are of the same kind as

me. Are you perhaps a spy? Should I beat and break your body to see if you're real or not?"

[T/N: 유리인 (glass person) a person who is fragile/delicate like a glass; this is the first time I've heard of this word, so I'm translating it literally the same as the korean term. Might change in future chaps!]

Nicole felt as though her hands were trembling, but she clasped them together without showing it.

She had no choice but to comply with him. Nicole decided to give an ambiguous answer.

"Your Majesty. Such important secrets should not be spoken of in such a private place. I apologize, but it puts me in a very difficult position."

"Oh, as expected..." Martes said.

"Indeed. Matters concerning ones like us are secret."

"....."

"Then come with me. I will protect you. I am a male glass person and you are a female glass person, so it is only right that we become a pair, isn't it?"

Each word he spoke plunged her deeper into shock.

'There is indeed a terror that a madman imparts.'

Nicole wanted to run away right then and there.

At that moment, someone approached, parting the crowd. The guards said nothing and made way for him.

“Your Majesty.”

Nicole almost cried when she realized who it was—it was Raul himself. He was leisurely walking towards her, dressed in the Knight Order’s uniform.

The aura and atmosphere he brought with him suddenly dominated the center of the corridor. Nicole’s gaze was fixed on Raul.

“You shouldn’t do this. It’s not my job to go around looking for Your Majesty. To run away in the middle of an important royal council meeting.”

“Ah, but this was the only opportunity. Grand Duke. Look at this. The woman I’ve been looking for is here—”

“That woman has spent the night with me.”

Raul stated bluntly.

At his words, the surroundings went quiet as if doused with water.

“Your Majesty!”

The Duchess Lisbeth appeared from behind, belatedly, and hurried over.

And Nicole clearly saw the Duchess’s face turn pale.

“This disloyal vassal of yours misunderstood the intentions of Duchess Lisbeth and mistook that person, presented before His Highness the Crown Prince, as a gift for myself. And then, that night, I got drunk. So if you wish to find another ‘glass person,’ I will assist you. That would be best, wouldn’t it?” (Raul)

"That woman? So... A man like you and that fragile glass person..."

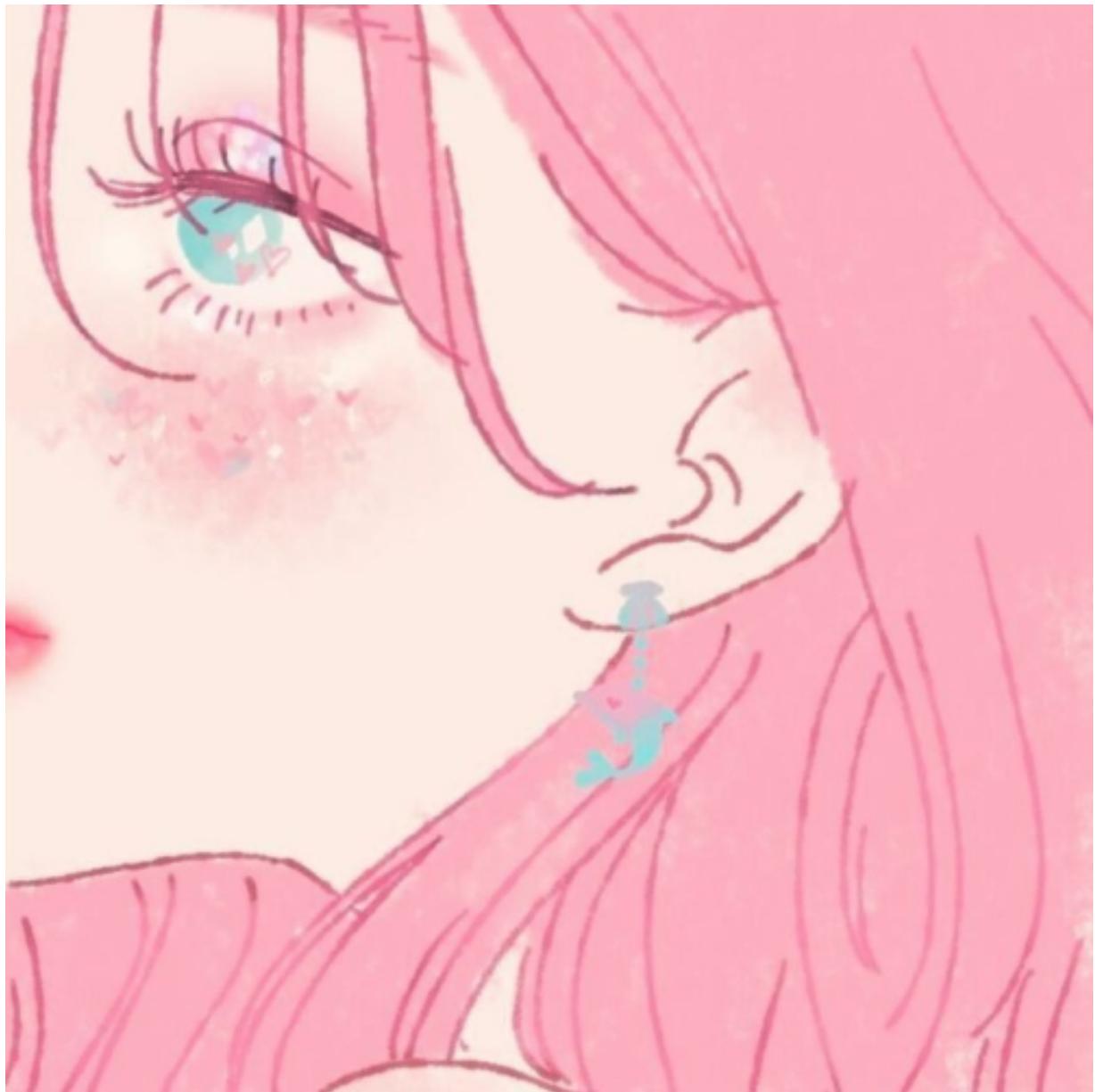
"It seems it was possible. If you're curious, Your Majesty could try it with other women. See if they break in your grasp or if they are truly smooth like glass. Ah, in Your Majesty's case, they would probably break."

Raul approached and looked at the Crown Prince. The tall and gaunt Crown Prince appeared irritable and weak in front of Raul.

The Crown Prince's lips began to quiver, followed by his whole body trembling uncontrollably.

However, the Crown Prince couldn't utter a single word in response.

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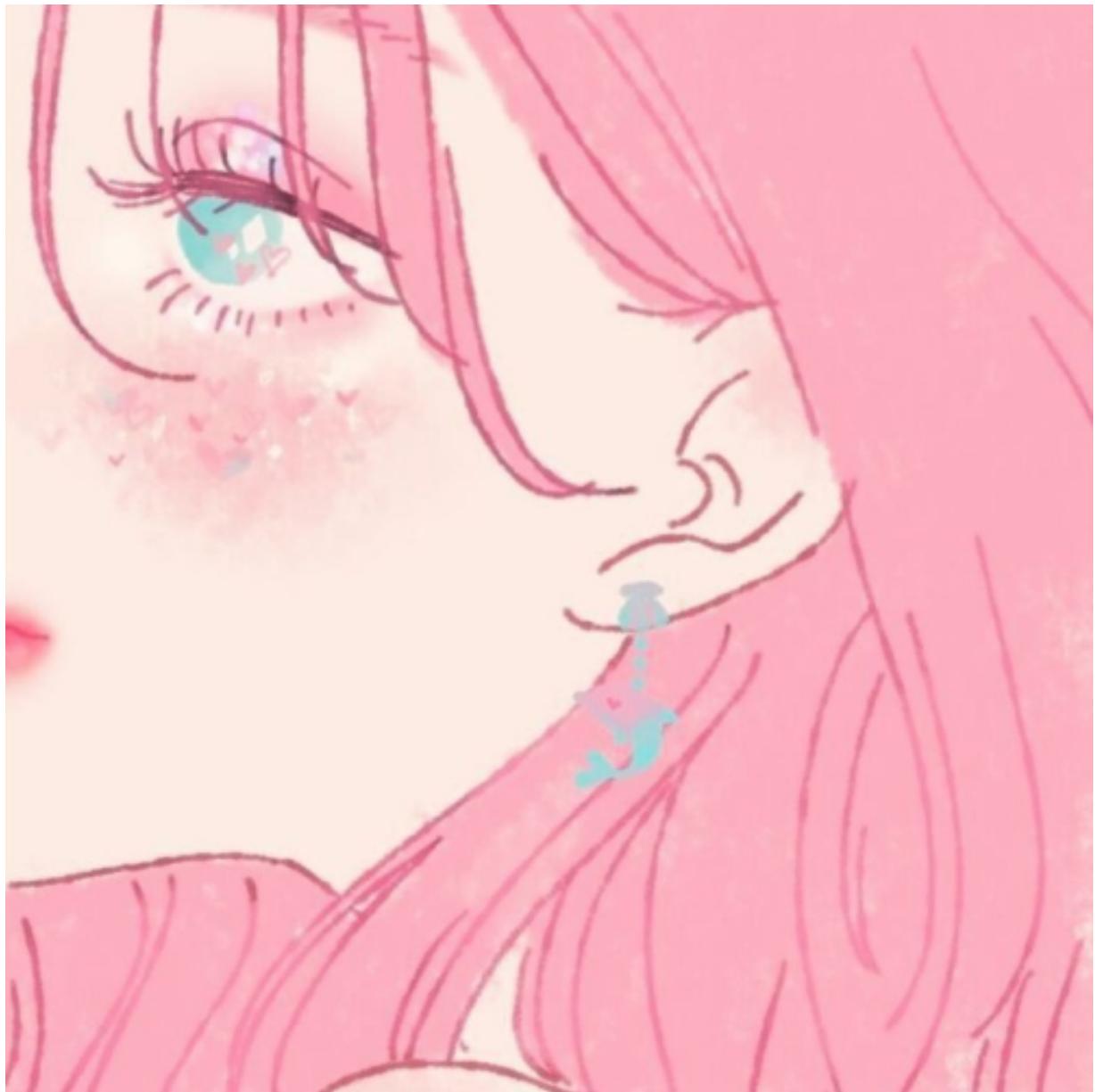


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# Chapter 107

“So, please go back. The journey must have been tough for you to come this far. What if your precious body gets hurt, Your Majesty? It’s not good for the glass to be so heated. You shouldn’t let delicate things get damaged, right?”

“Grand Duke, I am.....”

The Crown Prince’s expression clouded over. But soon, his shoulders sagged as if he had resigned himself.

“I see. I thought I had found an interesting toy for once.”

The Crown Prince kept glancing at Nicole as he left his seat. But it seemed that Raul was having a hard time moving.

“Y, Your Majesty. That.....”

Duchess Lisbeth called him in confusion. Instead of replying, Raul flicked his hand at Duchess Lisbeth.

Despite his arrogant behavior, Duchess Lisbeth approached Raul, biting her lip.

“Grand Duke, this is a private organization. Even if His Majesty the Crown Prince is here, it’s difficult if you intrude like this.”

“Why? Are you worried that I’ll seduce anyone if I come here?”

“How can you say that I offered a woman to Your Majesty!”

“There’s something more important than that.”

Raul said as if he was talking to a child.

“You should keep your mouth shut. Make sure no one knows what happened here.”

It was an obvious statement, so Duchess Lisbeth nodded uncomfortably. She glared at Nicole fiercely. Nicole pretended not to notice her gaze.

“Everyone, keep your mouth shut.”

Duchess Lisbeth gave orders to a man who seemed to be the leader of the guards. The man nodded and gathered the guards to leave.

As Raul was about to leave, his gaze met Nicole’s in the air.

But he didn’t say anything and looked away. Nicole did the same.

\* \* \*

“Did you really sleep with the Grand Duke?”

Duchess Lisbeth said as if she couldn’t believe it.

Nicole was confused. The secretary had said that there was a rumor about her and Raul.

She couldn’t decide whether to affirm or deny it. Nicole chose to leave an aftertaste and turn her gaze away.

“There was nothing shameful. Really.”

“Even just with His Highness the Crown Prince...”

The expression on Duchess Lisbeth’s face showed she was tired of speaking.

“Enough, leave now. And from tomorrow, try to come out every day if possible. I have to keep an eye on you.”

Nicole found it amusing to see through Duchess Lisbeth’s true intentions.

‘Ah, is this something too ambiguous for me to spit out but too trivial to swallow right now?’

It’s not certain, but it seems she thinks that she has caught Raul’s eye. Moreover, for some reason unknown to her, the Crown Prince is also paying attention to her.

So, she wants to keep her close as a potentially useful card for later. But Raul is not an easy man, so it seems unlikely that she would become a weakness to him.

Besides, if it was just a one-night stand for fun, keeping her would only tarnish her own reputation, so she’s agonizing over how to treat her.

As Nicole turned away, Duchess Lisbeth’s voice boomed out behind her.

“Damn it. And where has this crazy woman gone, I mean the secretary!”

An unexpected incident occurred, but thanks to Raul, it was manageable.

And the installation of the listening device was narrowly successful. The bewildered Duchess Lisbeth would have no

idea what had been installed in her room.

And Nicole's wandering through the corridors also went undetected.

'For now, I have achieved my goal.'

Nicole quickly left the charity organization.

\* \* \*

"Could you give me a heads-up about what kind of trouble you'll cause next time?"

When Nicole arrived home, Raul's carriage was waiting.

Raul swiftly scooped her up into the carriage and spoke tenderly, his tender tone more frightening than anything else.

"This time it wasn't my fault. I had no idea the Crown Prince would come unannounced."

"I was curious what you said to the Crown Prince that made him so obsessed with you."

Raul, leaning his arm on the carriage window frame, laughed mockingly.

"Pretending to be a glass woman to escape the crisis, huh? Interesting."

Nicole wondered why Raul's expression was so strange. He acted as if he was really angry about something. However, there was no room for reprimand in terms of work this time. And... he acted as if he was trying not to show that anger.

'This is a new side of him, is it jealousy? That can't be.'

Nicole thought in astonishment.

"I really had no choice at that time."

Nicole said softly, looking at Raul who was lazily leaning against the backrest.

"Thank you for your help, Grand Duke. It was really fortunate that you were there by chance."

"The mission?"

"I succeeded in installing the listening device. I'll make sure to catch a plausible story."

Raul nodded slightly.

"I'll give you one piece of advice as a reward. Never let yourself be taken by the Crown Prince."

"...Why?"

"What do you think the Crown Prince will do if he takes you away?"

Nicole really didn't want to know. She couldn't think of anything positive.

"I can't even imagine."

"As I said, the Crown Prince is sick with the belief that his body is made of glass. Perhaps that's why he thinks others don't understand him."

Upon hearing this, Nicole observed Raul anew. *'Such a person should not become the Emperor. That's... wrong.'*

If one must find someone worthy to rule others, it should be a man like Raul before her eyes. Cold, perfect, and naturally endowed with abilities surpassing others. A born ruler destined to lead. It must be such a person or none at all.

“So?”

“That’s why he’s obsessed with finding his kind, someone who understands him. Generally, when the Crown Prince finds a new toy, things don’t end well. And you’ve even pretended to be made of glass.”

Raul whispered.

“If he catches you first, he ‘ll test to see if you’re really made of glass. In many different ways.”

Glass can break when scorched by fire. While a person may emit the sound of breaking bones when hurt, glass will shatter with a clinking noise.

‘Is he saying he’ll conduct terrible experiments on me?’

Nicole turned pale.

“What if I get seriously hurt? What use would there be for such a person?”

“What does it matter? A toy doesn’t need to walk around.”

Raul’s dark purple eyes were enchantingly bright.

“Wouldn’t I, your master, be better in that case? Even if I were to raise you within our ranks.”

Nicole wondered if she should laugh at Raul’s teasing joke. After all, Raul was right. It would be better to be the cruel

man's pet than a toy. Either way, it would mean losing human dignity.

"I dislike both options."

Nicole said softly.

"However, if one option allowed me to live like a human, naturally, I would choose the Grand Duke."

Raul chuckled lightly.

"You ponder over the obvious, making people feel slighted."

"I thought that if it were the Grand Duke, you might really put me in our ranks, especially if I keep causing trouble."

"Smart, aren't you?"

Raul readily nodded his head.

Nicole considered protesting once more that this incident wasn't really her fault, but she held back.

If anything, this incident was also an aftermath of Nicole popping out of a pile of flowers.

Then their eyes met again.

Whenever they were alone in an enclosed space, it always led to a kiss. So she tensed up, wondering if he would kiss her again.

However, Raul showed no such intention. Nicole's mouth went dry. She had to relieve this tension somehow.

Impulsively, Nicole planted a small kiss on Raul's lips and then was struck dumbfounded.

"Thank you for saving me. I'll be going now."

Without checking Raul's expression, Nicole got out of the carriage, her back and ears flushed red.

It seemed Raul's gaze followed her to that place.

Nicole hurriedly entered through the main gate.

'Indeed, that person makes me feel strange.'

It was the last thought Nicole had.

\* \* \*

<...So all the letters have been prepared.>

<*Crackle*- The medicine is too effective. It's a waste to sell just the recipe. How about we sell some samples first and if the response is good, we raise the price? This could be the goose that lays golden eggs.>

<I've never seen such an effective drug before. It's like sending people to heaven. The sight of those trash gasping for it. Are you talking about those women's children? I've isolated them in branch number one under the pretext of illness. Luckily, the flu is going around, which is fortunate I guess.>

<Ah, I know I'm reluctant to get involved in such matters after the appointment ceremony. I'm also troubled. This could become too much money...>

*Crackle, crackle.*

Nicole sat in the room and turned on the listening device. This tool, made of a special magic stone called a listening stone, came in pairs.

Through this device, she could eavesdrop on another pair's conversation and also record it within the tool.

Nicole diligently saved every important part of the eavesdropped conversation.

'You talk quite a lot, Duchess Lisbeth.'

Nicole smiled faintly.

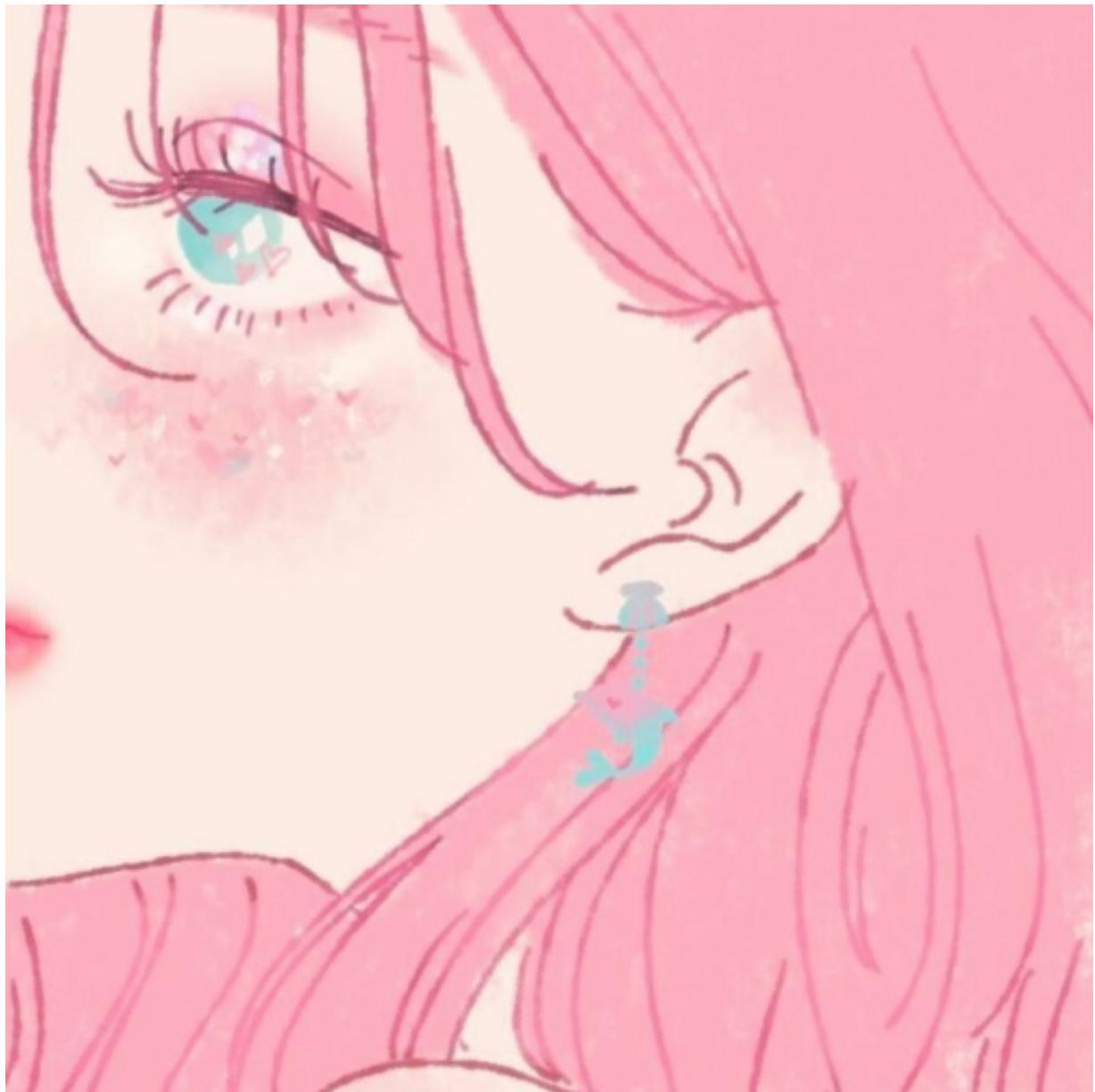
It's said that those who have committed crimes before do it best, after all.

Duchess Lisbeth carelessly babbled on about this and that with her husband.

'And then, there's one more thing...'

There was something she mustn't forget to take care of.

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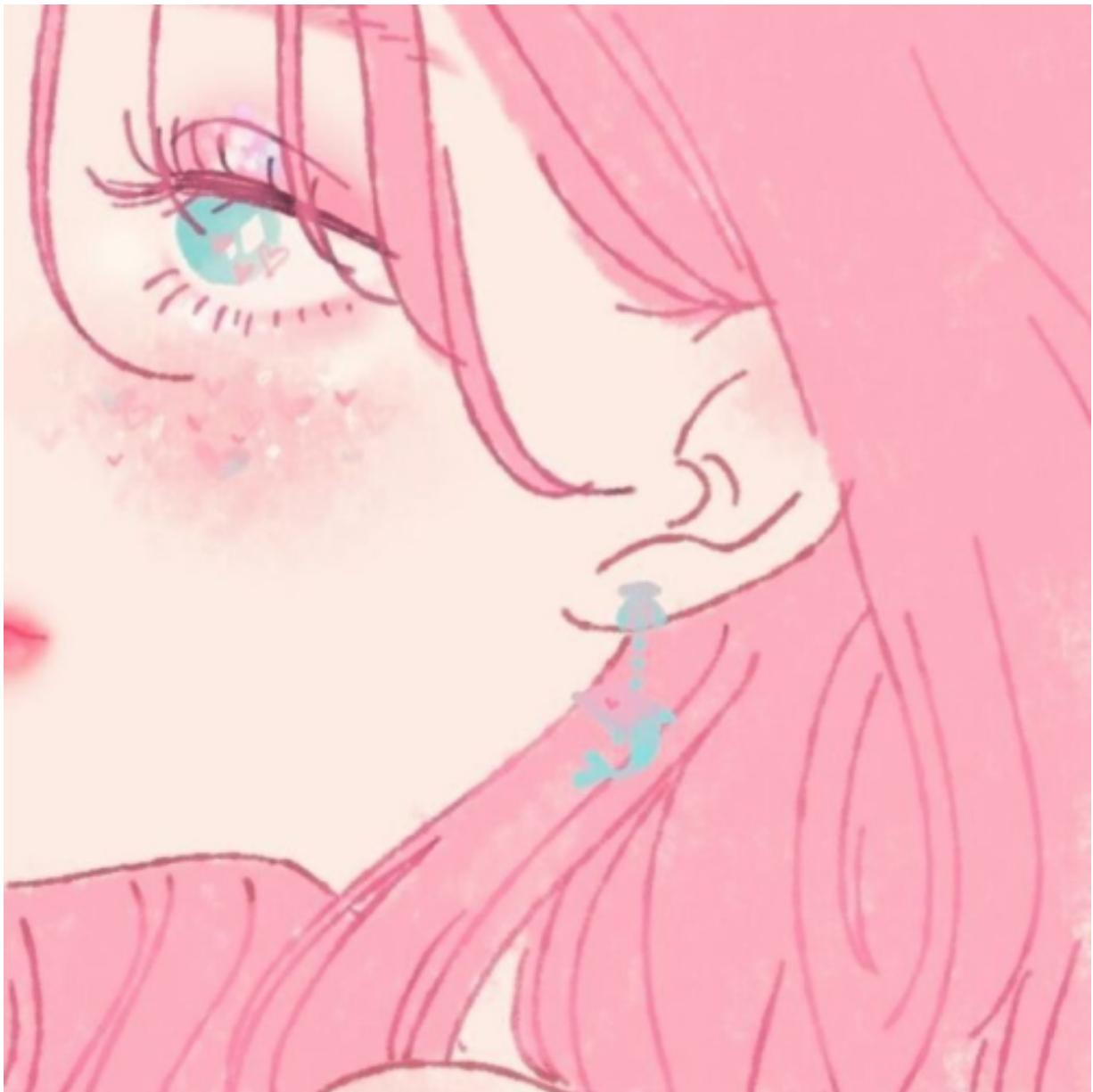


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# Chapter 108

Apart from the commotion of the Crown Prince's visit, Nicole had grown closer to the secretary.

It seemed that the secretary was also shocked by Martes' invasion, as she did not mention Nicole's absence from the counter and her wandering the hallways.

Thanks to this, Nicole found it quite comfortable to move around inside the charity house.

A few days later.

Nicole went to the room where the children were gathered, under the pretext of checking the prognosis of a skin disease.

Aru's eyes widened upon seeing Nicole, and she hurriedly approached.

"Miss!"

"Call me Karen."

Nicole said. Aru blinked shyly and then called her 'Miss Karen.'

"Didn't you call me unnie before?"

"Somehow, I thought you who does such things is amazing... Plus, I heard you were originally a noble..."

Nicole faintly smiled.

“Call me as you used to. More importantly, how did the task I asked you to do go?”

“I think I’ve captured something tremendous.”

The day after the Crown Prince’s visit, Nicole secretly entrusted Aru with a precious video stone. Nicole had given it to her without much expectation.

She handed it over with a warning not to lose it, but Aru handled the video stone as if she was well acquainted with it.

Aru was the most clever among the children, so she took on errands and thus had opportunities to wander around the building under various pretexts.

“I recorded a conversation between that woman Isabel and the Duchess.”

Nicole’s heart fluttered. Just as she expected, Aru was excessively competent.

“That woman Isabel is very quick-witted.”

“It seemed like it. She’s an incredibly beautiful woman, but something about her was off.”

“Didn’t you feel like she noticed something?”

“I’ve practically grown up here; this is my territory, and I know it very well. I won’t get caught.”

Aru, with eyes hoping for praise, told Nicole how she had installed the video stone.

She calculated the angle of a tree and hid the video stone in front of Isabel's quarters, then went to retrieve it the next day.

The fact that Isabel's study was underground. And how Duchess Lisbeth detests the underground so much that she insists on conversing with Isabel outside....

"And, look at this."

Aru handed a piece of paper to Nicole.

[Ulistan No. 9. Compartment 6, Cargo 3. Handle with care as special cargo. Treat as royal family's cargo.]

It was information about cargo scheduled for shipment.

"I couldn't steal the original for fear of suspicion. I memorized it first and then wrote it down. I clearly saw Duchess Lisbeth's seal on a document with this content. Is it okay even if it's not the original?"

Nicole wanted to hug Aru and spin around right there on the spot.

Aru was not just any Sith. She was a child who could become a very competent shadow. No, she might even rise to a very high place like Dagger.

'...Yes, Raul would never allow just anyone to marry into his retinue.'

Bastard is among Raul's closest confidants. Raul will surely promote her.

Of course, Aru is a lovely girl. But sadly, her status will be of no help to Bastard's advancement.

So if Raul allows that marriage proposal -

'That child, she's going to be an incredibly capable agent.'

And she will be a trustworthy colleague. Nicole trusted Raul's judgment of character, and this time it was spot on.

"But Aru, you seem to know all the buildings here inside out, don't you? Then why did you get caught by the secretary and scolded the day we first met?"

"Ah... The secretary is quicker to notice than you'd think... And you see."

Aru said seriously.

"Sometimes getting caught lessens suspicion. They think, 'Oh, she's not as sharp as we thought.' People in my position are resented if they act too competently in everything."

Upon hearing this, Nicole didn't know whether to pity Aru or be proud of her. This child had surely matured early on.

Not sure if he misunderstood Nicole's clouded expression, Aru quickly said,

"You need the original, don't you? If you give me some time, I'll somehow....."

"Aru."

Nicole opened her mouth.

"You really have a lot to learn from. How great it would have been if I had been as clever as you in my childhood."

Nicole said. Aru's eyes widened with the joy of being praised, and a smile spread across his lips.

"So, I did well?"

"Did well? Aru, you're a genius in this field. You're better than agents who have been trained for a very long time."

Nicole gently stroked Aru's head. Aru blushed faintly.

"I really worked hard. What should I do next?"

"You've done more than enough; let's stop here. Anything more would be dangerous. I didn't even expect anything about the magic stone....."

Nicole gave a slight smile.

"And make me a promise, Aru. No matter who comes asking, what you've witnessed stays a secret. Especially about that woman Isabel."

Aru nodded his head and then asked cautiously,

"Then... what about my mother?"

Nicole stopped speaking. Aru's face, which had been animated just moments before, quickly fell.

'Oh no, this wasn't the time to be giving praise. I should have comforted her first.'

Aru must have noticed what her mother was going through while investigating this matter as Nicole had instructed.

Being such a clever child, she would be able to grasp the whole situation with just a few clues.

Upon reflection, it was admirable that such a young girl didn't lose her composure and run to her mother.

'She has incredible talent... Despite her young age, she possesses a cool head and calmness, the greatest talents for an agent.'

Nicole took Aru's hand.

"Just hang in there a little longer. I will definitely save your mother. If we act hastily now, nothing will come of it. I promise to move as quickly as I can and get you and your mother out of here."

In relation to this mission, Nicole's sense of responsibility grew heavier. The well-being of Aru and her mother depended on this place.

"I'm okay," Aru murmured as if to convince herself.

"Mom was originally an addict. Now it's even more irreversible..."

"I will find a cure," Nicole said softly. And then she hugged Aru briefly.

"You know, unnie... You asked why I asked you for help," Aru said softly.

"My mother used to be very beautiful. She had golden hair and blue eyes, and I heard she was the prettiest in the neighborhood. Mom drank often and gradually stopped holding me," Aru confided.

"I didn't want to hate my mother. So when I started to hate her, I would imagine my mother as pretty and healthy as she used to be, a time too early for me to remember, as if

drawing a picture in my head... It's a bit strange to say, but unnie, you resemble the image of my mother from my imagination. Someone as pretty and kind-looking as you."

Nicole didn't know what to say. Her heart felt a bit heavier.

"Please go. The secretary is coming to look for you again," Aru said. Nicole let go of Aru's hand and went outside.

The children gathered around when they saw the bread and cookies Nicole had taken out.

When Nicole left the room, the basket was carefully hidden with the magic stone and notes written by Aru.

\*\*\*

'Aru, you're really amazing. Even Isabel's face is in this video.'

When she got home, Nicole played the magic stone video.

The video stone that Aru had secretly recorded contained a loud conversation between Isabel and Duchess Lisbeth about drugs in the laboratory.

'It would be troublesome if Isabel is caught by the royal family.'

Isabel must be taken away and thoroughly punished. That's revenge for their mother.

But before that, she had to see Isabel's face once more.

That night, Nicole donned the attire of a female priest and hailed a carriage. Without informing anyone of her destination, she headed towards the riverside near Bow Street.

A bridge spanned the shallow river, flowing like a stream. The vicinity was a haven for thieves and beggars.

Beggars gathered around, but upon seeing the priest's robe, they soon passed by.

The Great Temple had a strong influence throughout the Empire. They knew better than to meddle with it, for fear of bringing harm upon themselves.

"It's been a while, unnie."

Nicole headed beneath the deep bridge where no one was around. A slender woman, who had been hiding in the darkness, walked out.

Accompanied by the clicking sound of her shoes, Isabel appeared with a smirk on her lips. She was dressed in a silk dress with a thin hooded cape draped over her shoulders.

"Judging by your voice, you seem to be doing well, Isabel."

Upon hearing that, Isabel quickly pulled back the hood covering her face.

"Are you joking right now?"

On the cheek of Isabel, who was as beautiful as an angel, there was an ugly scar as if an apple had been bitten by a bug.

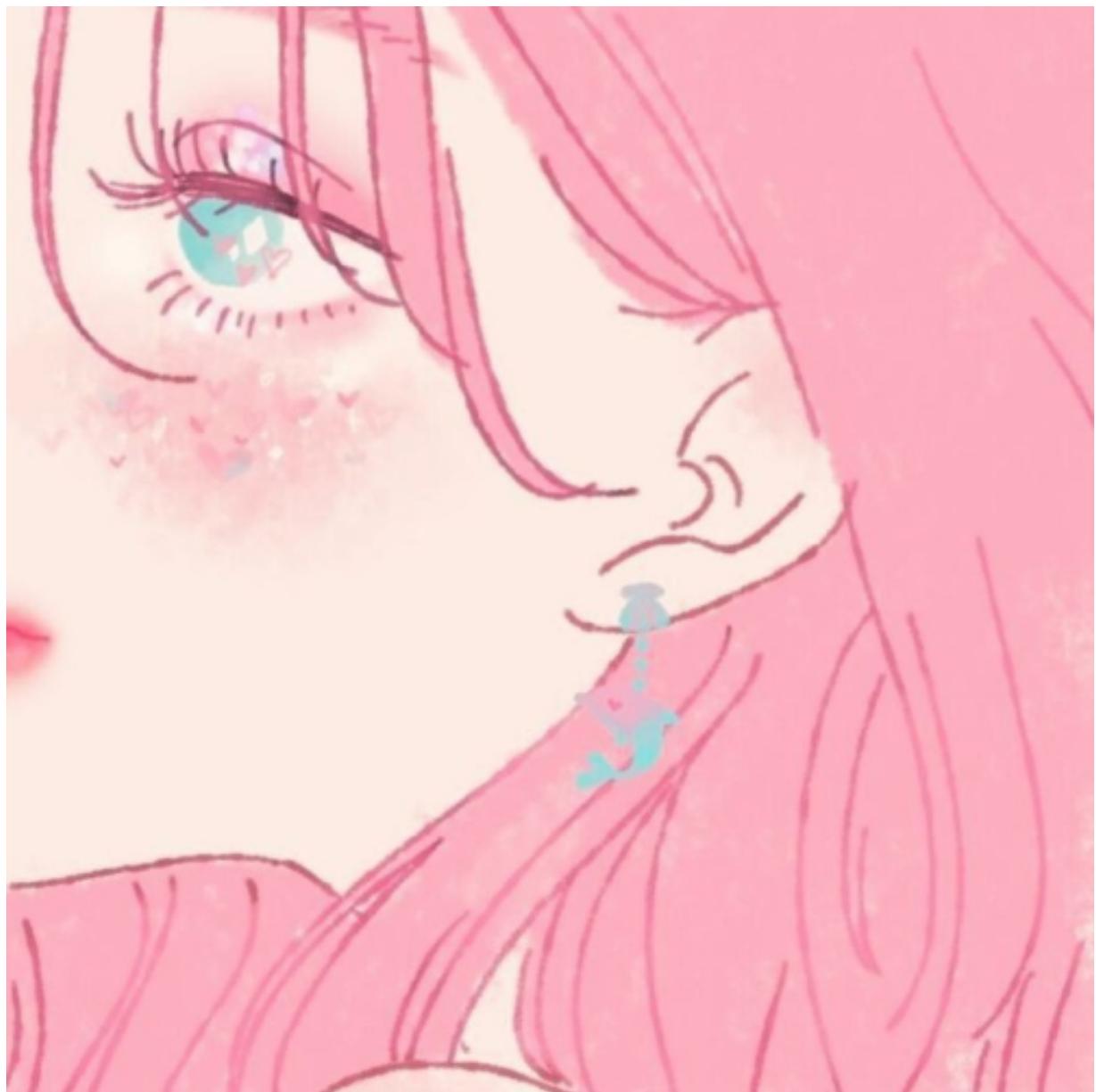
This was the result of Nicole stabbing Isabel's cheek with a poisoned needle when she had previously been caught by her.

Nicole nodded approvingly at her own handiwork.

"Your face looks good, Isabel. Considering you were poisoned, you seem quite healthy, don't you?"

Hearing Nicole's relaxed tone, Isabel involuntarily ground her teeth.

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# Chapter 109

“What have you done to me!”

Isabel exclaimed.

“No matter what medicine I apply, it doesn’t heal. I can’t even hide it... Do you know how much trouble I’ve gone through making excuses?”

...She must have had a hard time making excuses to Duchess Lisbeth.

This proved that Isabel was also in a situation she could not be proud of. She did not want to reveal Nicole’s existence either.

‘She must have been inflating her status, pretending to be a noble.’

Nicole sneered.

“It’s a pity you couldn’t make an antidote. I thought you were more of an expert on poison than I am, but it seems your studies were in vain, Isabel.”

Nicole’s spit trailed across Isabel’s cheek. The poison applied at the end was a special kind of poison.

It has a temporary paralyzing effect, and then causes the area it touches to blacken and rot away.

Nicole's knowledge of pharmacology was now far superior to Isabel's.

Pharmacology was ultimately about repeating experiments. Especially with special poisons, it took several syntheses and experiments to produce better outcomes.

In her past life, Nicole had improved various medicines by studying the family's ancient texts a year before she died.

This poison was Nicole's own improved creation, named 'Rotten Apple Poison.' It was so called because it made the poisoned area rot away like an apple bitten by a worm.

Fortunately, Nicole had an exceptional memory and remembered the recipe for the poison well.

"Stop being sarcastic and tell me! What exactly is this poison?"

"Isabel. You're not the only one who has read the ancient texts and numerous pharmacology books hidden in our house. And now those books are in my possession."

Just before fleeing, Nicole had secretly hidden the family's most important pharmacology texts in a concealed place.

Upon hearing this, Isabel's pupils shrank.

"Those books are mine. You're saying you have them? You stole what's mine?"

Nicole burst into laughter at that remark.

Now, Isabel's crazy way of thinking was even amusing.

"The ancient books were our family's property. Weren't you practically thrown out of the house just before Mother

passed away? The same goes for the inheritance rights. You have nothing. And you're not our family either."

The YvesChapel family follows a matriarchal system. Freya was the legitimate eldest daughter of the last YvesChapel, so she was the matriarch.

Everything in the family belonged to Freya, and Isabel, who caused Freya's death, had no share in it.

'Of course, you probably don't even know that our family is the YvesChapel. Knowing that would only make you greedier, so it's better for you to remain ignorant.'

Nicole thought with concealed contempt.

"You, you wicked woman!"

"Don't be too angry, Isabel. After all, I sent you the antidote, didn't I?"

Last time, when the secretary left Nicole on her own, telling her to go back by herself.

Nicole pretended to go back but instead headed towards the back door.

She went to the place where she had met Isabel before and hung a small pouch on a tree branch.

In that pouch was an embroidery that Nicole and Isabel could recognize at a glance.

Freya was very good at embroidery, especially sewing sheep shapes on children's clothes. That was exactly the embroidery Nicole had placed in the pouch.

Nicole had put a small amount of antidote ointment in the pouch. She also wrote a letter in a code that only the family could understand and placed it inside.

It was written with lemon and vinegar, so it needed to be singed by fire for the letters to appear. It was a method Nicole and Isabel often used to play with when they were young.

Inside that letter were written the date and time to meet at this bridge, and now Isabel had come here.

"Yes, you gave me the antidote. Just a little bit though. If my whole face rots away because of this, I won't leave you alone, Nicole."

Nicole looked at Isabel's face, twitching with madness, without batting an eye.

"So? Then live prettily until you succeed. Just like that."

Nicole feigned turning her back.

"Wait!"

Isabel called out to Nicole.

"Tell me why you summoned me."

"A warning."

Nicole said.

"You really value yourself, don't you? If you don't want to live with such a rotting face for the rest of your life, and if you want the rest of the antidote."

"....."

"It would be wise not to go around talking about me. I have no interest in whatever you're doing right now. So live as if you're dead. I'll turn a blind eye for now."

Nicole said this while observing Isabel.

Of course, Nicole had no intention of sparing Isabel. Isabel needed to be thoroughly crushed and punished.

However, Nicole intended to reserve Isabel's punishment until just before Duchess Lisbeth would crumble.

Because right now, it was most important to work as Raul's shadow.

"Aha, I see. You're proposing a truce?"

Isabel's expression changed.

"Yes. That's what you want too."

".....Me?"

"Yes. I know why you're anxious right now. You stole Karen's identity, didn't you? I can investigate you too. Damn it, Nicole. No, Karen."

Isabel continued with evident excitement in her voice.

"You know what? You even set up a considerable mansion in the capital under your name? Did you know that? The people of the capital will dig up any information if you just give them money!"

Nicole was convinced.

The mansion she currently lived in was also registered under Karen's name. It was easy to find out the owner of a

mansion, just by digging into the local real estate offices.

"So, is that all you've got? It's weaker than I thought."

Nicole spoke with disinterest. Isabel, growing agitated, turned pale then soon snickered.

"Of course, that's not all. Sweet, sweet sister. You wretched girl who stole the identity of the beggar Karen. Do you know how father is doing?"

Nicole fell silent for a moment.

"Father?"

Isabel threw something at Nicole's face. Nicole's eyes widened. It was a letter.

The letter Nicole had written to her father with care.

"Did you really think this letter would reach Father? You wrote it crying like a child, didn't you?"

Nicole grabbed Isabel by the collar and pushed her against the wall. Isabel, taller than Nicole, was pushed against the wall like a limp straw doll.

"What have you done to father?"

"Now...."

Isabel said as if she was pleased.

"Are you ready to have a real negotiation with me, Nicole?"

As Nicole's grip loosened a bit, Isabel spoke.

Did Isabel also know about the secret mailbox? Could father really have fallen into Isabel's clutches?

Nicole's head seemed to boil with all sorts of thoughts.

If something happens to father... Nicole would crumble.

She couldn't bear to see her father die twice.

\* \* \*

Isabel was very satisfied to see Nicole's expression soften for a moment, but she couldn't smile.

Because Nicole's grip on her collar was getting stronger.

"Uh, ugh! Are you planning to kill me?"

"That would be good."

Nicole looked at Isabel with scorn.

"I told you. There won't be a second time. I already warned you."

*If we meet again, I will kill you.* Nicole certainly said so last time. Isabel was so angry that her limbs were shaking. How dare she threaten her?

But unseen before, Nicole had developed a forcefulness she didn't have previously. Seeing her calm eyes, Isabel thought at that moment that Nicole might really kill her.

'Who on earth is this woman?'

Isabel turned pale with disgust.

“If you want to know where father is, shouldn’t you speak out more humbly?”

Nicole restrained her anger and stepped away from Isabel.

Isabel fiddled with her collar and smirked. She liked this situation where she could take control.

“The letter I received from father was definitely in his handwriting.”

Nicole said, looking down.

“You tampered with the mailbox, didn’t you?”

“Is that all?”

Isabel couldn’t contain her excitement in the moment she felt superior to Nicole.

“I also investigated the mailbox in the capital. You’ve been coming regularly to check the mailbox, haven’t you?”

The secret mailbox of the temple.

An old device that now only allows mail to be exchanged between mailboxes, not accepting new subscribers anymore.

Upon arriving in the capital, Isabel didn’t go to see Duchess Lisbeth right away. She was intensely fixated on Nicole.

So, Isabel first headed to the mailbox at the Great Temple, a place Nicole must have visited.

<Excuse me, has a woman with long, light golden-brown hair and blue eyes not come to check mailbox number 47?>

The priest in-charge with a kind-looking face was initially troubled but eventually succumbed to Isabel's smile.

<Yes, if it's mailbox number 47, there is someone who comes to check it. A beautiful woman who always wears the attire of a free priest. I overheard her talking to someone last time; I believe her name was 'Karen'...>

After receiving some money, the priest was charmed by Isabel and spilled all the information he knew.

"Have you been spying on me?"

Nicole asked.

"Oh, it was really a coincidence that I found you behind the house of charity that day."

Isabel shrugged her shoulders.

"But I've been watching what you've been doing and what kind of person you are for a while now....."

Hearing that, Nicole clicked her tongue lightly and then asked in a low voice.

"Is father at least safe?"

Isabel sneered. Her face was one that seemed to find the situation hilariously enjoyable.

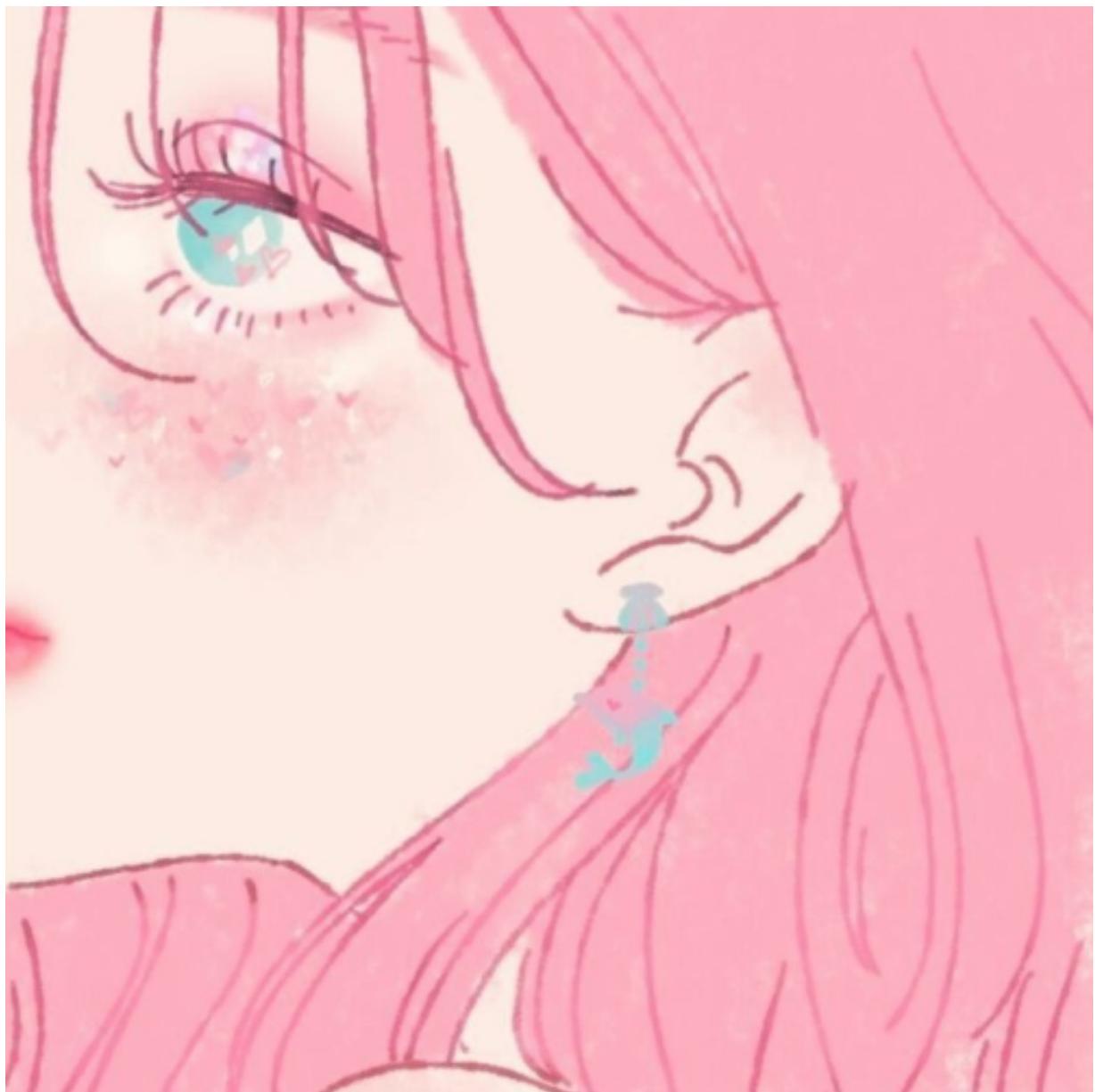
"That depends on you. But as for now, he's in no state to 'talk' with you, is he?"

Nicole's hand trembled slightly. For Nicole, who had a strong sense of family, this must have been unbearable.

"Now, Nicole. I'm asking for a negotiation even when I have the upper hand like this. Hm? It would be in your best interest to meet all my demands."

After a while, Nicole opened her mouth to speak.

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# Chapter 110

“Let’s trade one for one. I’ll give you the antidote for your decaying cheek, so tell me where Father is.”

“Are you crazy? Why would I do that?”

Isabel laughed out loud.

“Here’s my condition. You know what I’m up to, don’t you? That’s why you keep meddling with the house of charity. I don’t know your purpose, but you’re trying to interfere with me. Don’t do anything. If things go wrong, I’ll take revenge on your father.”

“.....”

“You have to help me, Nicole. Sisters should help each other out. What good is it if only you live well? And you know you need to give me the antidote, right?”

This time, Nicole’s expression darkened, and she looked at Isabel calmly but sharply.

“In return, I’ll also keep my mouth shut about your true identity?”

Isabel knew that Nicole was acting suspiciously but couldn’t snitch to the Duchess Lisbeth either.

Isabel was also lying about her own identity; she had been pretending to be Lady Rodria. If Nicole’s identity were

exposed, it would also reveal that Isabel was a girl who had been hiding in the countryside.

Isabel was ashamed of her rural background and also feared that it might be discovered where she had obtained the recipe for the hallucinogen.

Isabel didn't fully trust Duchess Lisbeth, so she saw no need to expose her vulnerabilities. 'It seems this woman is stirring trouble by Grace's orders.'

Previously, Isabel had thought of Grace as an eccentric rich person, someone without protection and thus dismissible. However, after nearly being killed by Grace's gun, she had inflated her opinion of her significantly.

Grace must be a powerful figure in the capital, a formidable noble, or a knight—Isabel's thoughts were not entirely wrong.

'Nicole, that wench, is parading around in expensive clothes and suddenly a mansion has appeared before me? And she's been rummaging around everywhere, you say?'

It was obvious. Nicole had become Grace's lackey.

Without Grace's help in the first place, Nicole would never have been able to come up to the capital.

Isabel's guess was only half right, but she didn't miss the core of the matter.

"...You want me to condone your actions?"

"Yes. For now, that's what I want."

Nicole looked down as if she were surrendering.

'Finally, I've given that bitch a taste of her own medicine!'

At that moment, Isabel was so pleased she felt dizzy.

Ever since falling off the cliff, Isabel had continued to hate Nicole. A worthless thing. It was the shame of being bested by someone she had ignored all her life.

But at this moment, everything had turned around.

'Once the drug deal is over and I've received the money from Duchess Lisbeth, then I'll start my real revenge on this bitch.'

And as long as her father was in her hands, Nicole would be no different from her slave going forward.

She would use Nicole to take revenge on Grace as well. She would use this stupid sister to the bone.

That was Isabel's true intention.

"And there's something else I want. Introduce me to him."

"...Him?"

Nicole furrowed her brow.

"The only Grand Duke of this country. Grand Duke Valentine."

Nicole had an expression as if she couldn't believe her ears.

"What did you say?"

"Give me a chance to meet with Grand Duke Valentine. Haha, how much Duchess Lisbeth badmouthed you. Saying

you climbed onto Grand Duke Valentine's bed with your status?"

Isabel sneered.

"You're quite something too. Anyway, the shabby ones are always worse."

<If you leave this building, I can't guarantee your life. At least until the deal is done, stay well hidden in the lodging I've provided for you.>

Duchess Lisbeth bluffed to Isabel, but Isabel was not one to follow such words.

The day Nicole burst out of a pile of flowers at the royal family's return ceremony.

Isabel sneaked out and watched in disguise, pressing her hood down in front of the crowd.

<How can there be such a man in the world?>

And then she completely fell for Raul, a man of unprecedented beauty.

<He's on a different level, truly perfect. Beautiful...>

Moreover, Raul was wrapped in the packaging of the highest status.

That day, Isabel, who saw Nicole's commotion, had an intuition that Nicole and Raul somehow knew each other.

Others didn't know Nicole, but Isabel knew her well. Nicole had a pathological shyness. Isabel quickly noticed even the slightest difference in reaction.

"Why do I want to meet the Grand Duke? Grace once mentioned 'a disciple she raised when they were young.'"

After learning that Nicole was involved with Grand Duke Valentine, Isabel collected whatever information she could find about it.

Duchess Lisbeth still looked down on Isabel and treated her as inferior, but she was quite a gossip.

Isabel snickered and dug up various pieces of information from Duchess Lisbeth, mostly about the royal family and high nobility.

Who slept with whom, who actually had an illegitimate child with them.

Duchess Lisbeth enjoyed sharing such gossip, and it was quite entertaining to listen to. However, Isabel only wanted to know about Raul.

Consequently, Isabel heard unexpected slander about someone from Duchess Lisbeth.

<There's this woman named Grace. She's almost forgotten in the capital now. Being from the royal family, I know a bit about her... A perfectly fine noblewoman affiliated with the secret intelligence service, oh, please pretend you didn't hear that last part. Anyway, do you know what opportunity that woman took away from me?>

Duchess Lisbeth said with an indignant expression.

It is said that long ago, Duchess Lisbeth was chosen as the nanny and caretaker for Grand Duke Valentine, that is, a man named Raul.

That was an official opportunity given to Duchess Lisbeth by the royal family.

An opportunity for Duchess Lisbeth to return to the heart of power.

<Grand Duke Valentine was no ordinary child. The royal family appointed me as his educator so that I could raise him to be well-controlled. He was in a pitiable state, having lost both parents early on. But for some reason, Grace took him away and eventually estranged him from the royal family...>

Grace may not hold a significant status now, but it seems her grandfather was a man of considerable influence.

Back then, the royal family owed her grandfather a debt, and Grace was able to demand a price for it.

Grace exhausted her single opportunity by taking Raul away.

<I missed a rare opportunity! Moreover, I had to bear the responsibility of failing to raise the young Grand Duke properly!>

It wasn't hard to imagine the picture Isabel was thinking of.

'Grace is my enemy. It's clear she's the woman who was hiding in the countryside. The character and physical descriptions given by Duchess Lisbeth fit perfectly. Grace was the Grand Duke's teacher? If she was such an incredible woman.'

The connection between Grace, Nicole, and Raul easily took shape in her mind.

It was Grace who attached Raul to Nicole.

'Why did such an opportunity go to my foolish sister?'

Isabel was green with envy to the point of death.

Isabel was of a status that dared not covet Raul. But if that man got involved with Nicole, the story would be different.

'This is unfair. I'm much prettier and smarter than my foolish sister, so I should have a chance at the Grand Duke too. I was originally close to Grace.'

Isabel never knew how to restrain herself when it came to things she wanted.

Officially becoming the wife of Marquis Rodria, she would gain the status that could allow her to have a romance with a Grand Duke.

From now on, by becoming acquainted with him, gradually making him hers, and then one day she could even switch to another...

Isabel fell into rosy delusions.

With the right opportunity, it was possible to captivate Grand Duke Valentine in one fell swoop. Isabel was confident about it.

"You're really crazy."

Nicole said, as if disgusted.

"And how did you come to know that man?"

"I'm now a person of the capital too. You, still dripping with country water, might not know, but it seems like everyone

in the capital knows Grand Duke Valentine?"

"What are you going to do when you meet him?"

"You don't need to know that much."

Nicole laughed snidely, as if amazed.

"Do you even know what will happen to you when you meet him?"

Nicole quietly looked at Isabel.

"Why, are you planning to use Glassworms when you meet him?"

Isabel's eyebrows twitched. She had not even dreamed that Nicole would know about Glassworms, and this time she was quite disturbed.

"How did you... That's supposed to be my secret..."

"You stole it from Mother's book, didn't you?"

Nicole said.

"I knew it. Glassworms. You used it on the man who was following you around. They called him Leos."

Isabel flinched. Nicole looked at her calmly, as if trying to extract some information from her.

"Does Leos also know about the existence of Glassworms?"

"Shut up!"

Isabel lost her temper.

“Decide, Nicole. Whether you will kill father with your own hands or obey me and find out father’s whereabouts.”

A cynical smile slowly formed on Nicole’s face.

“What on earth do you want?”

“The same as you. A noble status and the right to live openly in the future. So don’t interfere with me.”

Nicole let out a low sigh.

“There’s nothing that can be done in this case.”

Nicole said softly.

“Alright, I admit defeat. But if you play around with the whereabouts of my father... then.”

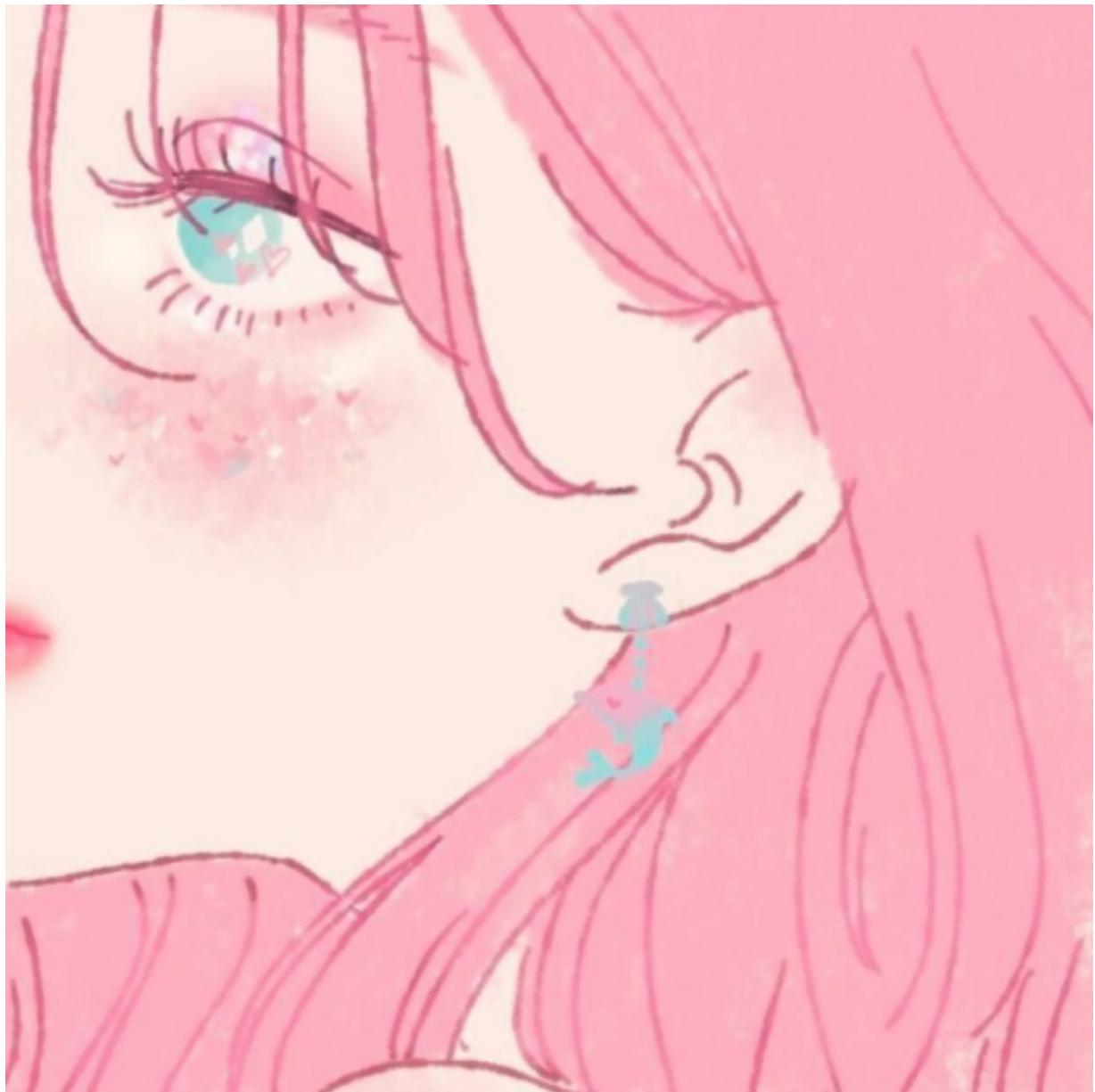
Nicole spoke gently. Isabel couldn’t understand why she was scared of such words.

Nicole kept touching upon Isabel’s danger signals, which were quick to react due to her naturally sharp senses.

“Then, it won’t end even with death, Isabel.”

Nicole whispered.

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# Chapter 111

A week ago.

Nicole had typed up the transcript and sent it to Raul. She also submitted a report on the ship that would carry the drugs.

<Good work. I will keep my promise. Send me the materials from the listening stone and the video stone.>.

A brief reply came from Raul. Surprisingly, it was handwritten.

Raul going out of his way to leave a note was the highest form of praise from him.

Then news came from Sith headquarters.

Raul had decided to move up the date of Duke Lisbeth's appointment ceremony as promised.

That date was precisely when the cargo ship filled with drugs was set to depart.

It was the day Duke Lisbeth and his wife, along with Isabel, were to commit their crime.

As it happened, there was a military event soon, and coincidentally, it fell on the same day as the departure.

Raul seemed to have urged the royal family to hold the ceremony on that day.

It would be an event with quite a large gathering of people.

And four days ago, Nicole had met with Isabel under the bridge and had a conversation.

'Perhaps the situation has changed now.'

Nicole thought.

From that day on, many things had changed.

\*\*\*

'Sith must be waiting just for my information. With that one piece of information, we can easily take care of Duke Lisbeth and his wife. Maybe this time we could even tarnish the dignity of the royal family. That could be considered an achievement as well.'

Now all Nicole had to do was hand over the information and receive her reward. However, she was anxiously holed up in her mansion.

'...Isabel said she wouldn't leave my father alone if I interfered with her business.'

With her father's safety at stake, Nicole might as well have been caught in an absolute vulnerability.

'Isabel has already once forced my father into a situation where he tried to take his own life.'

If she were to lose her father in this life as well. Then...

The mere thought was dizzying. She couldn't help but feel anxious.

"Miss."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door. When Nicole said to come in, her maid Redia carefully peeked in her face.

"Someone has come from Sith again..... They say there are materials that the young lady promised to give..... They are asking for those materials to be handed over."

However, for days, Nicole had been making various excuses and had not handed over the materials.

"I still need time. Tell them I will hand it over by the day of the event. There are additional facts to confirm."

Raul chose a simple method of exposure. On the day of the military event, recordings will be delivered anonymously in front of key figures.

At the same time, export control officials under Raul's orders will target the cargo ship. Capturing the cargo ship will immediately serve as evidence. Raul will arrest the duke and his wife on the spot.

They are so weak.....

'A dose or two of a truth serum and they'll spill everything. Even if I can't touch Duchess Lisbeth, the duke is a different story. He doesn't have royal blood flowing through him.....'

Moreover, there was another problem for Nicole. There was a chance that Isabel could be caught in the process of dealing with the Duke and Duchess Lisbeth.

‘Isabel would expose anything to drag me into this.’

If Isabel were to be handed over to Sith, it would be over then. Nicole needed to be careful.

“Young lady, are you alright?”

Redia asked cautiously.

Nicole looked at the video stone and the listening stone. These ancient artifacts allowed her to edit videos or recordings as she wished.

Nicole had been editing it for days and continued to play it back as if deeply engrossed in thought.

“The person who came from Sith today said that if the materials are not handed over by tomorrow, the leader of Shadow will come personally. Or someone even higher-ranking could come.....”

Nicole sighed softly. The situation had changed in an instant, and she was feeling pressure from all sides.

“They will come tomorrow too. Just like today, tell them I will definitely send the materials on the day of the appointment ceremony, saying that additional materials are needed.”

“Yes.” Redia nodded.

“Um, miss. Shall I contact Master Grace?”

Nicole turned her head. Redia and Bluea. Nicole’s new confidants were the devoted followers sent by the close-knit Grace.

“.....That’s right. I have Grace.”

Grace was the only person in this world whom the fearless man, Raul, could not touch. And Grace's house was the sole fortress that Raul could not conquer.

It was not because Raul lacked power. To Raul, Grace was the only being to whom he owed a debt from the past and whom he respected to this day.

"Let's go to Grace's house secretly, Redia. And tell Bluea as well. You know the tasks I've assigned, right?"

Redia nodded again. Redia, along with Bluea, were competent loyalists who had been trained by Grace for a long time.

Therefore, without further questions, she simply packed Nicole's luggage.

\*\*\*

On the day of the royal appointment ceremony.

The house of charity, the most secluded building. Isabel inside the room was ecstatic with happiness.

That day was the best day of Isabel's life.

"

<Here is the promised down payment first. Once the cargo is shipped and arrives, you can test the hallucinogen, then we agreed to discuss the price of the recipe in a few days. My husband's appointment has been accelerated, so I want to settle this matter quickly and start anew.>

Duchess Lisbeth was an unlucky woman, but today it didn't matter. The down payment for the drug export contract.

This was because half of that advance payment was made as promised. It had happened just this morning.

'Ah, these gold coins... So happy.'

The more money, the better. She had already taken all of the inheritance from the Marquis of Rodria's family, but that wasn't enough to satisfy Isabel.

Once the ship sails and arrives, and the value of the medicine is recognized, she will earn even more money.

"Leos, aren't you happy? If we become rich like this, we both can live very well."

Isabel spoke in a sweet voice. Leos had recently become more despondent, sitting every day with a vacant look in his eyes.

Only when Isabel soothed him well did he wear a human-like expression.

"Isabel, you really seem happy," Leos said weakly.

"Of course. It's not just one or two good things, right?"

Yesterday, Isabel sent a letter to Nicole's mansion.

<How much would Father hate you in the afterlife if he died because of you?>

Isabel included in the envelope a button from the clothes her father wore on the day he left home.

Nicole would recognize this button. Life in the countryside was boring, and one tends to remember every single piece of clothing and button of the family's.

After holding out for several days, Nicole finally sent a letter of surrender, unable to bear it any longer.

Isabel sprang up and picked up the letter on the desk.

<Keep your promise. Then I will grant all the conditions you want. I will arrange a secret meeting with 'him' soon. If you just let me see my father, I'll do as you wish. So don't lay a finger on my father.>

The Nicole that Isabel knew could never become cruel when it came to family matters. She could never go against herself.

'Stupid crybaby Nicole.'

Isabel was humming and seemed as if she might even start dancing.

Just then, a small noise came from outside. Isabel stopped what she was doing and looked out.

"Who's out there?"

Isabel carefully opened the door.

As if forgetting the Duchess Lisbeth's admonition to stay hidden inside the building until after the appointment ceremony was completed, just for today.

\*\*\*

Three hours before the commencement of the appointment ceremony, Nicole was sitting quietly with her eyes closed.

She had written a letter of earnest surrender to calm Isabel down for now.

‘Are there only two options Isabel has given me? To ignore my father or to betray Raul.’

Nicole slowly opened her eyes. It was almost time for the appointment ceremony to begin.

\* \* \*

“Is it betrayal, or is there some intention behind it?”

Bastard said.

Bastard was genuinely perplexed.

Karen had not handed over the promised documents. Moreover, she had hidden in Grace’s house—the one place Raul couldn’t touch her. There was an excuse. She claimed she was ill and needed to be under Grace’s care.

“Could Grace have some intention?”

“Impossible. That person is now beyond such passion. It must be Karen who has called for her.”

Raul added, as if he found the idea absurd.

“Thanks to that, I have to attend the appointment ceremony earlier than planned. I even had to move the ceremony forward myself.”

According to Raul’s plan, by this morning, exposé documents related to Duchess Lisbeth should have been on the desks of all involved parties.

‘What’s with that woman?’

Did Karen play him for a fool? Of course, there will be plenty of opportunities to expose her even after the appointment

ceremony is over. The cargo for shipment is scheduled to be secured by the Export Control Office people in the afternoon, as he directed. It's fine to obtain the goods first and then release the evidence during the investigation process.

However, what's important is Karen's bizarre behavior. She dared to defy him and cling to his weaknesses. But if that woman were before him right now...

'He'd still want to sleep with her.'

Of course, a suitable punishment must be given. Perhaps this time it won't end with just a spanking.

Raul clicked his tongue lightly.

'Perhaps I should use this as an excuse to lock her up underground and punish her thoroughly, for about four or five years, until I'm sick of it.'

He was really angry. But he was confused that this emotion seemed to be more than simple anger.

However, the only thing that crossed Raul's face was a slight annoyance.

Military events always began the same way.

"Loyalty and homage to the royal family!"

The arrayed soldiers came out and stood in a line.

The knights knelt down in unison towards the royal family members.

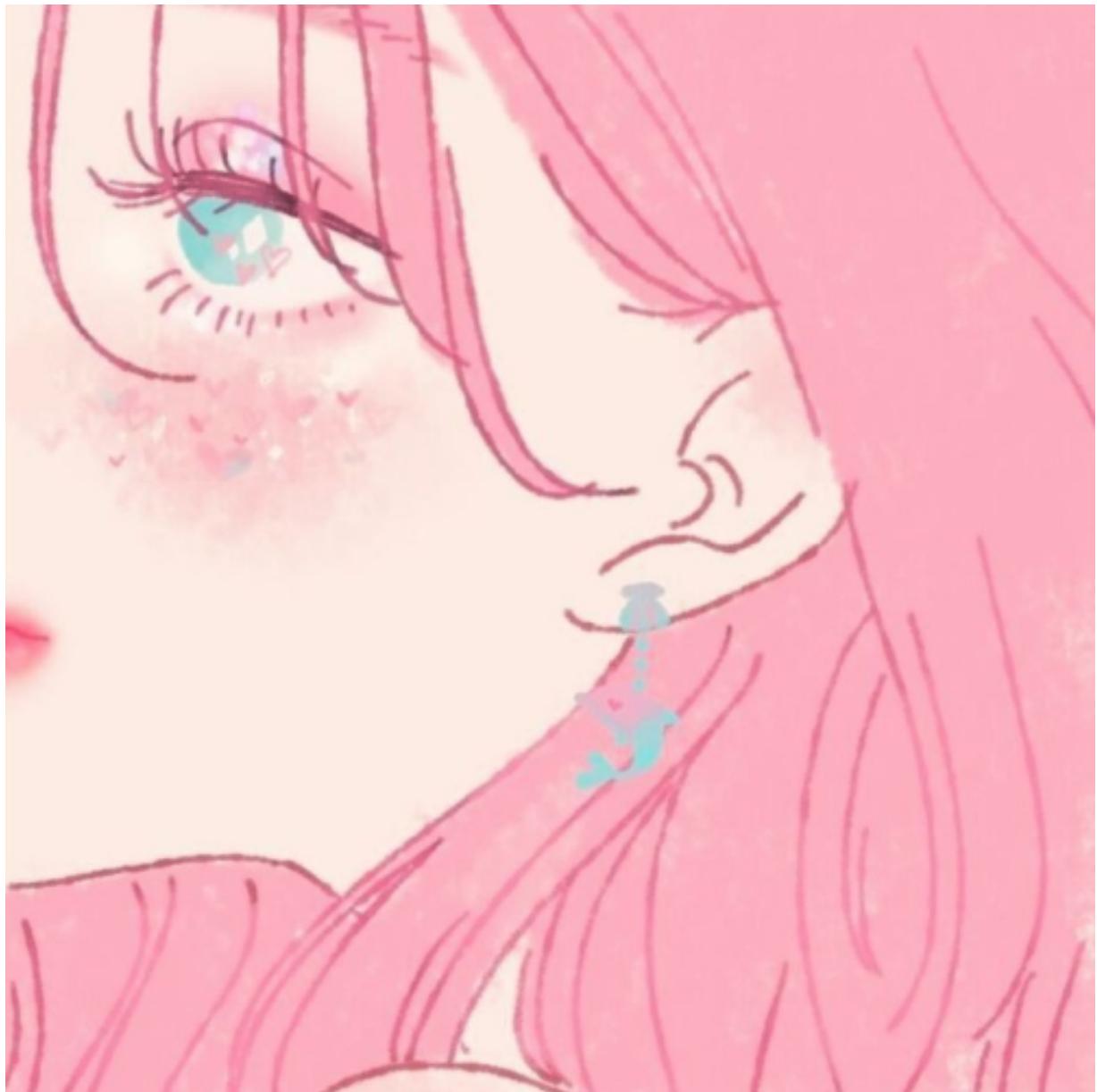
It was now time for the orchestra to play. The orchestra would play the national anthem.

It was at that moment.

*Crackling, crackling-*

A strange noise began to resonate among the orchestra.

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# Chapter 112

Imperial Knight Order Headquarters. The largest and most magnificent building in the Imperial Palace.

Duchess Lisbeth was lost in thought as she strolled through the garden.

The appointment ceremony was about to begin soon.

'Finally, the day has come.'

Duchess Lisbeth thought.

Once, she was so precious that she even coveted the imperial authority of this country. But not anymore, since her downfall.

However, the years of humiliation were now at an end. Once the Duke Lisbeth's appointment ceremony was over, it would be a farewell to the wretched past.

'Isabel. A woman with some bizarre aspects. But the drug she made was real...'

Duchess Lisbeth grew up as part of the privileged class in the imperial capital. However, she knows that there are many more subjects in the countryside who are much poorer than this.

Across the sea, there are many lawless lands that lack even the basic framework to be called a country.

She had heard that in such places, hallucinogens are treated like currency. Countries steeped in drugs. The people there liked new kinds of effective hallucinogens. Duchess Lisbeth, who knows from smugglers, was well-versed in such matters.

'When Lady Rodria, the Marquis's wife, came to me, I thought it would be a hit or a miss. My hunch was right...'

In a short time, Duchess Lisbeth had many thoughts.

Now she had enough power and money to enjoy the pleasures of high society.

'The only problem is those women who are too indulged in that drug...'

Together with Isabel, Duchess Lisbeth experimented with hallucinogens on the members of the charitable organization she protected.

The women were provided unlimited drugs to fully verify their effects. Due to that, it was disturbing to see women who had become invalids. Anyway, the drug exportation was almost as good as concluded now.

'Now that those women are no longer needed, they must be dealt with... And I need to decide what to do with Isabel.'

Just in case, Duchess Lisbeth had instructed that Isabel's residence be strictly guarded before she left.

'And there's another thing that bothers me. Did that wench, Maria or whatever her name is, really sleep with the Grand Duke?'

Maria. A noble young lady of unknown origin who one day arrived at Duchess Lisbeth's charity with a large donation.

She is young, beautiful, and of noble birth, so there are plenty of uses for her. If she's the type to climb into bed with the Grand Duke at the slightest seduction, she'd do anything to get ahead.

'She could be used to entertain bureaucrats, or even presented to His Majesty the Crown Prince.'

As Duchess Lisbeth became nervous, her mind was flooded with random thoughts.

Just then, Duchess Lisbeth came face to face with Raul, who was approaching from the opposite direction. She gave a sly smile.

'You may act like an omnipotent ruler, but you can't keep that up forever.'

She sneered inwardly as she looked at Raul.

"Duchess Lisbeth."

Raul, in his military uniform, said. She responded with the dignity befitting royalty.

"It seems you are fortunate to be here today."

Her expression clouded at his words, which were clearly provocative.

"Indeed. It seems you took a liking to this Maria girl. Even someone with such refined tastes as yourself, Grand Duke, has unexpected sides. You seem to be satisfied more quickly than I thought."

Raul snickered. Duchess Lisbeth felt as if her lungs were shrinking.

It was a feeling akin to a mouse challenging a predator, despite herself being of royal birth by nature. Duchess Lisbeth tried to suppress that feeling.

“I am discovering new tastes myself.”

Raul wiped his smile and responded curtly.

“Remember that I am the chaperone of Miss Maria, whom you seem to fancy, Grand Duke.”

“Was that woman’s name Maria?”

Raul replied as if he had just remembered it.

“It really doesn’t sound like a real name. Quite a spirited woman she is, for such a common name.”

Duchess Lisbeth sensed an odd tone in those words but did not delve deeper. The ceremony was about to begin, and she grew anxious.

“Seeing that you don’t even remember her name, I suppose you won’t be calling for Miss Maria again?”

“I’ll think about it.”

Raul said so and brushed past her.

Duchess Lisbeth found the exceedingly handsome Raul both fearsome and peculiar. In a moment, cold sweat seeped down her back.

\* \* \*

‘What does it matter.’

Duchess Lisbeth thought to herself. Today was her day.

Duchess Lisbeth walked through the corridor and arrived at the venue. The military event was crowded with numerous people, and a banquet would follow.

‘This event is solely for me.’

The event was ostensibly to commemorate the Empire’s past war victories, but the main purpose was a nomination ceremony.

The formal opening speech soon ended. The royals were seated on the highest stage.

It had been a very long time since Duchess Lisbeth had sat among the royals.

‘Ah, now I shall rightfully enjoy what I have lost as a royal.’

Sitting with the royals, Duchess Lisbeth felt so happy she thought she might die of it. She could see the portly and ordinary-looking Duke Lisbeth standing at a distance.

Shortly thereafter, the orchestra prepared their music.

It was at that moment.

*Click... Crackling.*

An inexplicable sound began to emanate from the side of the stage where the orchestra was positioned.

The stage where the orchestra was seated had a special structure to amplify sound.

A human voice flowed from beneath it.

<...So, the letters are all prepared.>

<Crackle- The medicine is too effective. It's a waste to sell just the recipe. How about we sell some samples first and if the response is good, we raise the price? This could be the goose that lays golden eggs.>

<I've never seen such an effective drug before. It's like sending people to heaven. The sight of those trash gasping for it. And about those women's children? I've isolated them in branch number one under the pretext of illness. Luckily, the flu is going around, which is fortunate I guess.>

<Duchess Lisbeth's efforts in running a charity seem to have paid off,> said the secretary.

<Everyone has their own use, after all. Even pigs can be made into fine horses if utilized well. No one has died yet, right?> came the reply from Duchess Lisbeth's voice.

<Would they die just by taking some hallucinogens? Don't worry. They're all happy, after all. This is nothing less than a grace from the royal family, providing them with the hallucinogens they crave without limit.>

A sharp laugh followed, the tone dragging with an emphasis on certain words in a manner befitting royalty. It was unmistakably Duchess Lisbeth's way of speaking.

"Duchess, what is this all about?"

Princess Silia asked, her eyes wide open with evident contempt on her face.

“What am I hearing right now? Have you been manufacturing narcotics, madam?”

Even that sound was growing louder. People began to murmur, and the orchestra stood still, having stopped their music.

Duchess Lisbeth rose from her seat.

“That’s not my voice!”

Duchess Lisbeth exclaimed.

Who in the world, why...

‘Did someone record my voice? How did they do it? More importantly, that is...’

Who could it be? Who has betrayed her?

“It’s coming from the orchestra!” someone shouted.

“Catch it, stop it immediately!”

Duchess Lisbeth cried out. Pushing through the crowd, Duke Lisbeth ran towards the sound. His waddling figure resembled a fat duck.

On the floor of the orchestra, between the chairs, there was a listening device separated from its listening stone looking almost like a transparent stone at first glance.

“Pick it up!” soldiers yelled as they pushed through the orchestra members and musicians who were trying to protect their expensive instruments.

*Thud! Whoom! Squeak!*

The noise grew louder as instruments fell to the floor.

“Hold on, don’t push!”

In the ensuing chaos, people were jostled and pushed every which way.

“This is it!”

Duke Lisbeth barely managed to pick up the eavesdropping device. His hair was disheveled from crawling on all fours, and his eyes were bloodshot.

The magic stone was wrapped in a sound amplification device.

“Destroy that. Then.....”

Duchess Lisbeth’s voice grew even louder. That’s when it happened.

*Boom!*

A loud noise came from the sky.

“Aaagh!”

Today’s event was crowded with nobles who had come to watch the ceremony, in addition to the soldiers.

Screams echoed from all directions. There were small balloons floating in the sky today. They were devices intended to burst at the climax of the ceremony to shower down a rain of flowers. But the balloons burst prematurely, scattering the papers inside them.

“Look at this!”

“That’s the recording of what was just said!”

“Duke and Duchess Lisbeth attempted drug trafficking?”

It was a flyer containing the exposure of her corruption. There was also a list of victims sacrificed by Duchess Lisbeth in the shipping information, even detailed descriptions of the crimes were included.

Duchess Lisbeth stared blankly at the sky. This had to be a dream. It couldn’t be real. Today was supposed to be the best day.

‘Who could it be?’

Duchess Lisbeth looked around in all directions. The Empress covered her mouth with a handkerchief.

It was as if she was being looked at like an insect. And then there was the Emperor. The Emperor looked at Duchess Lisbeth with a faint hint of anger in his eyes. At that moment, Duchess Lisbeth had a premonition.

‘No, it can’t be, this can’t be happening. I’ve endured without giving up for so long.....’

She had committed an act most taboo in the royal family: she had sullied the dignity of the royal family in the mud. Sweat poured down Duchess Lisbeth’s face like rain.

Her expression twisted into one of despair.

“What on earth is this commotion.....”

Bastard and Raul stood side by side near the orchestra, intending to watch the situation for a moment.

Bastard had a horrified expression upon observing the series of events.

"What do you mean what? It's our Karen's doing."

Raul remembered Karen's message. She had consistently said, 'I will definitely hand over the materials on that day.' At least she had kept her promise.

"You think Karen has such capabilities?"

Raul chuckled. "Seems like she likes flashy things more than one would expect, that woman."

And she likes breaking rules even more. Disobeying orders, overstepping authority, causing trouble, she enjoys it even more, Raul thought.

"Besides, Karen has a guardian angel, doesn't she?"

".....Ah."

Bastard immediately thought of Grace upon hearing that.

Grace had a very bad relationship with Duchess Lisbeth and saw the royal family as an enemy after losing her own daughter. Grace had both the means and the motive to help Karen sufficiently.

"How did you know that she got involved?"

Raul gestured with his chin as two maids disappeared into the crowd.

Raul recognized their faces. The two maids from Karen's house were close aides carefully raised by Grace.

Raul watched their retreating figures.

Soon, one of Raul's subordinates approached him.

"We've seized the ship and secured the evidence."

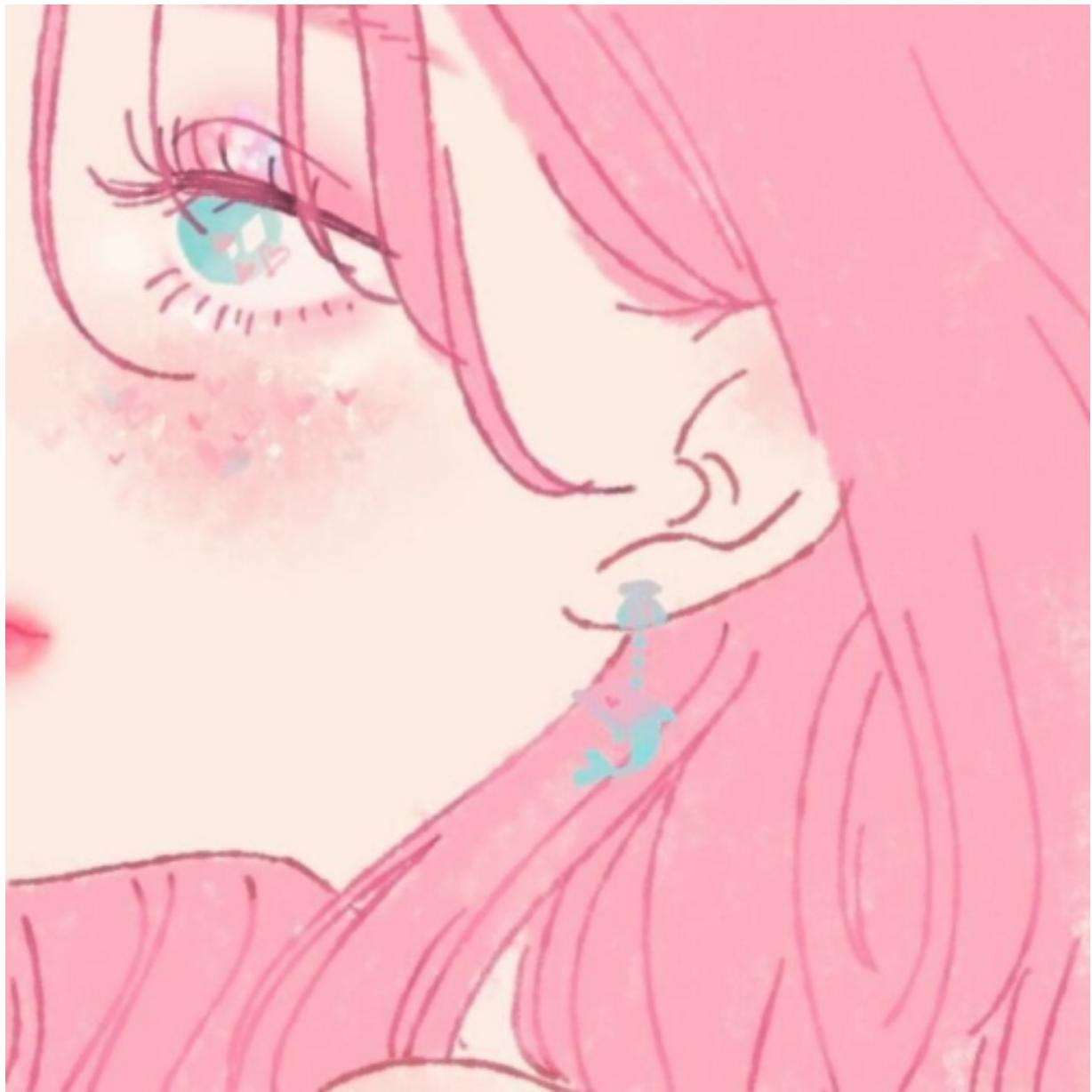
Now it was his turn.

Raul decided to savor the downfall of Duke and Duchess Lisbeth with pleasure.

"What are you waiting for, arrest them now."

Raul flicked his hand, and Bastard moved to arrest Duke and Duchess Lisbeth.

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# Chapter 113

Bluea and Redia were dressed as palace maids. They quickly stepped out of the vast training ground that felt like an office.

The two arrived at a place where there were few people and smiled at each other.

“We did as the young lady commanded.”

“Yes, you did well. The training we received was worth it.”

“Lady Grace will be proud of us too.”

\* \* \*

“Secure the duke couple immediately.”

Bastard ordered the soldiers.

Raul’s soldiers quickly approached Duchess Lisbeth. Bastard whispered to Raul.

“As planned, we will raid Duchess Lisbeth’s house of charity. We will preserve and secure all evidence.”

Raul nodded his head.

“And one more thing. Find out who created this new type of hallucinogen described in this paper.”

Raul added the command.

In the meantime, Duchess Lisbeth, surrounded by soldiers, cried out in dismay.

"I am of the royal family, are you all mad? This is a trap!"

The voice of Duchess Lisbeth echoed emptily into the air.

People only murmured among themselves; no one helped her. The Empress exchanged a few words with the Emperor and quickly left with her daughter.

Ultimately, the Duke and Duchess Lisbeth showed the worst disgrace, struggling not to be taken away, they were dragged out while being seized by the soldiers.

Eventually, the Emperor felt humiliated by the situation and was greatly angered.

"What a disgrace! Gag them if you must and take them away, and assess the situation!"

Eventually, the day's event fizzled out.

Everyone present sensed it. This incident would remain a humiliation to the royal family for a long time to come.

\*\*\*

At that moment, Isabel stepped outside the study.

'There was definitely some noise.'

What Isabel found was a little girl rummaging through the small living room that Isabel used.

The child who saw Isabel recoiled in surprise and hid her hands behind her back.

'She's the daughter of one of my test subjects, her name is.....'

Isabel frowned. She knew who the girl was.

"Aru. What were you doing here?"

"Well, um. Young lady... I..."

Aru stepped back hesitantly. Her small, parched face had been pale for a long time.

Isabel smiled with the corners of her mouth raised.

"Why are you scurrying about like a little mouse? Did you come here wanting to play with me?"

Isabel had recently sensed that she was being watched by someone.

She was not wrong. The reason was that the Duchess Lisbeth had increased her watchers under the guise of escorts.

And she had noticed that the documents she had organized were subtly misaligned.

She knew that Leos often turned the room upside down in his instability, so she had overlooked it.

"Thinking about it now, it was you."

Isabel grabbed the letter opener that was on the desk.

"I'm, I'm sorry!"

Aru exclaimed. She quickly turned and ran away.

"How did you manage to evade the guards? I'm in such a good mood today. Why did you provoke me?"

Isabel ordered Leos to chase after the girl.

"Leos, catch her! You must catch that wench!"

And it was when she followed her outside.

At that moment, Isabel noticed something strange.

It was too quiet in all directions.

"What did you pilfer?"

Isabel roughly grabbed Aru's wrist, and bundles of paper fell from Aru's hands.

The core documents most precious to Isabel: recipes for medicine, cargo shipment permits, and the contract for the sale of medicine with Duchess Lisbeth.

Isabel was not foolish enough to blindly trust the Duchess Lisbeth, so she had made sure to leave a paper trail for everything.

She thought that would later serve as a weapon to prevent the Duchess Lisbeth from disclaiming any knowledge of her.

"This was definitely put in the safe. How did you open it?"

Isabel did not get angry. She just twisted her lips into a chillingly calm expression.

"I'm so curious. Won't you tell me how? Please?"

Aru grew even more frightened at the sight of Isabel like that.

"Aha, I see. I wondered why there were no guards. It was the Duchess Lisbeth's doing, right? She told you to steal the evidence. It's obvious."

Isabel said, pressing her face close to Aru's, and then pushed Aru over.

"It's too late. You think I wouldn't have thought about covering my tracks?"

Isabel pointed a letter opener at Aru's throat.

"Go to the lab and take some medicine, then you'll reflect on the bad things you've done. I'll make sure you have nice dreams, just like your mother did."

At that moment, someone grabbed Isabel's hair from behind.

"Ack!"

Isabel turned her head around. It felt like her scalp was being torn off; the strength was tremendous.

The face that met Isabel's eyes was pale and androgynous, with slender eyes; the person smiled thinly, like a mask.

"Hello, sister? You're such a wicked girl, aren't you?"

Isabel took a moment to comprehend what she had heard. What is this?

"Aaagh!"

The person holding her hair flung Isabel away. As Isabel tried to rush back in, she was immediately kicked in the stomach.

Isabel, kicked by the tip of the boot, fell to the ground with a strange cry.

“Ugh, uck...”

“What was the name again?”

“Isabel.”

Then someone beside answered. Isabel couldn’t even think to lift her head as she clutched her stomach and grimaced in pain.

“You should at least remember the target’s name, Estock. Even if it’s not an official job,” the man said.

*‘Estock? Damn it, what kind of name is that?’* Isabel thought. More importantly, where is that slow-witted fool Leos? Shouldn’t he be rescuing her?

Then something collapsed onto Isabel’s body. Isabel flailed her arms.

“Leos, Leos!”

The heavy thing thrown onto Isabel was the unconscious Leos. Isabel grabbed and shook Leos, then lifted her bloodshot eyes.

“You’ve got talent. You lured them well.”

The man, no, the boy said. Aru, standing a bit away, nodded slightly.

"Thank you. You're Dagger, right?"

Dagger nodded in response.

"Did all of you get sent by Duchess Lisbeth?"

Isabel shouted sharply. Estock chuckled softly.

"Hey, that's really too much. We have our pride."

Estock and Dagger leaned their heads towards Isabel. Isabel stiffened her neck and looked up at them.

"We may come from the trash heap, but we don't serve trash as our boss," Dagger said. "Unless it's competent trash."

"Duchess Lisbeth is closer to incompetent trash, isn't she?"

Soon after, a loud noise erupted. Voices were coming from the main building of the house of charity far away.

"Start the search-"

"Begin with the documents-"

"Securing the victims comes first!"

It was the sound of men talking.

"Nobody move!"

Someone shouted loudly through a megaphone. Hearing that, Estock pricked up his ears.

"Seems like people sent by our original boss are coming?"

"Let's get out of here quickly."

Dagger said, and then Estock grabbed Isabel by the hair.

"I've been asked by someone to bring you in. Will you come along quietly?"

Dagger asked, but of course, Isabel resisted.

"Urgh!"

Estock kicked Isabel mercilessly once again, and this time she truly lost consciousness.

At the same time.

In the quiet estate of Grace, Nicole stood in front of a large window.

Today, Nicole let her golden-brown hair down, adorned with a silver hairband. Dressed in a silk dress with a hint of apricot, she stood with a well-balanced posture, devoid of the rusticity from her previous life hidden in the mountains.

"The appointment ceremony must be underway by now."

Grace approached. Nicole spoke softly.

"Do you think Redia and Bluea have done well?"

"Would I have assigned just anyone to you?"

"Of course, I trust your judgment of people, Grace. Besides, you've given all the help you could."

"Enough with the thanks. I despise sappy talk."

Grace said. Nicole smiled faintly.

'That aside, Grace is truly remarkable.'

Nicole realized that Grace's power was not yet extinguished. Even though she had turned her back on the world, Grace still had many people at her disposal. This realization made Nicole a bit sad.

That someone as great as Grace met such an absurd end in her previous life.

And that she lived alone in a secluded house deep in the countryside hills. That was...

'Perhaps... she once tried to die, which is why she kept her loyal followers at a distance and lived in seclusion.'

But the Grace of now seemed different. She appeared more vibrant after meeting Nicole, which eased Nicole's concerns somewhat.

"But why did you take such actions instead of leaving it to Raul's hands? To expose Duchess Lisbeth yourself?"

"There are two reasons. The first is..."

Nicole had to punish Isabel, but at the same time, Isabel couldn't fall into Raul's grasp.

A tiny gap, a moment of chaos. By disrupting Raul, she could create a blind spot unseen by his eyes. That's what Nicole desired.

"To spirit away Isabel. And the second reason is—do you remember the story about the child Arula I told you?"

"Of course. You praised her for being an extremely capable agent."

“I promised to save the child’s mother. Even if I expose Duchess Lisbeth to the royal family, they’re unlikely to punish her unless it’s for a significant reason.”

The royal family is reluctant to leave official records of royals being punished, fearing that one day it might serve as a precedent for their own punishment.

‘Unless it’s an incident that would bring major disgrace to the royal family.....’

Nicole wanted to expose Duchess Lisbeth in a way that everyone would know, making it impossible to cover up the matter.

And she wanted to settle this affair as quickly as possible.

“You thought Raul wouldn’t prioritize rescuing the victims, did you?”

“.....Yes, there’s that too. I wanted to keep my promise to Aru.”

Nicole said.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, and a maid approached and handed over a note.

There were two notes. One was about the progress of exposing Duchess Lisbeth. The other was.....

<Target Secured>

It was a brief message. Dagger had Isabel held at the promised location.

Nicole smiled faintly and folded the letter.

“What does it say?”

“I should be going now, Grace.”

Nicole said quietly. It seemed.....

“It’s time to start a lesson in manners.”

“Do you think there’s a chance for correction?”

“No.”

Nicole replied briefly.

“Still, punishment must be given.”

It’s the head of the household’s role, after all. Nicole burned the note in the candle flame.

And without any hurry, she gracefully walked out through the back door.

“The Grand Duke is looking for Miss Maria.”

Raul’s knights belatedly surrounded Grace’s mansion, and Grace himself went out to meet them.

“There is no such person in our house.”

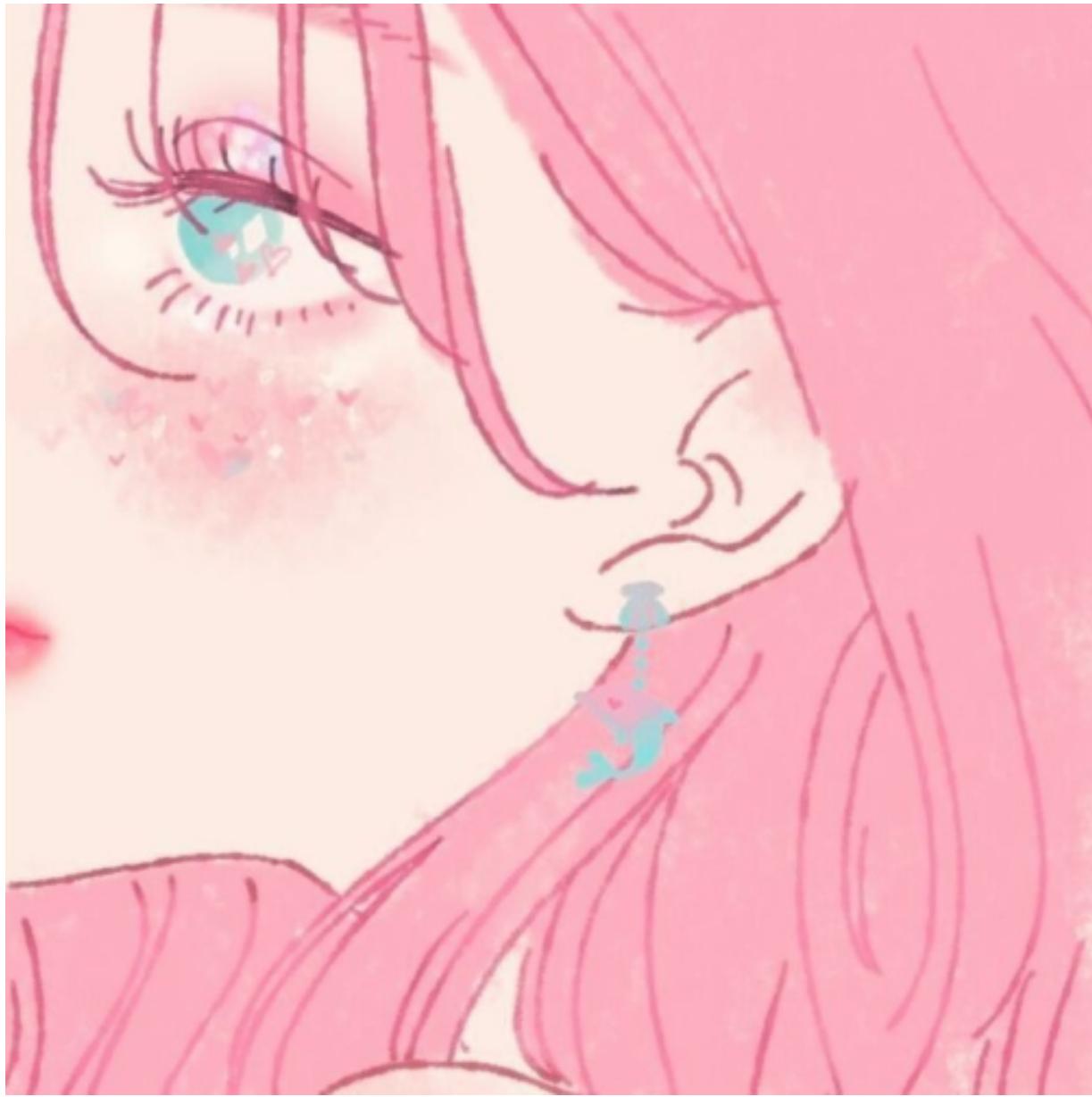
“Perhaps you know Miss Portia and Miss Karen? You are ordered to bring them immediately, by force if necessary.”

Grace sneered at their words. The knights began to form a cordon around the back gate as well.

However, Nicole had deliberately hidden a carriage a few blocks away, and by the time the knights raised their voices, she was already far enough from Grace’s mansion.

The carriage carrying Nicole glided smoothly through the back streets of the capital city.

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# Chapter 114

The carriage carrying Nicole came to a halt near the slums. Nicole alighted from the carriage.

The children playing in the alley glanced at Nicole and then moved aside to give her way.

“This way.”

One of the children whispered. Nicole nodded and opened the old, small gate.

Upon passing the entrance, a small living room came into view with nothing but a table, a desk for work, and a makeshift sofa—the typical appearance of a safe house.

“You’re here, noona?”

Dagger emerged from the direction of the kitchen.

“I received the note well, Dagger.”

“The guests have been taken care of especially well.”

“Thank you, truly.”

“It’s nothing. I should do at least this much for the head of the family.”

Nicole smiled.

Not long ago, Nicole visited an orphanage with Dagger. Watching the children play, Nicole spoke in secrecy.

<Dagger, please prepare one safe house. It should be sturdy enough to detain someone, with the size of a typical interrogation room, and soundproofed. The security must be so tight that no one would notice if someone died inside.>

<That's not difficult at all.>

<And one more thing. Most importantly, it must be a place that will absolutely not be discovered by our boss, the Grand Duke.>

<Eek. That might be a bit difficult... He is quite an extraordinary person after all.>

<So even Dagger's abilities are not up to the task.>

At those words, Dagger bristled immediately.

<Who says it can't be done? Just wait a week.>

And so, Nicole was able to acquire this special safe house.

"Let's meet in person first."

Nicole said, and Dagger headed towards the door leading down to the basement.

The basement stairs were much deeper than expected.

Isabel was tied to a chair in the middle of the room, her head bowed low.

And as Nicole approached, Isabel lifted her head; a sturdy gag was in her mouth.

“Mmph, mmph!”

Isabel looked up at Nicole, her head held high and her eyes bloodshot with a groan.

Nicole gazed at her coldly.

“Turn on the light, Dagger.”

Dagger nodded his head.

*Click.* The magic stone lamp on the wall lit up. Nicole slowly looked down at Isabel.

“Isabel, have you been well?”

Nicole asked softly.

“Ugh, ack!”

Isabel spat curses with her eyes. Then the door slid open, and Estock entered.

“Shall I hit her a few more times? She seems like she’ll scream if I take off the gag now.”

Estock said without greeting, and Isabel’s face paled at the sight of him.

“It’s soundproof, so it’s fine.”

Dagger shrugged his shoulders.

“Do you need to step in personally, sister? Just say what you want, and Estock will make it burn smoothly.”

“Exactly!”

Estock looked at Nicole with desperate eyes. Nicole spoke to Estock as if soothing an anxious puppy.

"I know you like interrogation and are an expert, but I want to give her one last chance."

"To the woman who was trying to sell drugs in collaboration with Duchess Lisbeth? To her?"

Nicole just smiled quietly, and Estock clicked his tongue.

Next to the wooden chair where Isabel was tied, there was an old table made of the same material, covered with a black cloth.

When Estock swiftly removed the cloth, an array of syringes and torture tools were revealed. Isabel's eyes widened at the sight.

Estock took out a knife from among them and cut off Isabel's gag.

"You crazy bitch! What are you doing! Have you forgotten? I have your weakness!"

As soon as the gag was removed, Isabel began to scream like a madwoman.

Nicole was dumbfounded. Even at this moment, Isabel was making a fool of Nicole.

Just moments ago, the situation was entirely different; she was afraid of Estock.

"What are you going to do about it?"

Nicole asked calmly.

“Do you know who’s behind me? The royal family, that’s who. You might not realize how insignificant your backer Grace and her cronies are...”

“Much better. It’s better to be mistaken as one of Lady Grace’s lackeys than as the Duchess Lisbeth’s.”

Estock blurted out without realizing it. Nicole didn’t even turn to look at Estock.

“Royalty? Ah, right. You were trying to export a new type of drug with Duchess Lisbeth.”

Nicole laughed. Dagger also shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly.

“So what? Do you think Duchess Lisbeth will protect you just for that reason?”

“Do you have any idea how deeply involved that woman and I are? If I just open my mouth—”

“Dagger. What’s the current situation with Duchess Lisbeth?”

Nicole asked quietly.

“Yes, she’s been arrested. The Grand Duke’s personal knight order has started the interrogation. She’ll be singing like a canary soon enough,” Dagger replied.

“Is it possible to interrogate royalty as well, our boss?”

Estock asked, blinking in apparent ignorance.

“He’s the commander of the heretical inquisition knights, head of the security division of the metropolitan knights, leader of the knightly corruption investigation team, and

chief of the capital's public order knights; it's certainly possible."

Nicole nodded her head. If it's Raul, he would splendidly finish off Duchess Lisbeth.

"So that's how it turned out. Not so fortunate for you, Isabel."

Nicole said. At that moment, Isabel's eyes wavered mercilessly.

Just by looking at her rapidly darting eyes, it was clear what she was thinking.

As Isabel attempted to scream again, Nicole elegantly gestured with her hand.

"It seems we need a gag again."

Estock shrugged and quickly stuffed a cloth into Isabel's mouth. Isabel made a choking sound as her breath was cut off.

"I'm sorry, but could we have a moment to talk, just the two of us?"

"Just when it's getting interesting?"

Estock seemed reluctant to leave, but after Dagger gave him a look, he obediently exited the room.

"Call me if you need me, noona."

Nicole nodded lightly at Dagger's words.

Nicole waited for Isabel's complexion to return. Isabel, with great effort, finally spat out the gag.

"Isabel. Listen carefully. This is really your last chance."

Isabel lifted her head, her eyes stained with terrible hatred.

"Confess where our father is and write a letter confessing everything you've done. Then you can at least avoid a terrible fate. After that, I will see to it that you receive the fairest punishment possible. Sending you to the Order of Public Safety Knights might be a good idea."

Nicole made an exceedingly generous offer.

Isabel's expression turned icy cold.

"Ha, you're really foolish. Why would I?"

"...Why?"

"I may be tied up like this, but I'm the one holding the hilt of the knife. Do you think I haven't taken measures with our father? If you don't release me, father will truly be in for a rough time."

Isabel spoke with dreadful hatred.

"You damned wretch. If Father dies, it will all be because of you. I will curse you until my dying breath. It's too late to stop now. You've ruined everything for me. Now you will live with the guilt of having killed our parents for the rest of your life. You always act so noble, huh!"

Slap!

Nicole struck Isabel across the face.

She could no longer stand to hear Isabel speak of their father in such a way. Isabel's cheek was turned aside.

“You, damned wretch!”

Having been struck, Isabel was so enraged that she thrashed about wildly while seated in the chair, but she couldn't move at all.

“Are you saying you'll abandon Father?”

“You should speak correctly. Even if Father dies, you're the killer. Even if he suffers.”

“.....”

“You are the perpetrator. I'm not at fault in this matter.”

Isabel was at a loss for words at Nicole's statement. Nicole's calm eyes were filled with utmost coldness.

The primal fear she felt upon seeing Nicole last time began to surface again. However, Isabel couldn't acknowledge that feeling until the end.

“You made a promise with me. How could you deceive me and undermine our negotiation?”

Nicole chuckled lowly.

“Isabel. Let's get our words straight.”

Slap!

She swung her hand once again. The deed done to her father. The act that killed her mother. For Nicole, stabbing Isabel to death dozens of times would still be insufficient.

Even compromising to just a few slaps on the cheek required tremendous patience. Nicole didn't want to stoop to Isabel's level.

“Shut your mouth, Isabel.”

Slap!

“I, it hurts!”

Isabel’s cheek swelled up. Nicole lifted her chin and said while staring into her eyes,

“First, what you attempted wasn’t negotiation, it was a threat. And you would have kept father alive. If he remains alive, you could continue to manipulate me as you please, so why would you get rid of him? Father is alive and well now.”

That was the critical point. Isabel’s eyes stopped wavering.

“Looking at your expression, I hit the mark.”

Nicole said.

“And one more thing. This was your last chance.”

Nicole whispered.

Nicole let go of Isabel and headed towards the desk.

Then she picked up a syringe and injected a solution into it.

It was something Nicole was well acquainted with, as she had used it during confession drug training with Raul.

“I learned this in the capital too, but the performance of this confession drug is truly the best. This is a drug that even our family members can’t make, with effects so potent that even I can’t withstand them.”

Nicole added, tilting her head slightly.

From the beginning, not even once did Nicole intend to negotiate with Isabel.

“Why would I negotiate with you? Like this, I can just capture you and make you spill everything.”

From the start, not for a single moment.

Nicole had no intention of compromising with Isabel. She had excellent companions and a guaranteed effective truth serum.

“Negotiations are held with ‘people’ who can communicate. Isabel. Why would I have a reasonable conversation with someone who is threatening me?”

*You’re too naive.*

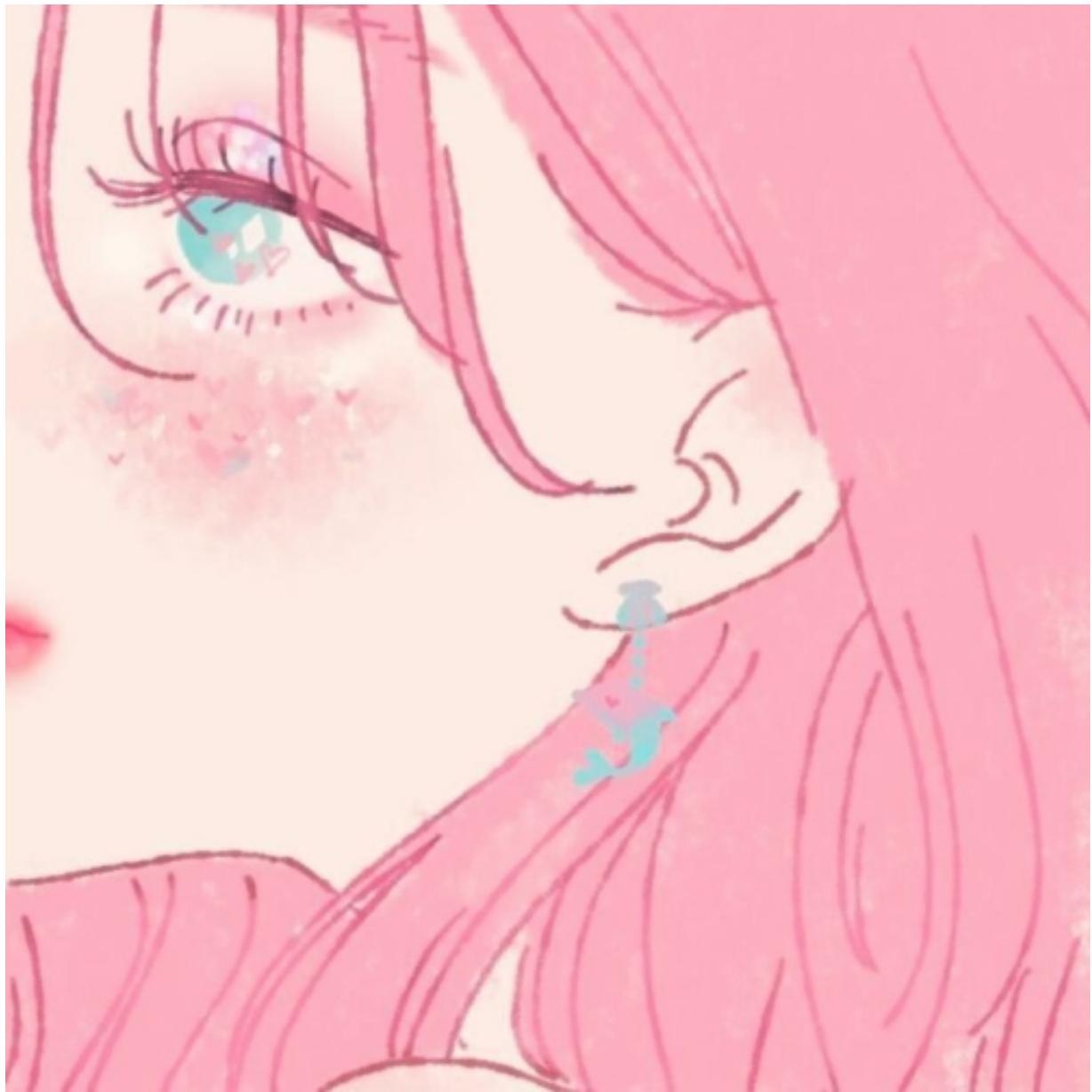
Nicole added, and Isabel’s face contorted even more.

Isabel couldn’t even imagine.

When Nicole had begun to conceive the current situation. Where it all started as Nicole’s plan.

[T/N: Ofc my girl has plans 🤪]

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# Chapter 115

It was then that Isabel realized the situation. Nicole had not been cowed by the threat from the start.

Isabel had been fooled by Nicole's act.

"You, you. Did you deceive me again?"

"I didn't deceive you. It's another matter if you've deceived yourself."

Nicole said, as if she pitied Isabel.

"You've always lost your mind at the sight of anything that sparkles. If someone else had something shiny, you'd want to steal it, even if it meant killing for it."

Isabel flinched at those words.

"Isn't that right? There are many ways to use one's charms."

Nicole said.

"I thought if I showed you the most sparkling and beautiful thing I know, you would be 'again' enchanted."

Isabel's face turned pale. Nicole glanced over a syringe once.

"...Did you deliberately distract the Grand Duke?"

Nicole's lips curled into a nearly visible smile.

"So, you showed me that man on purpose? You deceived me?"

Isabel looked as though she felt betrayed, staring at Nicole without blinking, her gaze chilling.

"Do you really know that man?"

"Still, you cannot come to your senses."

Nicole clicked her tongue. Often Raul had an attitude that seemed to despise the people of the world. Just now, Nicole could empathize with him.

Anyway, Isabel wasn't wrong. Nicole had planned everything from the beginning.

'In her past life, Isabel wasted a lot of time on Raul.'

Most people live their lives pursuing only what they can realistically obtain.

However, someone like Isabel cannot control her desires well. She imagines having someone shining like Raul at just the glimpse of a very small lead, a tiny possibility.

Even at the sight of a very small lead, a tiny possibility.

"You must have heard the rumors about Raul and I. Stories about how Raul personally took away the woman who caused a commotion at the royal family's welcoming ceremony."

Nicole said.

"I didn't even need to try. You were watching me all along."

Nicole had already won Aru over. Aru was like the leader among the children taken in by the house of charity.

Besides Aru, a few other children acted as errand runners. Nicole made sure that everyone in the charity talked about it.

Isabel might have had an elaborate plan originally.

However, Isabel changed her course when she heard that Nicole might become Raul's lover. She decided to use Nicole to get to Raul.

As a result, Isabel showed a gap. Pretending to be intimidated and scared by her threats, Nicole easily deceived Isabel with just a few letters.

"I can easily read your mind, Isabel."

Nicole said coldly.

"You, to someone like you... I..."

"Isabel, do you think you're smart? No."

"Filthy wench! You're like trash, sleeping with just any man."

Isabel muttered under her breath. Nicole didn't care in the slightest.

"I don't sleep with just any man. I slept with the man you covet."

At those words, Isabel's face turned pale and then flushed bright red.

"You, ugh!"

Nicole laughed, her eyes twinkling at Isabel's frothing rage. In truth, Nicole hadn't yet shared a bed with Raul, but she thought this would effectively infuriate Isabel.

"And now my last ounce of patience has run out. So..."

Nicole picked up the syringe she had set down for a moment and examined it with her eyes.

"There's no mercy now. Whatever happens, don't blame me. It's all because of your greed."

Nicole said.

"Once you get this injection, you'll spill even your deepest, darkest secrets. It starts with Father. That friend of mine, Estock, was in this room earlier, wasn't he?"

"...That person?"

Fear flickered across Isabel's face.

"That person is an expert in such matters. They've agreed to volunteer to test the limits of the truth serum's effectiveness."

"To torment me like this, you're a devil. Aren't we related by blood?"

Isabel changed tactics and began to spout nonsense. Nicole was so dumbfounded she wanted to burst into laughter.

"We'll see who the devil is after the interrogation. For instance, the secret of the Glassworm."

At the mention of Glassworm, Isabel rolled her eyes.

"You, you..."

“Well, you might be right. The content that would come out from interrogating you is quite predictable.”

Nicole said kindly.

“Yes, I am quite noble compared to you. I don’t messily use other people’s connections! And I don’t steal someone’s identity either.”

Isabel exclaimed.

“Let’s see. How about your sinister plan? The Glassworm must have been stolen from our family. You’ve probably hidden it somewhere I can’t imagine. Yes, in Karen’s cabin, right? You sent someone to find it there later?”

“...”

“That must be thanks to the power of a young man named Leos. Leos must be a noble, considering he’s brought you this far. Your vain dreams are clear: to become wealthy and gain noble status. And for that, you’re dragging Leos into this...”

“You seem not to know everything, do you?”

Isabel was confident about one thing that Nicole still didn’t know: that Isabel had long been aware of Nicole’s whereabouts and had been monitoring her.

“I was a bit careless. You involved the Grand Duke to blind and bewitch me but...”

“Really, you’re foolish. To think that I thought that ‘in a few years,’ you’ll improve.”

“...What?”

“Careless? What are you talking about? Are you referring to you bribing the priest in charge of the Southern Temple’s mailbox?”

Isabel straightened her back. She felt as though she had been repeatedly beaten by Nicole in an unending series of defeats.

“No way, no way.....”

“I told you, Isabel.”

Nicole whispered.

“I gave you the last chance. You should have come clean before getting scolded. Did you really think I was asking because I didn’t know?”

Isabel’s face looked as if she had been struck multiple times on the head, while Nicole, on the other hand, had a peaceful expression.

From the beginning, Nicole knew that Isabel had gone to see the priest in charge of the mailboxes at the Great Temple.

Because.....

“I was the one who bribed that priest before you, Isabel.”

Previously, Nicole had a secret conversation with Raul at the Great Temple. The content of the conversation was trivial, but the atmosphere and words were enough to be misunderstood if overheard.

Worried that the priest might have overheard the conversation, Nicole went through the trouble to seek him out again a few days later.

And while she was there, she confided a secret request.

<Priest, I have a request. If anyone comes looking for this mailbox, this number, could you please contact me immediately? Actually, it doesn't have to be about the mailbox at all. If someone is inquiring about me, please let me know right away.>

At first, the priest adamantly refused. He said that someone who follows the Southern God could not play the role of a spy.

<The truth is, I have a family from whom I've lost contact. I thought they might come looking for me here. It's really urgent for me.>

Nicole hinted at a painful family history. Eventually, moved by her story, the priest agreed to send information about those who come looking for the mailbox in exchange for a small token of appreciation from Nicole.

When Nicole heard that a beautiful woman named Isabel had come looking, she shivered with excitement. Isabel also knew the secret of this mailbox.

"You thought you were watching me. But I've been watching you from the moment you arrived in the capital."

Nicole smiled. She had plenty of time before being assigned to the duchess-related mission.

With Dagger's help, it was not difficult to privately secure the scouts to track Isabel.

Then Nicole learned that Isabel had gone to see Duchess Lisbeth, and Nicole began to keep an eye on the duchess as well.

When she was assigned by Raul to surveil Duchess Lisbeth, she thought it was a stroke of luck.

‘And for that, I’ve kept Raul on his toes.’

Nicole was deeply infatuated with Raul, but on the other hand, she knew she had to do anything to manipulate him.

So she approached Raul. If he hadn’t targeted Duchess Lisbeth for her first, she would have secured that mission by any means necessary.

“You’ve been in the palm of my hand from the beginning. Just like that, foolish Isabel.”

“.....”

Isabel’s face turned pale as if threshed. Tears streamed down from Isabel’s eyes.

“Are you reflecting at all?”

“I hate you so much. I really hate you. You’re truly a bitch. You.....”

It wasn’t worth listening to. Nicole shook her head.

“Sorry, but I don’t take pleasure in torture. Instead, I’ll send an expert.....”

Nicole injected a syringe into Isabel’s arm.

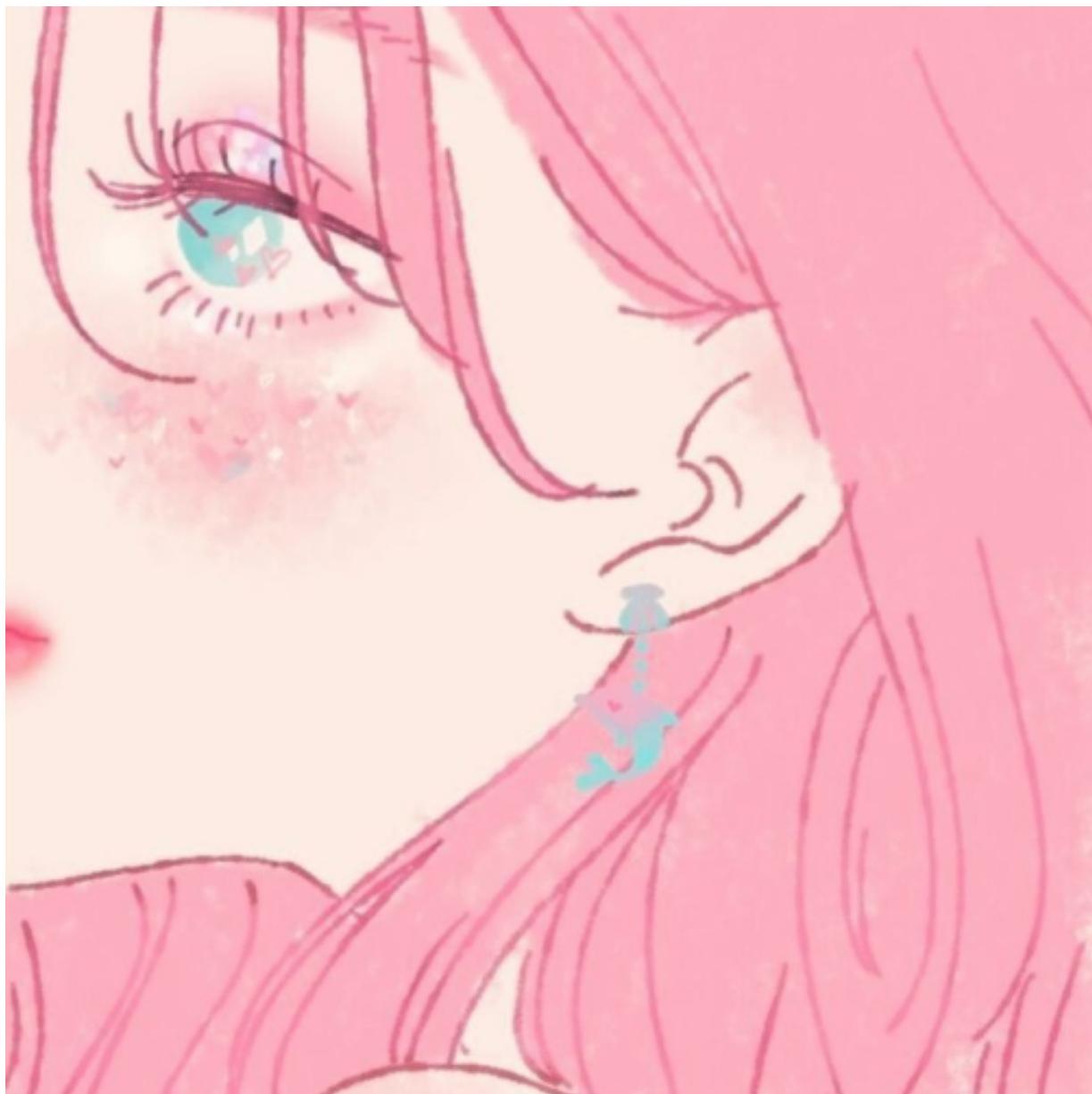
“Have a very good time until the effects of the truth serum wear off.”

And now, it is truly over. Nicole clicked her tongue lightly.

"Still, when I punish you, I'll grant you one wish. I'll make you a noble, of a status you could never imagine."

These were the words Nicole whispered, as if letting them slip away.

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# Chapter 116

\*\*\*

“What is this medicine? I hate it!”

Isabel screamed belatedly. However, the interrogation room was perfectly soundproof. Once Nicole left, no sound could be heard from outside.

‘I gave her so many chances.’

At least Nicole did not lie.

Nicole had given Isabel, the devil who might as well have killed her entire family in a past life, not one but two chances.

Had Isabel disappeared on the day their house burned down and never returned, Nicole might have given up on her revenge.

Just a moment ago, had Isabel given up and offered to confess, she would have been forgiven.

‘But that would never happen.’

Isabel was a demon. Once a family Nicole loved the most, but now there was not a shred of affection left.

“I thought if she ever came back, I would break her completely.”

And that's exactly what was happening, as she had resolved.

Nicole felt more bitterness than exhilaration, but she had no regrets about her actions.

The perfect revenge was just beginning.

\*\*\*

Nicole closed the door and pondered for a moment.

'I never thought Estock would cooperate to this extent.'

Nicole had been skeptical until the end about Dagger's attempts to involve Estock in this matter.

Dagger said that Estock was crazy enough to inject himself with the truth serum too.

He then said Estock enjoyed using the serum to interrogate and torture someone.

But why was he obsessed with such things? Nicole couldn't understand, no matter how hard she thought about it. Trying to fully understand Estock seemed like a waste of time.

'Thinking back to when the fire first broke out on the mountain, both my brother Jay and I almost got tortured by Estock in the village.'

And then Dagger said,

'Estock want to be involved in everything I do, and I've shared most of my life with this strange guy. And he has never once exposed my secrets.'

Nicole trusted Dagger. And feeling like she was burdening Dagger too much with this matter, she eventually agreed to involve Estock.

And now, Estock was sparkling before Nicole with excitement.

Like a puppy asking if it could eat its treat.

“Can I go in and start?”

“Estock, are you really going to help me?”

“Of course! You know how interested I am in the side effects of using more than the prescribed dose of truth serum. To include me in such an interesting task... Karen is really a good person. I’m smitten...”

Nicole increasingly wanted to keep her distance from Estock.

“Estock, tell me again about the side effects of the truth serum.”

“Ah, if administered excessively, one becomes an idiot. It’s not that you lose all your memories, but your mind becomes a complete mess. You become half-witted and incapable of functioning as a person.”

“And during that process, you can select which memories are necessary and which are not?”

Estock said.

“Right. I’ve always wanted to try erasing and reestablishing memories through the administration of truth serum.”

He licked his lips.

“Moreover, this doesn’t go against our master’s rules.”

“Our master’s rules?”

Dagger answered on his behalf.

“The rule is that only those who have committed serious crimes or those whom the Grand Duke has permitted for interrogation may be tormented. Since Estock is not a compliant character, that’s the one teaching he’s been drilled into since childhood—to at least adhere to that rule.”

“.....”

Is this a person or a mad dog...

Nicole couldn’t help but have such impolite thoughts. Hiding her true feelings, she spoke seriously.

“Estock, can you keep your mouth shut until death about the contents of the interrogation of a woman named Isabel that starts now?”

“Yes, of course. Even if you ask me again under truth serum, my answer would be the same.”

Nicole nodded her head.

“After all, I have no choice but to leave this to Estock. I’m currently on an undercover mission for Mr. Snake, so it’s going to be difficult for me to wander around starting today. I’m just out for a bit right now.”

Dagger said. He had said before.

That it’s actually better to move freely during a secret mission. There’s no lord who would doubly watch a subordinate who’s on an undercover operation.

"Then what kind of mission is Estock on that he's out and about like this?"

"Ah, I'm on vacation."

Estock cheerfully said.

".....Does Sith have a vacation system too?"

Nicole had read all the regulations of Sith Shadow. However, this was the first time she heard of such a thing. There was usually enough rest time provided between mission dispatches that a separate vacation wasn't necessary. Perhaps for someone like Estock, who wasn't a Shadow but a regular knight, things might be different.

"I caused a bit of a ruckus in front of the Grand Duke recently, and he said, 'Don't ever appear before my eyes again, you fool.' So, I haven't been going to headquarters since then!"

Estock said spiritedly.

".....Isn't that the same as being absent without leave or running away?"

Nicole made an astonished face. Dagger nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders.

"After all, there are no great expectations for Estock, so they don't look for him when he disappears like this. They'll call him if needed."

"....."

She couldn't tell if Raul had the loyalty of his subordinates or not. Nicole felt like crying while smiling.

'After all, from Raul's perspective, I must not seem like an obedient subordinate either.'

This time too, she did not comply obediently with Raul. She spectacularly exposed Duchess Lisbeth after all.

She's been avoiding Raul by relying on Grace's support, but when she meet him next time.....

'I will have to properly face his anger.'

However, Nicole decided to think about that later. She wasn't without fear, but she still didn't think Raul would kill her. After all, he was someone who recognized her merits.

"Is there any news from outside?"

Nicole said to Dagger.

"It's still quiet. No newspaper articles have come out either since it was an internal palace event."

Dagger said.

"The Grand Duke will finish that woman off, won't he?"

Nicole spoke softly, feeling increasingly burdened by Estock's gaze.

"Estock, please interrogate that woman according to this list. And like this, is it possible?"

Estock's eyes widened as he heard Nicole whispering.

"Give me two days. It will be interesting."

Estock smiled aggressively.

“It’s been 15 minutes since the injection.”

“15 minutes. Just the right time for the truth serum to work best.”

Estock said as he loosened his hands.

“Shall we begin then?”

Estock spoke briskly, but somehow a chill was felt.

He entered the room. Hearing the heavy door, Nicole felt no sympathy for Isabel.

“And what about the young man named Leos?”

“Ah, this house has a unique structure; there’s a hidden room between the basement and the first floor.”

Dagger answered.

“The woman named Isabel is in the basement, and the boy is locked in the hidden mezzanine.”

Leos. The young man who seemed captivated by Isabel. He was someone who had almost killed her.

‘He looked quite young...’

Nicole was concerned about Leos. She also needed to know about the Glassworm.

“Was that man also involved in the drug business?”

Nicole shook her head.

“He’s a complete stranger to me. Seems like he got entangled with Isabel.”

Nicole hesitated then added softly,

"I suppose I will have to meet that person myself."

"Shall I do it for you? I have about 30 minutes."

"You've done enough."

Nicole said kindly to Dagger.

"I'll leave the rest to my maids."

Nicole gently patted Dagger's back, who blushed at having received praise from the head of the family.

"Then I'll be off now. Take care, noona."

After Dagger left the safe house, Nicole was lost in thought for a moment.

'Leos. He's a complete stranger to me. He wasn't even around Isabel in my past life.'

Although Leos had almost killed Nicole once, if it was because of the Glassworm, she felt pity for him and had no intention of tormenting him.

However, he must not talk about this safe house, so he needed to stay here for a while.

After all, if he left now, he would only be awaiting a future where he'd be caught as an accomplice to Isabel, a drug offender.

Nicole headed to the room where Leos was detained.

The structure of the middle floor was very appropriate—a small room with a low ceiling and a bed, much better than

an interrogation room.

However, there was a barred gate between the room and the door, keeping Leos and Nicole separated, which was very safe.

'To secure such an appropriate place, Dagger's ability is impressive.'

Nicole thought and observed Leos. He was neither rebellious nor wild; he just looked powerless and exhausted.

"You are....."

Leos lifted his head.

"My name is Karen."

Nicole said softly.

"Isabel didn't call you that."

Nicole saw confusion in Leos's eyes. He wanted to believe Isabel but struggled with doubt in his gaze.

Leos seemed uncertain whether he should resist Nicole or give up.

'I don't fully know what methods Isabel used, but it seems the brainwashing isn't complete.'

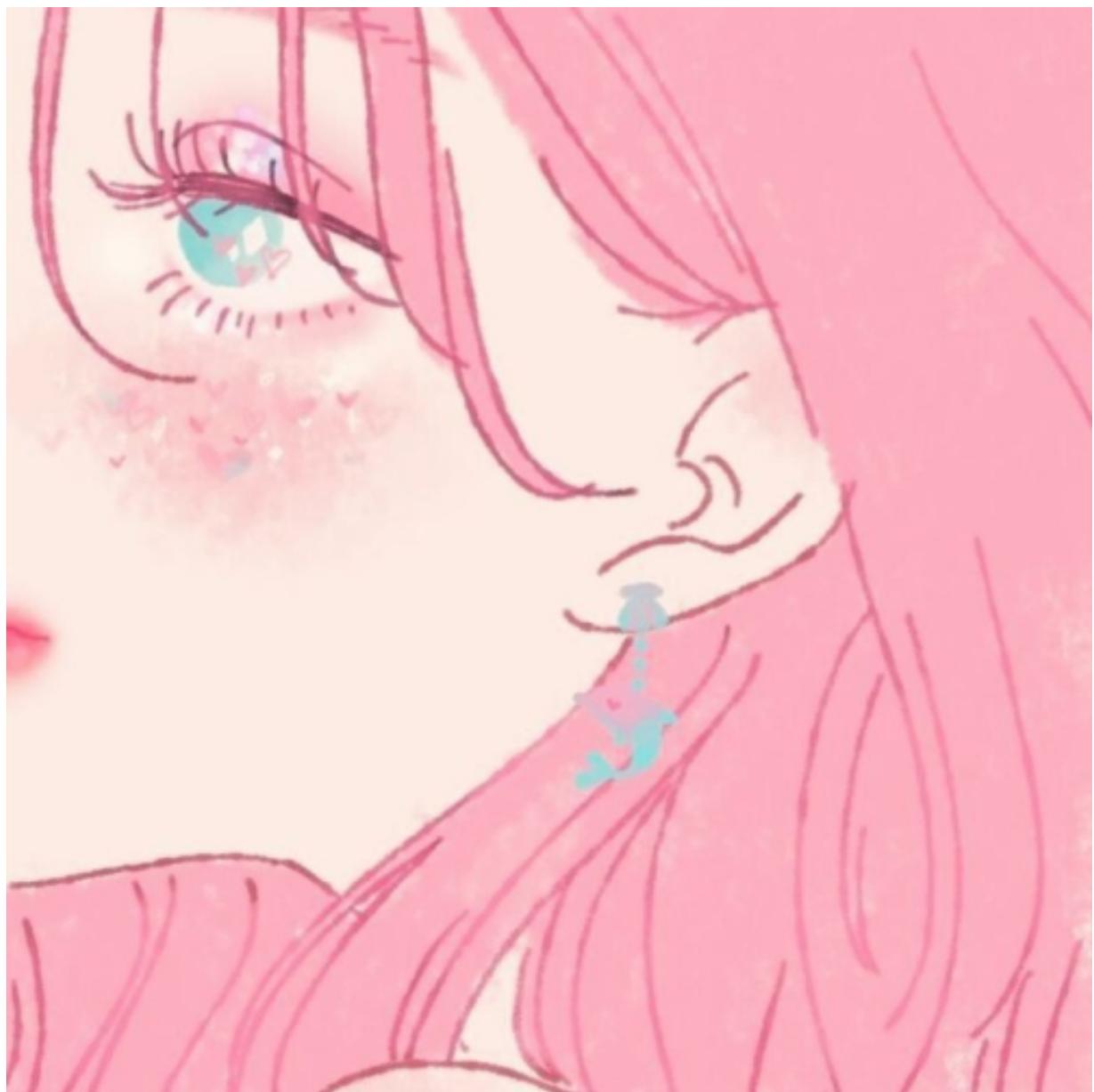
Nicole had a hunch and felt strange at the same time. If her guess was correct, Nicole would have suffered a similar fate in her past life.

In her past life, Nicole probably wandered with a look similar to Leos's, like a ghost.

"I have something to ask you."

Leos said softly.

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# Chapter 117

“What is a Glassworm?”

“.....I don’t know either right now.”

Nicole spoke softly. But Estock would soon find out. Among the list of interrogations Nicole had given to Estock, there was also something about the Glassworm.

“It’s okay that you’ve locked me up. I just want to know.....”

Leos rubbed his head.

“I, I didn’t want to do this..... But then..... Isabel.....”

“One thing I know. Isabel has implanted a Glassworm in you.”

Nicole said.

“And if my hypothesis is correct, that worm is controlling you. I’ll look for a way to remove it.”

Upon closer inspection, Leos was quite a handsome young man. He looked at Nicole for a while and then nodded slightly.

“.....Please find out anything you can. I..... don’t know who to trust.”

Leos muttered. He clutched his head.

"But if Isabel has deceived me, then I..... to my parents....."

Leos couldn't continue and bit his lip. Nicole slightly furrowed her brow.

"You might not believe this, but I'll tell you anyway. If you didn't participate in drug trafficking with Isabel, I have no grudge against you. There's no reason for me to keep you locked up either."

Nicole spoke softly, wondering what Raul would think if he found out she was unwillingly imprisoning such a fine young man.

'He already looks at me strangely, it will only get worse now. He'll think I'm a completely crazy woman.'

Thinking this made her want to click her tongue in disapproval.

"Then why have you locked me up?"

"You'll have to find that out in time. After administering a truth serum, you'll have to undergo basic interrogation....."

Nicole spoke frankly, also mentioning the fact that if things went wrong, Leos could be caught by the city guard and be subject to summary execution.

"I'm not sure."

Leos said softly.

"I am..... right now, I'm so confused that I'm satisfied just to be a little away from Isabel."

"My maid will bring food soon. Rest until then."

With those words, Nicole left the room, leaving Leos behind.

She also left a note where Estock could see it when he came out.

The note said not to harass the young man named Leos, and to conduct a simple interrogation if necessary.

'Have sweet dreams, Isabel.'

Nicole murmured to herself.

No sound came from behind the iron door. She could only hope that the ending of this self-inflicted dream would at least serve as a lesson.

That is, if Isabel could survive it.

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Nicole, who had come down to the first floor, looked out the window.

Soon, it would be time for Redia to bring news. She would arrive safely here as long as she wasn't being tracked by Raul.

"Miss."

As expected, Redia arrived shortly after. She was wearing a hood and carried a basket of food in her hand.

"You should come see this. There's been a problem."

Redia whispered something into Nicole's ear, causing Nicole's eyes to widen.

\*\*\*

Nicole got out of the carriage. She had arrived at a hospital in town, which was surrounded by knights.

“Unnie.”

Nicole pushed through the crowd. The security knights who were there to protect a witness recognized her, and Aru burst outside to greet her.

Nicole’s heart sank at the sight of Aru’s tear-stained face.

“What happened to your mother?”

“Mother is sick.”

Aru said softly.

“I thought I would be really okay because I was prepared for it, but now that Mother is actually sick...”

Redia had come to convey none other than news about Aru.

Aru had sent an urgent note to Nicole, she said.

It was about the Grand Duke’s men noticing Aru’s existence and trying to take her away under the pretext of being a witness.

And also that Aru’s mother was in very bad condition.

“What about Mother?”

Nicole grabbed Aru and entered the room as she spoke.

The room they entered was a small living room, a space where guardians could rest. Beyond that, the connected door led to a hospital room.

“She had seizures all night long asking for her medication, and now she’s not saying anything.....”

Aru clung to Nicole.

“Momther has been an alcoholic from the start, a persona non grata in the eyes of the Grand Duchess Lisbeth.”

She heard she had frequent seizures and was high-maintenance.

Isabel divided people to test the effectiveness of the drug. Some were overdosed while others were given doses at intervals.

Sadly, Aru’s mother was the test subject ‘receiving the most medication.’ As a result, she became severely addicted and now, although alive, she was not in a living state.

Nicole knew the biggest problem with the drug Isabel used.

A person who overdoses becomes empty. They can’t communicate and are just living corpses with open eyes. That’s what happens.

Aru must have panicked at the sight of her mother like that.

‘Isabel, Duchess Lisbeth.’

And then there was Duchess Lisbeth. Nicole felt a grinding anger towards them. She had just sent Isabel to hell, but it felt insufficient.

“I am too late, aren’t I? Don’t cry, I’m sorry, Aru.”

Nicole said and then hugged Aru tightly.

“It’s not your fault, unnie.”

Aru took Nicole's hand and said so. Nicole sincerely wanted to protect Aru.

While consoling Aru, Nicole suddenly lifted her head.

Bastard stood towering above them.

"Why are you crying like that?"

Bastard looked confused. Nicole gazed at him and unknowingly hugged Aru even tighter.

"What's going on here?"

"I came to check on the witnesses. And I was told to bring your informant inside as well."

Aru raised her head and looked at Bastard with her eyes smeared with tears.

At that moment, Nicole's feelings were really... complex. She thought it would be better if Bastard and Aru did not meet.

Aru was still young and currently a relative weaker party...

"It's not an arrest. It's a formal investigation, and we will assign someone gentle as the investigator as much as possible."

Bastard sweat unknowingly as he spoke.

It was because Nicole was glaring at him.

Up until now, Bastard and Nicole had not been on bad terms. Even though he knew that Nicole had crossed Raul in many ways, Bastard had always taken Nicole's side every time.

Bastard was originally weak for the unfortunate, and among Raul's knights, he belonged to the kinder side.

"But this child's mother is sick right now."

Nicole said, stroking Aru's shoulder.

"The Grand Duke is also looking for Miss Karen. He is quite angry."

Nicole felt a bit calmer at those words.

She was worried about Aru, but she couldn't just stay by the child's side forever. She had things to do with Raul.

Making an insider without the approval of the higher-ups was subject to punishment. The only way to be forgiven was post-payment; in other words, to succeed in the task and then persuade the superior by saying, 'In fact, this person was our internal collaborator, so please be lenient.'

"Please let her stay by her mother's side a bit longer. She's just a child."

Nicole emphasized the fact that Aru was young. A question arose on Bastard's face.

It made sense since Nicole was looking at Bastard with wide eyes.

"Understood. Then I will grant a reprieve for summoning this young lady until tomorrow. And truly, nothing much will happen to this little lady. Since she is involved in an incident related to the royal family, she needs protection, so we plan to take her to the Sith headquarters."

Nicole also knew that well, so she nodded her head.

"I'll calm the child down and then leave."

Bastard nodded and kindly said to call him anytime if help was needed.

"Did that knight just call me 'young lady'?"

As Bastard left, Aru cautiously raised her head.

"Why?"

"It's just strange. Noblemen in such expensive clothes don't usually call me 'young lady.' They might call me this or that, but not 'young lady'."

Bastard's politeness seemed to surprise Aru even amidst the situation. At least her expression softened a bit.

Then, wiping away her tears, she whispered softly to Nicole.

"He must be a bit lacking, I guess. Judging by his kind face, he won't be successful."

"....."

Nicole was at a loss for words. Anyway, Nicole knew that Raul was angry now.

Nicole's well-being was in his hands at the moment. If Raul, in his anger, decided to punish Nicole severely, Aru, her ally, might get entangled as well.

"I will see the Grand Duke first and talk about you."

Aru nodded her head.

"After that, let's think about your future. I'll also look for a way to cure your mother, as promised."

“.....Yes.”

Nicole said. Aru glanced around and then hugged Nicole tightly.

“Sister, I’m really thankful for everything. You have the face and heart of an angel.”

Nicole looked at Aru and thought of Isabel.

Isabel might go on to hurt many people, including her own family, in the future.

Nicole had a duty to stop Isabel. Therefore, Nicole’s revenge was justified.

\*\*\*

As Nicole came out of the room, Bastard tried to go inside.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll just take the basic personal details of that little lady.”

Nicole said.

“Then what carriage shall I take?”

“.....Can’t you ride a carriage by yourself?”

“The Grand Duke said he urgently needed to see me. Interrogating a child isn’t really something for Bastard, who is a close associate of his, to do.”

Now that she heard it, Nicole’s words made sense. Aru could be left to others. After all, the whole hospital was protecting the witnesses.

Raul wanted to see Nicole immediately. Therefore, it was right for Bastard to escort Nicole himself.

“But, Sir.”

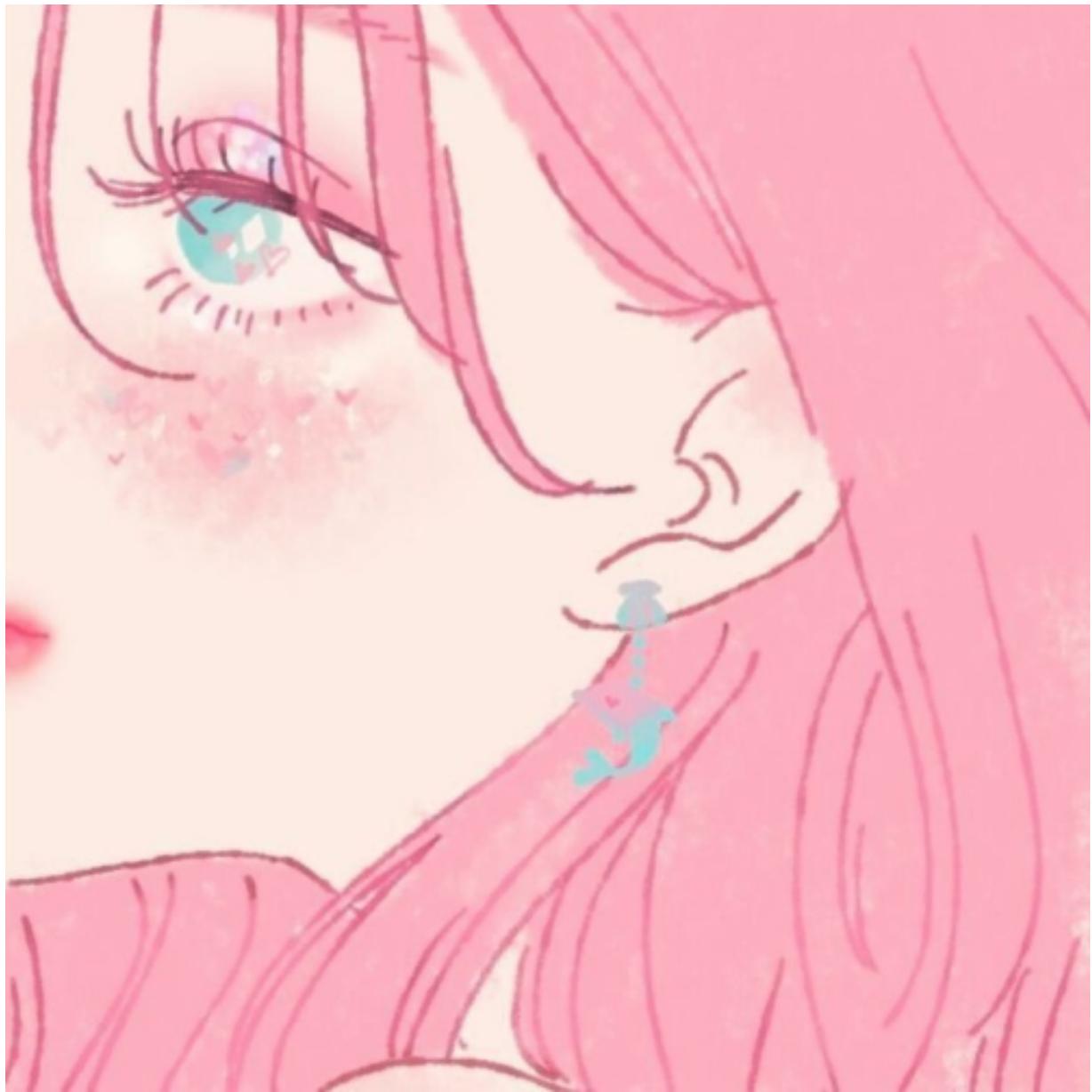
“Yes, Miss Karen.”

“...How old are you?”

“...Pardon?”

Bastard was taken aback, not knowing whether Karen was showing interest in him or picking a fight. If it were the former, it would surely ruffle Raul’s feathers.

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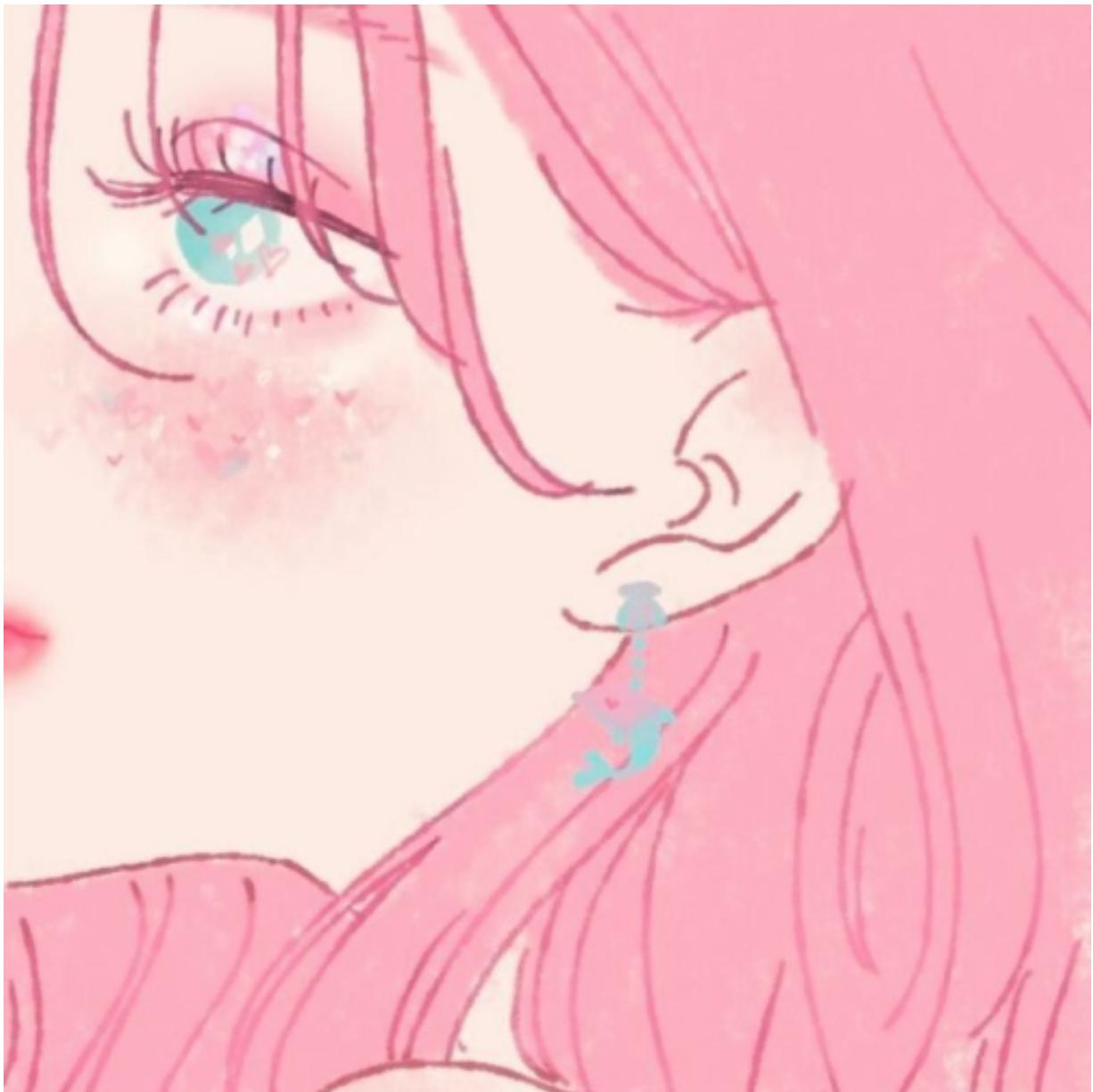


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# Chapter 118

“...In my twenties?”

Surprisingly, Bastard was 28 years old. Aru looked too young, and Bastard had an older appearance.

Aru would be an adult next year, so the age difference was still within the realm of possibility. It was common for nobility to have marriages with age gaps.

‘...Still, it’s not a small difference.’

Nicole silently looked at him through the carriage window. Bastard couldn’t understand why the back of his head felt prickly. Even more so, he was very gentlemanly escorting around the carriage Nicole was in, riding a horse.

\*\*\*

The place Nicole arrived at was the Grand Duke’s mansion. Raul was not in the secret interrogation room of the security knights, but in his own home.

‘Why is he here? Isn’t he usually busier than this?’

Nicole was puzzled, but before she could satisfy her curiosity, the carriage crossed the back road of the Grand Duke’s estate.

There was a separate entrance for Siths. Siths used the west gate. Nicole also alighted there.

“I will guide you to where the Grand Duke is.”

Bastard said. Nicole nodded slightly. As she crossed the corridor of the Grand Duke’s house, she tensed up again, feeling strength pour into her ribs.

And as she entered Raul’s space, her mind went blanker. Her world’s focus shifted to Raul, and she tensed up immediately.

‘It’s strange. I can craft intricate plans from behind or carry out secret intelligence work calmly. But... when it comes to Raul, I just become a fool.’

Even now, standing in front of Raul makes her feel stripped bare. And she can’t move an inch.

Nicole headed towards the large dining room. Passing by, she noticed an old clock on the wall and realized—

It was time for Raul to have tea.

Bastard guided Nicole, gave a nodding farewell, and left. Nicole opened the heavy door.

“Sit down.”

Raul said. He sat leisurely in front of a long table, looking at documents. His profile in uniform was perfect as usual and faintly glowed in the sunlight filtering through the windowpane.

Nicole was cautious and sat a little away from Raul.

“So, how does it feel to hold the record for the most disobedience of orders in Sith Shadow history?”

Raul took his hands off the documents he was looking at and looked at Nicole. Nicole thought that Raul would stand up any moment, throw her on the table, and hit her.

Nicole was puzzled by his very calm demeanor.

“.....I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disobey orders. I carried out your intention to expose Duchess Lisbeth on the day of her appointment ceremony well.”

“Carried out?”

Raul snickered. As the smile faded from his face, Nicole felt a chill down her spine.

As expected, this man was very angry.

“You know I never ordered you to do such a thing, right?”

“.....Yes. But the situation was urgent. The witnesses were being drugged... There was no time. And I had promises made to an inside collaborator.”

Raul gestured to Nicole, who approached and bowed to him.

“You didn’t trust me.”

“.....”

Nicole remained silent. It was true.

“Who asked you to think?”

Raul said.

“Your role is to carry out my orders.”

Nicole closed her mouth. Raul's words were absolutely right. He didn't need a staff officer... he needed a competent agent. She couldn't act on her own accord.

So she had no choice but to expose herself completely and beg again this time.

Fortunately, Nicole had anticipated such a situation and knew which card to play.

"Get on the table."

Raul said.

"Choking you might improve my mood a bit."

Raul said it as if it were absurd, the tone indicating he wasn't serious, which allowed Nicole not to be terribly frightened.

"You don't seem scared?"

Raul said, and only then did Nicole look beside the table.

There was a whip laid out. It was something Raul used when he rode horses. The short whip was thin and black. It looked elastic and well-used.

Tea time food replaced by a teacup and a whip, that's too much.

Even the antiquity felt terribly lewd, and it was scary, too.

"At this point, you should know what to do."

Raul brushed Nicole's hair back. He looked at her as if she were laid out on the table for dinner and said,

“Lift your skirt.”

Raul said, and Nicole, having a sense of the situation, immediately did so. Her pale legs were clad in silk stockings.

Raul lifted the whip to Nicole’s face, tracing it gently. Nicole bit her lip and turned her head, exposing her chest slightly at the same time.

“Raise both hands above.”

Nicole did as she was told. Now she couldn’t move her hands at all, as if she was bound to him.

Her master had warned her several times that he was being lenient with her. That next time, he might whip her bare.

Despite knowing this, Nicole did not submit to Raul.

“Say what you want to say.”

The whip slowly grazed her soft cheek and tickled Nicole’s white neck.

It tickled, but no laughter came out. Her body began to tremble gently.

“Your Grace... you have the right to handle me as you please.”

“I’m well aware.”

This time, Raul’s whip caressed Nicole’s prominent nipples over the thin dress and then tapped them very lightly.

“Hnng...”

It wasn't painful, but Nicole tensed up in her collarbone area.

Nicole knew which whip was used for torture in Sith— a large, sturdy whip braided with iron wires that could break bones if swung by a strong man's hand.

The fact that he was using the whip he employed for taming horses... it was still him being lenient.

Nicole spread her legs a little more, and Raul's whip lingered near her thighs.

"This seems like a good spot."

Nicole closed her eyes. Raul's whip swung once between the garter belt and her pale thighs, as if to check its position.

"Ah, uh!"

It stung. But even this time, it hadn't hit properly.

"You're an amazing woman."

Raul said.

"After all the trouble you've caused that deserves punishment, you're the first Sith who hasn't yet been properly punished by me. And, you're the first woman to lie on my tea table."

"....."

"Despite that, you're still the first woman I want to do it with."

Nicole flinched at Raul's words. A strange sensation rose in her lower abdomen again. Her skin prickled and saliva

pooled under her tongue.

Raul was tilting his head, looking at Nicole. Just being near him made her body temperature rise. It was just... hot.

"There's another first time as well."

Nicole said softly. Raul would have understood that insinuation right away. Then, Nicole had kissed Raul and engaged in lewd acts with him.

But the last thing, Nicole's first time, she had not allowed. And Raul had been patient.

"Tonight... you can do whatever you want."

She spoke boldly, but Nicole felt like her chest was about to burst. She hoped Raul wouldn't lash out in anger with a whip all over her body.

Anyway, Nicole seduced Raul.

"Do you have any idea how ridiculous you're acting?"

Raul leaned over Nicole.

Thud, thud.

The whip tapped slowly between Nicole's corset and the long, thick crease of her buttocks.

As though it could lash out at any moment.

A steady vibration seemed to reach up to her womb as it slowly struck, causing Nicole's entire lower abdomen to tremble and spasm slightly.

'Am I really a pervert?'

Nicole couldn't bear the embarrassment as her nipples hardened gradually. When Raul did such things, she was excited beyond fear.

"I know. But all I have to offer is my body and heart."

Nicole said.

"So, throwing myself away... isn't a bad thing, is it?"

Raul leaned in.

"Do you always use your body like this to appease someone's feelings?"

"It's not a transaction."

Nicole looked at Raul with desperation. She could endure whatever Raul did, whatever act they did together, but she didn't want to do the same with anyone else. She was sincere.

"I'm yours, so I can't deal with someone else. Just... Just..."

Nicole said.

"Tonight. I want to go all the way tonight. Please reward me for what I've done well, and punish me then..."

Raul's brow furrowed. The expression that appeared on his perfectly beautiful face was rather one of anguish.

Nicole found it hard to look at that expression and closed her eyes.

"Get up."

Raul said. Nicole released her hands and stood up. However, Raul did not allow Nicole to come down under the table.

As soon as Nicole raised her upper body, Raul's large hand pressed down on her shoulder. Nicole naturally faced the wall, showing her back to Raul, and then she was made to kneel on the table.

"Don't turn around."

Raul whispered. Nicole did so and closed her eyes.

Nicole felt Raul approaching, smelling good as always. Raul stood behind her and merely tilted his head to kiss her lips.

Nicole's chin turned to the right as Raul's lips moved fervently as if to devour her. Nicole gasped, laboriously receiving his kiss once again as Raul's hand gripped her chest tightly enough to hurt.

"You're the naughtiest woman I know."

Raul said as if he couldn't believe it.

"...I'm sorry."

"But you have good skills."

Raul added. His hand moved slowly, caressing Nicole's lower abdomen. Her thighs were also tense from being forced to kneel.

Pressing down firmly, Raul's hand pressed exactly on top of the clitoris.

"You move me as you wish."

".....I'm sorry....."

Nicole continued to apologize, not wanting to go against his mood. However, Raul's words were not unpleasant.

She thought it would be truly ecstatic to be able to move freely, even for just one day in his life.

"You're the one who started this. No mercy tonight."

".....Yes."

Whether it was punishment or reward. Nicole imagined being whipped into a mess by him and embraced in disarray like the last night of her past life.

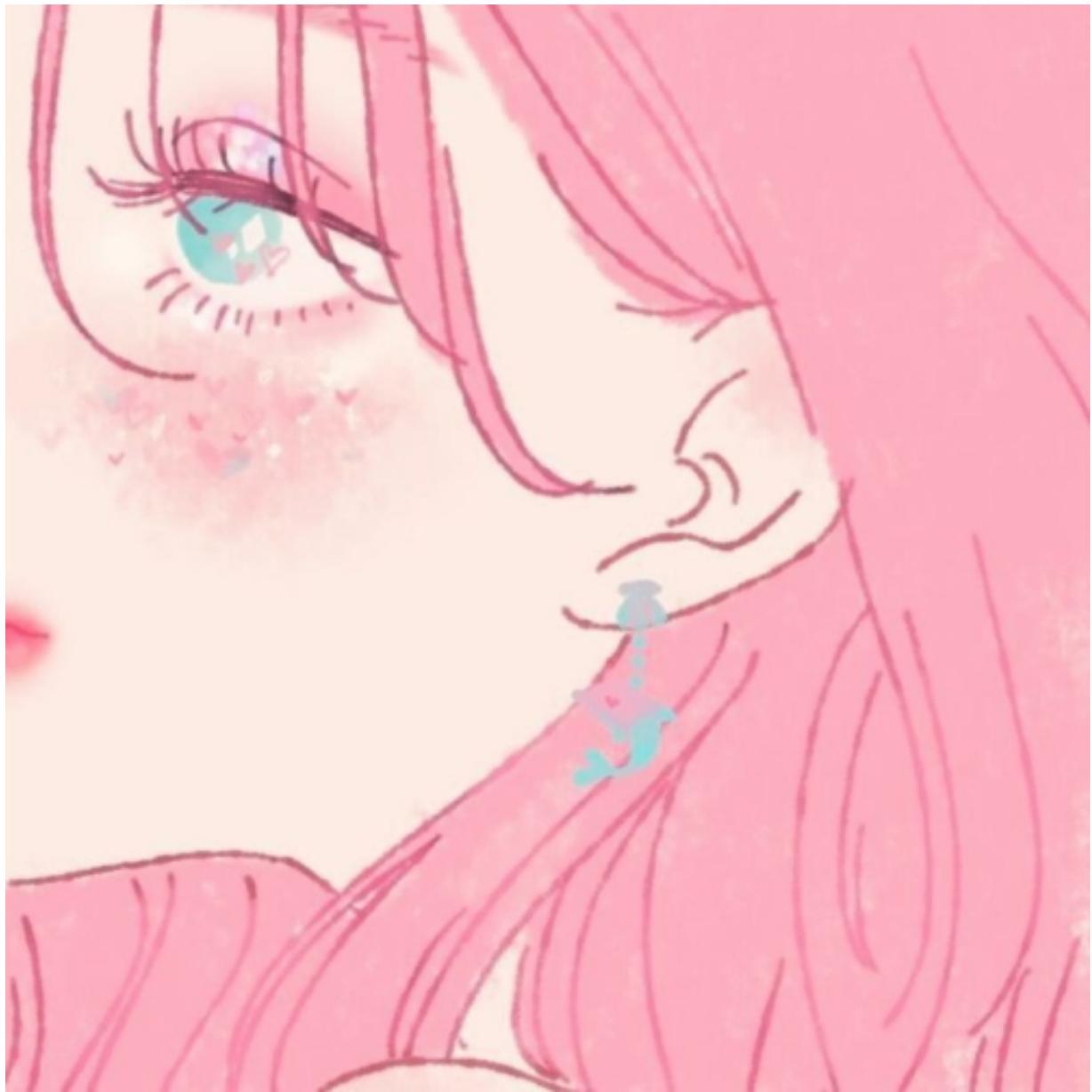
She disliked the pain, but it was an imagination that gave a strange pleasure. Nicole shuddered, and Raul's hand dropped.

"I will come to you tonight, so wait."

He commanded. His low, beautiful voice burrowed into Nicole's heart.

Nicole nodded heavily, barely managing to do so.

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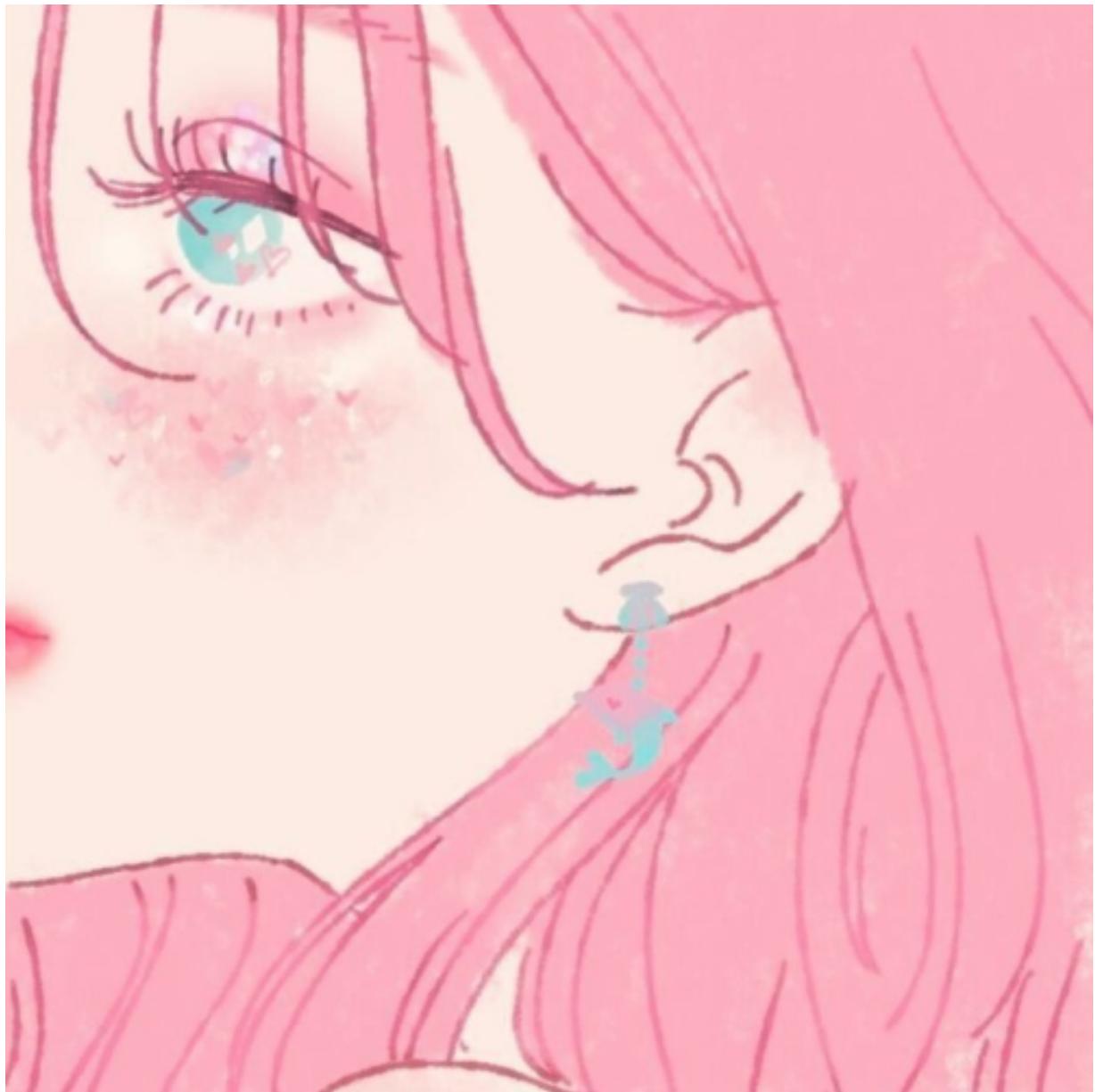


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# Chapter 119

Thus, Nicole was finally able to free herself from Raul.

When she returned home, Nicole's back was drenched.

'Did I make a wise choice?'

There were countless issues to consider.

Would Isabel and Leos, trapped in the safe house, and Duchess Lisbeth truly be punished?

But no matter how much she pondered, reality did not change. Tonight, Nicole had seduced Raul and invited him to her home. She would prepare to receive her guest.

\* \* \*

Raul's day passed quickly as usual, by the hour, sometimes by the minute.

Around 8 in the evening, he had just finished receiving reports from his subordinates at the mansion. He spent the evening quietly.

"Didn't you say you had plans to go out this evening?"

The butler asked quietly. It meant that if he was not going out, he would prepare to go to bed. Once Raul retired to bed, the official day at the mansion would come to an end.

Raul put down the documents he was looking at.

“Prepare to go out in an hour.”

Raul had not given Karen a precise time for their appointment from the start. He had said in the evening, so she probably had been waiting for quite some time...

Raul thought of Karen’s face, either worn out from waiting or frowning. It was somewhat amusing and, frankly... tempting. It seemed like it would be quite entertaining if she got angry with him.

Anyway, he was quite pleased and looking forward to tonight, even though he knew he shouldn’t get carried away by his emotions.

\* \* \*

An hour later, he was seated in the carriage, mindful of the whip placed beside him.

It was indeed Nicole’s merit that had dealt a significant blow to Duke and Duchess Lisbeth.

And up until now, he had never given that woman any special reward.

Including the fact that Raul would often suck on that woman’s tongue.

If it were by the book, Raul would have whipped Karen until her bones broke without any shortfall. Had the other shadows behaved like Karen, he would have done so without hesitation.

'Will that woman come to her senses after a sufficient scolding?'

Raul even doubted that. He was thinking too much about that woman excessively.

'She must be punished.'

For now, her willful actions have only led to not-so-bad outcomes. But one misstep could cost that woman her life.

And someday, it might even bring a blade to the neck of her master.

Once he met that woman, he would whip her entire body until her pale flesh turned blotchy and make her cry.

Of course, he no longer intended to postpone possessing Karen. He would have to embrace that woman, battered and in a mess.

That woman said she wanted to spend the first night carefully. Anyway, Raul would give a generous reward to the woman who slept with him, be it power or whatever.

It was just trampling on and ruining something someone begged him to value highly.

Perhaps ruining the first night she both feared and looked forward to would be an appropriate punishment. Raul licked his lips.

And that would only be fair.

Feeling like a somewhat personal vendetta was proof that Raul had begun to obsess over that woman excessively, and

he was engulfed in a bizarre feeling he had never experienced before.

It was half excitement and half discomfort. And he had the intuition that he would feel many more contradictory emotions towards this woman in the future.

‘That woman herself said with her mouth that she is my possession.’

She is a person who knows his master’s duty. If she intends to give, he will consume it without leaving anything behind. Be it her life or her body.

\*\*\*

The carriage stopped. Raul stepped out, lost in cynical thoughts. The night was dusky, and the flames burned intensely that evening. The twinkling lights inside the walls of Karen’s mansion caught his eye. It was as if silver dust was spilling outwards. Raul entered through the gate that had been opened in advance for him.

“Our master is waiting for you.” One of the waiting maids greeted him.

“She has asked to escort you to the garden.” The maid said cautiously.

Raul felt offended at that moment. For noblewomen, meeting someone outdoors meant there was no intention of ‘sharing a secretive night’.

‘Is this woman trying to play games again?’

If she wasn’t ready, he could grant a reprieve. But if she dared to toy with him, that was a different matter. It seemed

she was likely to spout some nonsense about it not being the right time.

Raul followed the maid's lead to the garden where bright lights were lit. Regrettably, it was an intensely hot night. Even inside the house, it was stifling, and certainly not a night conducive to love between a man and a woman.

Raul noticed a gazebo he had once visited before. A pile of flowers was placed on the table. A sheer silk curtain with hints of silver and gold encircled the gazebo like drapery.

Inside the open gazebo was a large daybed covered with silk sheets. And on the table, there were gentle candlelights and incense burning.

In the night garden, flowers bloomed in every direction, and the sound of small insects was carried on the lightly rustling wind. Even the flames seemed dazzling as they reflected the expensive lights of the illumination.

In the meantime, Nicole had turned around. Hearing the sound of Raul's footsteps, she slowly turned her head.

Nicole was wearing a nightgown that covered her from neck to toe.

However, as he approached, the flickering candlelight revealed her pale skin through the sheer nightgown.

Raul couldn't take his eyes off her nape and white thighs, as if they were nailed in place.

Nicole blinked. Raul felt the tension in her chest, shoulders, and the tips of her fingers.

This woman had prepared all of this herself, like a bride on her wedding night.

It was impressive, and Raul's brow furrowed.

\*\*\*

'Calm down.'

Nicole thought to herself. She had hardly eaten since lunchtime, having devotedly decorated this outdoor space and waited for Raul.

She knew he would be late. In his past life, he had the habit of working late into the night and only returning to his room at midnight.

Nicole was always used to waiting for the sound of Raul's return home, so his lateness did not affect her at all.

Nicole knew that she had to now unravel Raul's heart. She had clearly ignored his command. He was furious, and Nicole had no excuse even if she were to be beaten to death by him.

To that end, she had prepared this space to win over his heart, though she honestly didn't know if it would work.

'I am not a woman great enough to bewitch this man.'

Nicole thought blankly. Her mother Freya was educated in the ways of the past, teaching about the chastity of young noblemen and women.

'Mother said that ruining one's reputation before marriage is a very grave sin...'

She said to never allow one's body to someone who is not your spouse to be married to, and she taught Jay the same way too.

In this life, Nicole will find it difficult to even become Raul's lover, let alone his wife. But...

'But Mother. If that person was once my husband, would that be alright?'

What if she's drawn to him like hell? What if it feels like she can never escape him?

And what if she deeply regrets the first night of her past life that she couldn't spend with him?

What if he's the only one she wants to spend the first night she's dreamed of?

Would that also be a sin?

Nicole lifted her head to look at Raul.

"What is this?"

"You have to give a reward too."

Nicole gathered her courage and pulled on Raul's sleeve.

"I know you're angry with me. Whether you whip me or give me a greater punishment, I'll accept it."

Nicole took a step forward.

"But I want to receive the reward first. Then you can punish me. It's not like I failed the mission."

The corners of Raul's mouth seemed to rise, almost imperceptibly.

"Is this the reward you want?"

Nicole nodded slightly, thinking that his eyes were mesmerizingly beautiful.

"I told you it's the first time. A day that will never come again. So, I want to create a good memory, one that I won't forget later."

"Doing it outdoors?"

Nicole understood that Raul couldn't hold back that question. She smiled faintly.

"I've dreamed of it since I was very young."

It wasn't exactly a dream about spending the first night outdoors, but the flower decorations and beautiful candle arrangements were a dream Nicole had since playing with cloth dolls made by Freya in a corner of a cabin.

"There seemed to be too many women who would want to invite you home. So... I invited you to the garden instead."

Nicole said. Raul looked at her. Their eyes met.

"Do you dislike it?"

Nicole tried to relax her hands that had stiffened from too much tension, while slowly smiling with a twinkle in her eyes.

In this life, Nicole wore the most expensive dress she had ever donned.

This slip dress, covering her from neck to toe, was made from the finest silk of the eastern continent, elegantly embroidered with flowers each in a different hue.

Nicole paid special attention to the fact that the dress had buttons in a straight line from the collar that wrapped around her entire neck down to her feet.

It was a design that took time and effort to undo, much like a bride's dress.

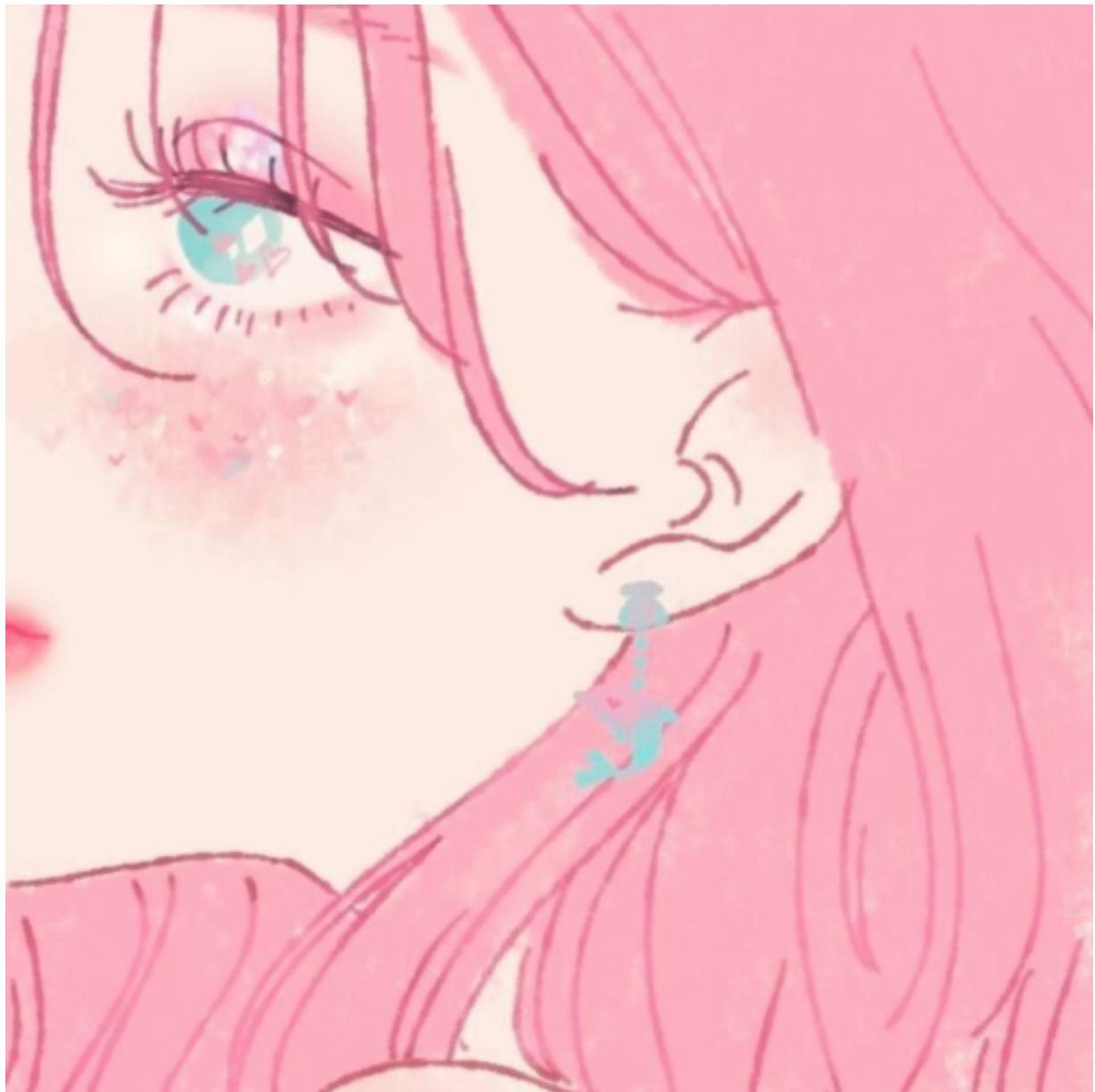
Nicole whispered softly, maintaining eye contact.

"You told me to dress modestly."

So, she wonders if he will enjoy taking the time to undress her.

Nicole gazed at Raul with such eyes, as Raul's hot and large hand grasped the back of her neck.

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# Chapter 120

Raul's hand warmly clasped the back of Nicole's head.

"Mmm..."

Nicole thought. Their lips had met several times already.

'Why does each kiss feel hotter than the last?'

Every time he bit her lip, Nicole felt breathless and her entire body seemed to melt. Really... that was the only way to describe it.

Tsup, tsup...

As their lips continued to press together, they grew short of breath. Nicole was easily laid down on a long chair by Raul.

Raul trapped Nicole between his arms and looked down at her. Lights flickered around his hair. Nicole's head felt increasingly faint.

"This will be worth the effort."

Raul spoke as he fiddled with Nicole's buttons. Nicole nodded. His voice was hot with uncontrollable desire.

Raul began to unfasten each button one by one. With each one, Nicole tensed up.

The buttons were undone down to her collarbone, and as they reached her chest, he stopped unbuttoning and pushed up Nicole's skirt instead. The rustling silk grazed her legs as it rose, revealing Nicole's garter belt and the silk underwear she had fitted for today.

Her pale thighs and the white underwear fitted over them truly resembled that of a new bride. Raul gazed at her for a long while.

"I can't tell what you want."

Raul's words pierced Nicole's heart with pain.

"If it doesn't please you, we can stop..."

It was an offer to stop. At that moment, Nicole had no idea what Raul's confusion meant.

"Stop?"

Raul said, slowly caressing over Nicole's underwear with his hand.

As if her body, which he had seen several times before, was something new.

"There's no stopping now, Karen. Today, I will have you."

Raul said, staring intently into Nicole's eyes.

Nicole took a breath and nodded slightly in agreement. Yes, today was the day...

"I'll give you your punishment later, as much as you want it, plentifully."

"...then please give me a lot of rewards."

"Yes. Enough to break you."

Nicole couldn't tell which of the two he was referring to. Raul's hand, which had been stroking Nicole's cheek over the blanket, tightened.

He seemed like someone who could no longer be patient due to urgency. Their lips met once more. And Raul yanked down Nicole's underwear. With such force, Nicole instinctively lifted her hips, and in an instant, the thin and short undergarment fell to the floor.

'Somehow, I thought it would be like this.'

Raul wasn't bothering to unbutton each button. Eventually, the silk slip dress was ripped and fell to the floor.

“I thought you liked undressing [me].”

Nicole gasped for breath and touched Raul’s chin. Before she knew it, Raul was on top of her.

“I’ve come to like ripping [it] even more.”

“...I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You should.”

Raul smiled with his eyes.

Then he pressed himself against Nicole’s lower body and rubbed his genitals against her. His erection felt taut even through his pants, as if it would burst. Holding the back of Nicole’s head, he bit at her chin and nape as if to devour them. Raul moved the back of Nicole’s head as he pleased. Each time, their tongues entwined stickily, and his tongue reached deep into Nicole’s throat.

“Uhh, hah...”

This person, he's really aroused...

Nicole was shocked anew by that fact and felt a tingling in her spine.

'Raul wants me.'

Nicole kept giving her heart to Raul. Even if the reciprocation was merely desire, it was enough for her. Right now, if he only wanted her...

'I don't mind being just a simple bed partner, as long as you want only me for the time being.'

She was a little afraid. Until now, Nicole had provoked Raul as if she was about to cross the line without actually doing so. Therefore, Raul looked at Nicole as if he was on an unfinished hunt. But this interest might end after spending one night together. She didn't want it to end like that.

Her heart was impatient, but her excitement kept growing. Nicole was already embarrassed by her moist lower half. Reflexively, she rubbed and twisted her silky smooth thighs together.

“This is a reward, isn’t it?”

Nicole whispered, gently wrapping her arms around Raul’s neck.

“So... whatever I say today, please don’t scold me... even if I act a bit willful...”

“Are you planning to curse?”

Raul said as if he couldn’t believe it.

“No, I mean... I want to call out... your... name, Your Grace.”

Nicole said softly. Raul’s eyes seemed to ponder for a moment as they shifted to the side.

“Both are fine.”

Swearing or calling his name... Nicole realized that he could joke too.

It eased her tension a bit. Without realizing it, Nicole let out a tiny laugh.

Raul, who had been staring intently, forcefully pulled away the remnants of her dress from Nicole's body, almost tearing it off.

Nicole was already left in nothing but her stockings and garter belt, her skin pale as alabaster. Perhaps it was too much to be outdoors. She shrank back needlessly, her toes curling up. She averted her eyes out of sheer embarrassment.

'Should I pretend to be more at ease to be attractive?'

Nicole kept chewing on her lips, swollen and moistened by his saliva.

"It's the first time," Raul said, looking at her from between her legs. He seemed very impatient too, but at the same time, he appeared to want to savor this feeling right now.

"It's not that big of a deal," Nicole lied.

"I just wanted to do it with the person I want... when I wanted."

"I see," Raul said, his desire terribly refined. Nicole felt a strange tremor throughout her lower body at the sound of his voice.

Raul glanced over Nicole's garter belt and said, "You look just like a new bride."

Nicole's lips were bitten. She knew that those words sounded mocking.

In the Empire's aristocratic wedding ceremony, the bride wears white silk underwear with lace and a garter belt. And on her thigh, she wears a wedding band made of white lace.

The band is embroidered with invisible white thread, bearing words of blessing, wishing for the marriage to be safely carried to completion.

After the wedding night is over, the groom unties the wedding band.

Raul looked at Nicole.

“Look,” he said with a smirk, pulling something from one of the table’s decorations. It was one of the ribbons Nicole had used to tie the flower arrangements.

“You go well with flowers. It’s almost a fact you’ve forced upon me, emerging from a mountain of flowers.”

He took a rose, well-groomed without a single thorn, in his mouth by the ribbon.

Then he placed the rose on Nicole’s slender belly. Tension gathered around Nicole’s navel.

“It’s a gift, so don’t drop it.”

Raul spoke leisurely as he lifted Nicole’s thigh, savoring her slim and white legs as he caressed from her calves up to her thighs. And when he tightly tied a red ribbon around her thigh, Nicole thought her heart had stopped.

It was like a real newlywed couple, like the wedding band on the first night.

“What kind of joke is this?”

Nicole frowned without realizing it.

Raul just looked at Nicole. The coldness in his eyes slowly faded into a smile, leaving only desire behind.

“You like it when I tie you up, don’t you? And giving orders.”

“.....”

Nicole couldn’t say anything more; it was the truth.

“So cheer up. If you do well, I’ll do whatever you want,” Raul said.

The punishment might even be reduced. Nicole guessed the implication behind his words.

And Raul buried his face between Nicole's legs.

"Ah, ah...!"

Nicole held back as if her body would spring forth. If she moved too forcefully, the flower might fall.

"Mm, uh... uh... Raul..."

Nicole grabbed his hair, resisting the urge to buck her hips, which she kept pressed against the bed as much as possible.

Raul's long and hot tongue voraciously sucked on Nicole's insides. His tongue tip poked between the folds of flesh that were already soaked and hot, holding clear fluid. With each poke, a hot breath naturally escaped.

His nose rubbed against her taut clitoris. It was difficult for Nicole not to rock her pelvis in response to his movements.

"Huh, ah... too much... if you do that..."

Nicole said, turning her head. Even the insides of her thighs and her pubic hair were already drenched, down to her lower body and stomach.

Due to the restriction of not moving freely, the only thing she could move at will was her tongue.

Unrestrained moans flowed out without filter. It was good that she told the maids to leave the house when Raul arrived and stay at Grace's house until dawn. But such thoughts ended in an instant.

Tsup, tsup. Tsup.

Indecent and greedy sounds were heard as Raul firmly held Nicole's pelvis so she could not move it. Nicole's jaw jutted up towards the sky as she writhed. Raul's pelvis also moved slowly in sync with hers.

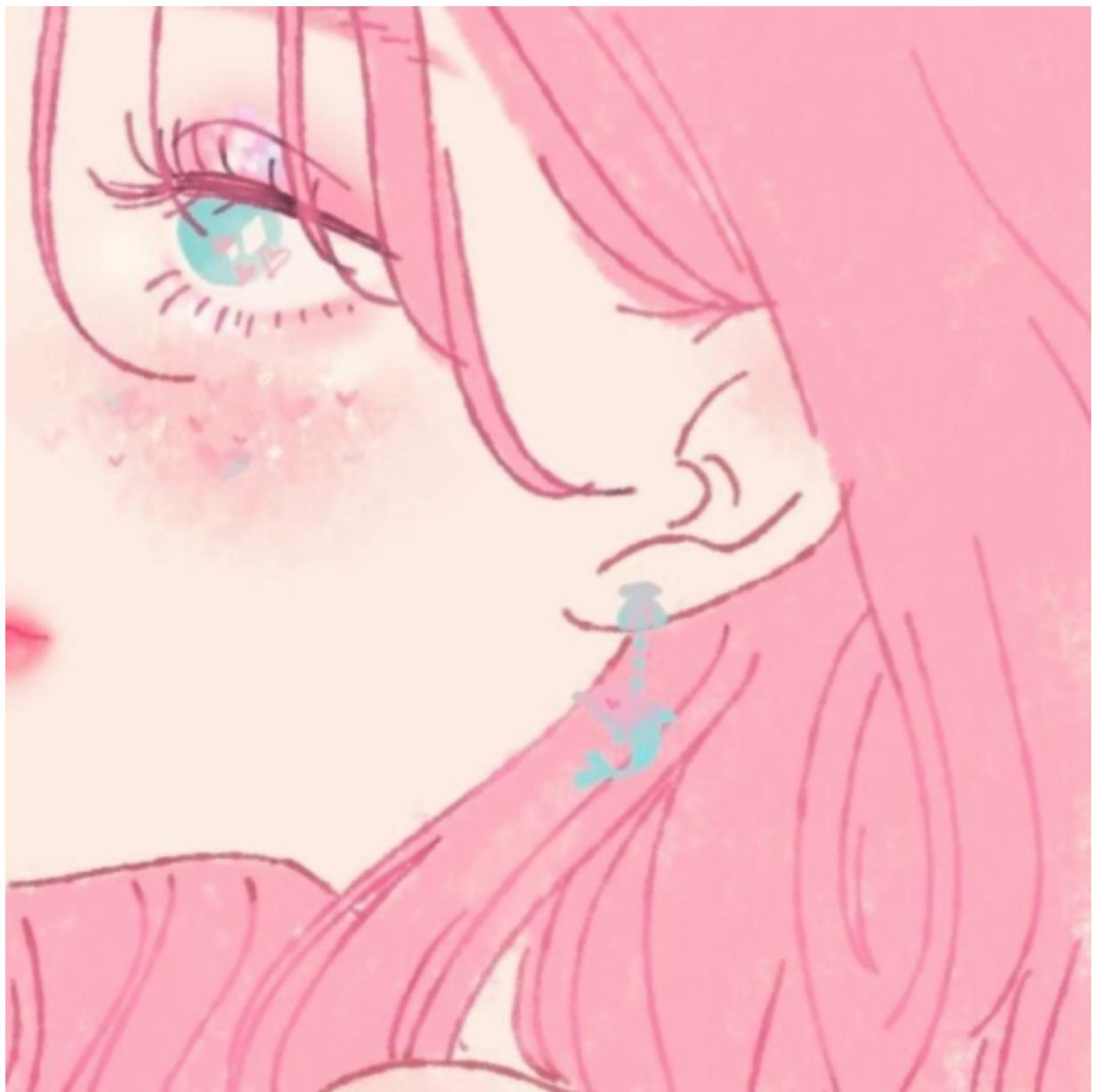
Raul lifted his head and looked at Nicole.

Her delicate pink flesh was now dripping with clear fluid, completely loosened, the small opening moving as if breathing.

“It’s pretty.”

Raul said, as he placed his hand on Nicole’s lower abdomen.

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# Chapter 121

When Raul's tongue trailed off, Nicole was breathing overly hot breaths.

Raul restrained himself for a moment, like someone holding something back, and then restrained himself again. Nicole sensitively felt his demeanor.

Raul swept his palm through Nicole's sparse pubic hair, which was originally not very thick and darker than the hair on her head.

When the area clung wetly to the love juices and stuck upwards, her pale buttocks were revealed. Raul spread it wide with two fingers, and as the light pink inner walls were fully exposed to his view, Nicole uttered a subtle moan again.

Nicole's small opening was already fluttering and repeating the cycle of slightly opening and tightening.

“The flower is ruined.”

Raul clicked his tongue. Although Nicole was careful, the roses she had placed on her stomach were now completely scattered, and a few petals lay on the floor.

“I’m sorry.”

Nicole replied reflexively, feeling her mind in disarray.

“It’s okay, you can repay with your body.”

Raul said. It was a moment later that she realized it was a joke. Raul brought over a rosebud and began to gently rub it against Nicole’s lower body.

The swollen lower body, already slick and slightly engorged, found the sensation strange and stimulating.

“What is this...?”

Nicole groaned. The peculiar sensation made her hole that was already fidgeting on its own clench with more force.

“Shh.”

Raul said.

“You like flowers, don’t you?”

“Hng, uh...”

A tiny teasing sensation at the intensely heated spot; it was both the best and the worst, making her whole body tremble uncontrollably. She could no longer hold back.

‘It’s definitely the first time.’

In this life, she had never experienced this with her body before. It was strange how much she desired Raul.

“I like other things too.”

Nicole murmured in an unclear tone.

“.....Really..... I.....”

It was when I was startled by what she had said. Raul’s eyes flickered with amusement.

“If you go around saying things like this to other guys, I’ll kill you.”

Raul whispered sweetly. His large hand gripped Nicole’s nape, and she nodded heavily, feeling his intense possessiveness.

“It seems like it will smell of flowers. And from the flowers that touched your body too.”

Raul said, as he climbed back on top of Nicole. It seemed as if he would enter her at any moment, but he delayed for the last time. Nicole now wanted to cry.

‘Quickly, quickly.....’

Not begging was her last pride and rationality. Raul undid his trousers. His large member sprang out. Even without looking, the sight of its huge size with veins standing out was ghastly. Nicole grabbed his shoulders and writhed beneath him.

“Uh, ah.....”

“Now I can put it in.”

Raul said.

He wants it too, Nicole thought.

“Why are you holding back?”

“You call this a reward?”

Raul said, as if he couldn’t believe it.

“Something that just hurts messily isn’t a reward.”

Nicole’s nipples stood erect and her breasts with their transparent white flesh slowly rose and fell.

But she couldn’t let her guard down. This is the person who would whip her right after having their way with her.

Nicole reminded herself. Perhaps because of the situation, such thoughts were exciting too.

“What are you thinking?”

Raul grabbed Nicole’s head.

“Focus, Karen.”

“Yes..... I’m sorry.....”

Nicole said mechanically. Her whole body was too hot to think straight, and her eyes kept reddening.

“I like it when you apologize.”

Raul said, and Nicole felt increasingly embarrassed by his words.

“Don’t look away.”

Raul whispered, and Nicole nodded her head. Raul spread Nicole’s legs wide apart, his eyes filled with desire.

Raul pulled Nicole in. Nicole couldn’t even bend her legs, spreading them until her thighs were almost in a straight line.

Raul grasped his end with his hand. His genitals were already pulsating greatly. He stroked it with his hand. Nicole could see its towering silhouette even while lying down.

Saliva pooled under Nicole’s tongue and she swallowed it. She already knew this sensation. It hurt too much in her past life... But it soon turned into pleasure.

And she knew fear as well. Her hands trembled finely.

“Relax. If, as you say, this time is a reward, then you must accept it well.”

Raul leaned towards Nicole. He pressed his body against hers gently and began to move his pelvis.

His club-like hard genitals rubbed against her wet pubic hair and plump buttocks. The tip of his glans seemed to almost enter, softly grinding against her hole and pressing down on her clitoris. Raul was toying with her.

“Uh, hmm...”

Nicole couldn’t even turn her eyes away.

“Quickly.”

Nicole eventually said softly.

“Please do it now...”

“You understand so well when you speak nicely.”

Raul briefly stroked Nicole’s earlobe as if praising a pet dog.  
But he delayed a bit more.

‘Why, hurry, quickly...’

When Nicole became impatient enough to curl her toes, he thrust in all at once.

“Huh, euh!”

A gasp escaped her involuntarily. Her toes curled completely. It felt like something fiery hot was piercing her lower body.

‘It’s hot, no...’

She was breathless all at once.

“Breathe.”

Raul said. Nicole looked at him with tear-stained eyes, trying to breathe slowly and relax her muscles.

‘How far is it going in?’

Nicole wore a terrified expression. Despite having experienced it before, she was still shocked. The thick member felt as if it was pervading her entire body. Raul moved further forward.

A deep sound ensued. Dribbling from the joined area, faint blood mixed with fluid flowed out. It felt as if something was being pierced, and a deep pain reverberated in her lower abdomen.

“Ah... Uh.”

The tears that had pooled up fell in a rush. Nicole gasped from the shock.

Raul bent down even more towards Nicole.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes, but... don’t stop...”

Nicole whispered faintly, as if she would break.

A different emotion flickered through Raul’s desire-filled eyes, and because he was gazing intently into Nicole’s eyes, she easily noticed it.

Thump, thud. Creak. Creak.

Raul began to move his body slowly back and forth. At first, he seemed to be holding back, but once he started moving, he seemed unable to stop himself.

“Huh, uh, ah, ah!”

With each forceful thrust, Nicole felt as if stars were bursting in her head. When she tried to pull her hips away to escape, Raul gripped her shoulders tightly. Nicole’s hands were spread near her face, and with his movements, the

remnants of petals on her stomach scattered with a red afterimage as they were flung around and dispersed.

“Aah, sob. Sob... Slowly, please... Raul...”

Raul. For the first time in this life, Nicole called out his name. Surprise flickered in Raul’s eyes as he loomed over Nicole.

“No, aah, mmm!”

Calling his name seemed to have some effect on him. Raul’s movements slowed down ever so slightly. Yet he did not stop his hips; he kept moving heavily, as if continuing to advance.

Slap, squelch, squelch. Thump thump thump.

This time the lewd sounds hit heavily against her ears. Raul leaned his body in even more and pulled Nicole’s knees and thighs close enough to stick together tightly. The inside of her thighs tingled and even that sensation became pleasurable to her sensitized body.

Nicole, seeing his body bend, unwittingly lifted her chin.

At that moment, Nicole thought desperately, 'I wish he would kiss me.'

Throughout their encounters, nothing had been easier between them than a kiss. Raul pressed his forehead against Nicole's, his waist moving more languidly.

"Ah, ugh. Huff..."

With each thrust, her lower body started to feel a tingling sensation as if paralyzed by an electric current. Nicole's heated inner walls writhed against Raul's veined manhood; when he entered deeply, she clung to his body happily, tightening around him, and when he pulled away, she fluttered as if in longing.

Raul kissed near Nicole's lips. This time, he gently rotated their joined sexes as his face moved away.

Swoosh, swoosh... Thump, thump...

Two different sounds tickled Nicole. Raul lowered himself to kiss Nicole's pale chest and teased her erect nipples with the tip of his tongue as if to soothe them. When he rose again, Nicole gazed into his eyes and reached out to embrace him.

"Put your hands up above. No."

Nicole's eyes clouded over. Raul handled her as he pleased but did not permit her to touch him with her hands.

"Don't cry over something like this."

Raul said. And then Raul slipped his hands inside Nicole's thighs. He handled Nicole effortlessly like a light doll.

Her thighs spread slightly and touched Raul's hips. Nicole's buttocks were slightly lifted in the air.

"Ah, ugh. Uh... Ugh..."

This time Raul began to thrust into Nicole fiercely, more intensely than before; a strong sound accompanied the

throbbing in her lower body. And then a pleasure like a flood struck her lower body indiscriminately.

To prevent Nicole from being lifted upwards, Raul held the back of her head and pushed her against himself. Nicole couldn't use her hands. Raul embraced her with his whole body and violated her.

"Use your hands now."

Raul commanded, and she clung to him with her whole body. A hot explosion shot out from within her.

Drip, drip.

A trickle of blood, semen, and Nicole's warm love juices. All became one, flowing down Nicole's thighs.

"Haa, haa..."

Nicole, spent, was in Raul's arms. Raul's hand gently patted the back of Nicole's neck in a steady rhythm.

Nicole gathered strength in her waist and lifted her body. Raul embraced her whole body as she clung to him like a baby.

Blankness, her mind was bleached white. Nicole was confused about where she was, what time it was.

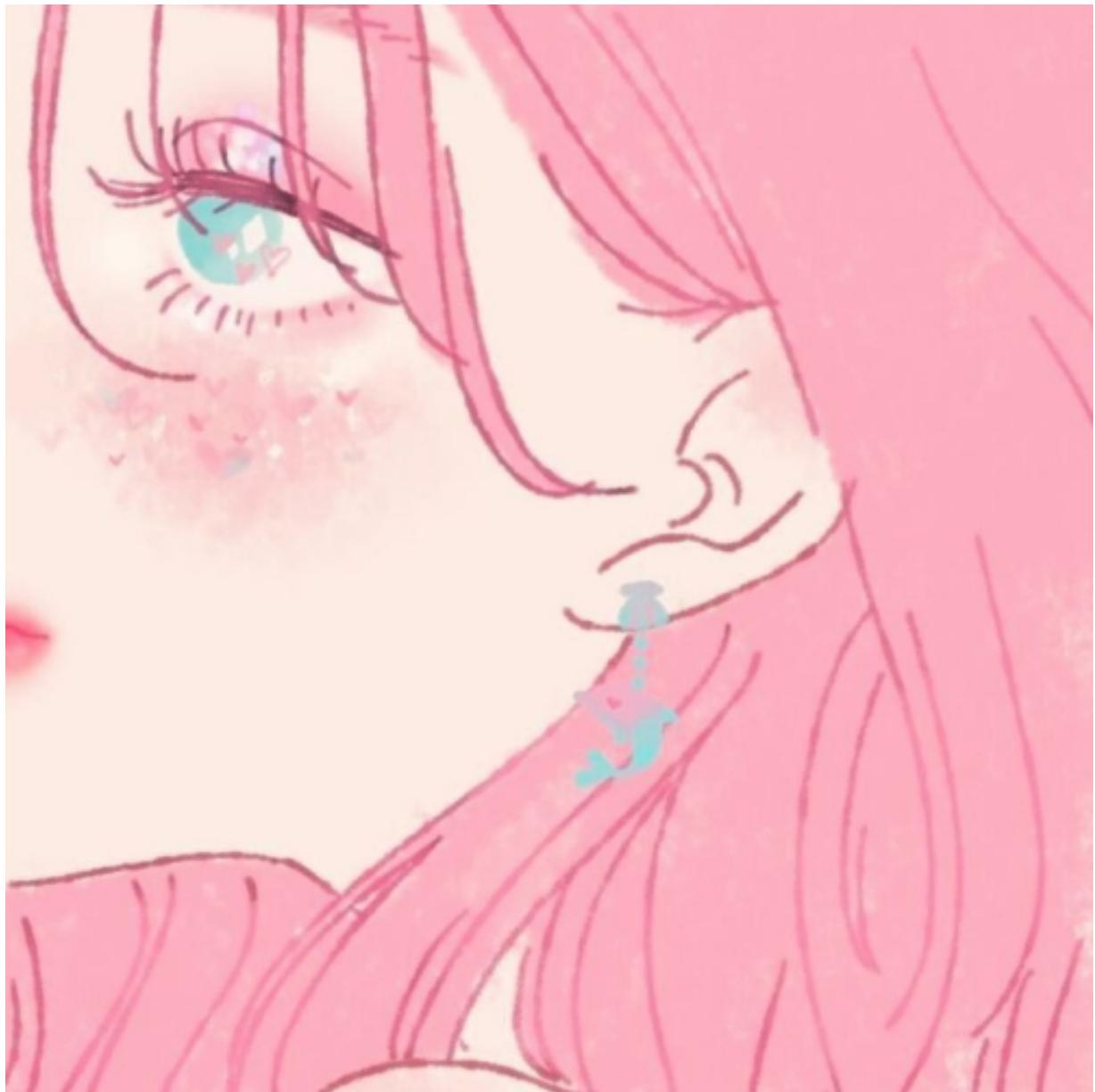
Raul and herself. At this moment, in Nicole's world, there were only the two of them. She swallowed back tears.

'It finally happened.'

At that moment, strangely enough, Nicole thought that thought.

Maybe... the reward was now over.

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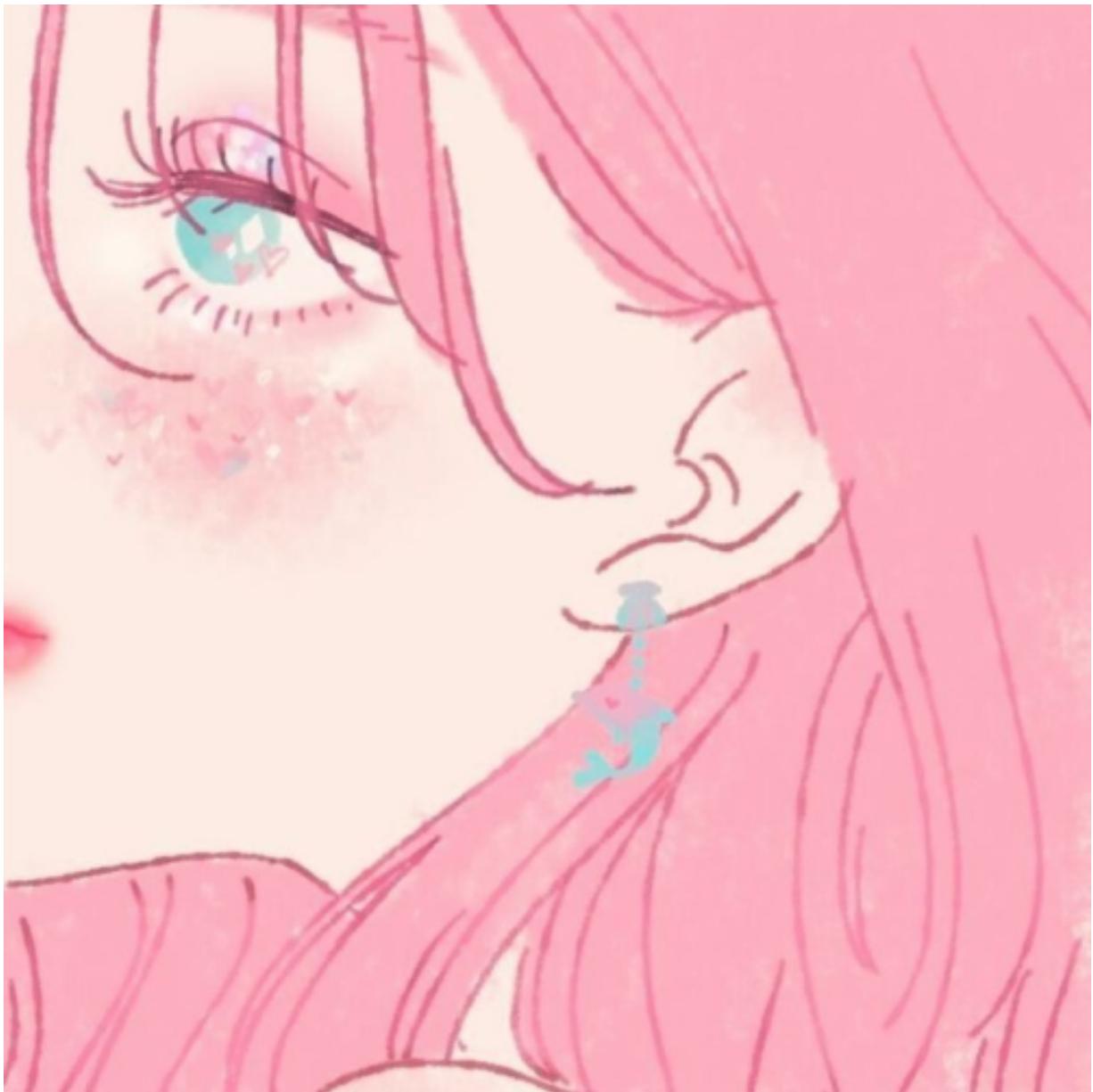


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# **Chapter 122**

As Raul released inside Nicole, his hand touched the ribbon tied around her thigh. He swiftly applied pressure with his fingers.

Snap.

The ribbon tumbled to the floor. Nicole painfully watched its red afterimage.

“Now, I completely have you,” Raul said, breathing hotly.

Raul spoke as he breathed heavily. Nicole couldn’t fathom his intention. As she slowly pulled away, Raul finally kissed her.

“Mm, uh... tsup, it’s, tsup...”

By the time Raul ended the long kiss, a silver thread stretched between Raul and Nicole's lips.

Raul looked down at Nicole and wiped her mouth with his thumb.

Then he laid Nicole on the bed and withdrew his body from hers.

As the tide-like pleasure receded, Nicole felt a kind of emptiness.

Her whole body was drenched in sweat and felt cold. Raul's clothes were disheveled as well.

Raul straightened his clothes. As he brushed back his tousled hair, he regained his usual indifferent appearance, though slightly more provocative than before.

Nicole was still gasping for air, her breaths deep and ragged. The immense size that had filled her so completely seemed to have left a gaping void as it withdrew, and her body trembled with a throbbing pain at the same time.

Nicole was completely naked except for her stockings, her body sprawled out.

‘It hurts, I can’t muster any strength in my body...’

At the same time, it was sore and painful. She couldn’t muster any strength in her thighs.

‘Was it not satisfying?’

Nicole felt she could have died just from receiving him; he was too large, and she was far too small in comparison.

Did he expect a courtesan’s coquettishness from Karen? Or perhaps some technique? Nicole had managed neither. Anxious, she chewed on her lip nervously.

“Your clothes?”

“...They’re gone. You tore them all up.”

Nicole spoke. Raul nodded.

The muggy weather had improved, and a cool dawn was approaching. Nicole shivered.

If Raul said he would go now, she couldn't stop him. Suddenly, she felt sorrowful.

"What are you waiting for?"

Raul looked down at Nicole. She raised her upper body.

"Do you need me to walk you out? Or are you going to... punish me right away?"

Raul looked at Nicole as if she was strange.

"Are you going to stay up all night here?"

"What? ...Ah!"

The next moment he grabbed Nicole and easily lifted her into his arms.

“Where is your bedroom?”

“...That...”

“You started it first. I won’t let it slide just because it’s your first time.”

“.....”

“If you wanted to finish it in one go, you shouldn’t have teased me.”

Nicole barely bit her lip and tried to tell him the location of the bedroom.

“I actually know where it is. This is my house, too.”

Raul spoke like a bad man, and she was dragged into her bedroom.

The bedroom was not particularly prepared. Nicole had a bit of a girlish taste.

A large bed with pointed legs and white decorations, a white dressing table with lily patterns, curtains of a warm pink-beige color, for instance.

It wasn't Karen's taste, but Nicole liked it. It wasn't too much.

When Raul laid Nicole down on the bed, she became a bit embarrassed by the room and slowly moved her hips back.

"Your Grace, you may do as you wish. But right now... it hurts a little..."

Nicole thought it would be nice if Raul stayed the night.

Lying next to her, she thought it would be okay just to be held for a moment. However, she was already out of energy to embrace Raul right away.

Nicole was famished and already worn out from the tension. It was natural to be so after being penetrated by such a large phallus and crying for a long time.

“Then just for a little bit... let’s rest for a moment,” Nicole pleaded softly.

“No,” Raul said.

“If that’s the case, why did you hesitate earlier?”

Nicole said, incredulous. Raul did not answer, he just snickered.

“Lie on the bed. Spread your legs,” Raul instructed.

Nicole looked at him and then bit her lip.

“Instead... you should also strip before you come up,” Nicole said.

Or should she be the one to undress him?

"Then come closer," Raul indicated with a gesture of his eyes.

Understanding his words, Nicole slowly removed her torn stockings, then as if entranced, she approached to help Raul unbutton his shirt.

His clothes were completely removed, revealing his body, firm and sculpted like a statue. Raul sat on the bed, which shook violently once under his weight.

He had an excellent physique. With the room dimly lit, Nicole could easily grope his body. It felt miraculous every time the tightly packed muscles yielded under the softness of Nicole's small palms.

"Closer," Raul said.

Nicole shifted her hips to move closer to him. Raul wrapped his hands around her waist, and she ended up straddling his knees.

Raul had told her not to look away. Remembering this, Nicole gazed up at him. He firmly grasped her chin, lifting it

as he began to kiss her—her eyes, ears, and even down to her nape.

“Mmm, hmm....”

Each time he kissed her with a light bite, chills ran down Nicole’s back. Her nipples became even stiffer, and the throbbing pain in her lower half seemed to subside slightly.

“Ha, ugh.....”

As Raul bent down and took her nipple in his mouth, Nicole’s body shivered from her buttocks to her back.

The sound of sucking was so loud that as he drew on her nipple, Nicole gently moved her hips and jerked her upper body in small movements. Her white breasts swayed in the air, leaving a faint afterimage.

Raul gazed at her reddened nipple glistening with saliva, flicked it, then firmly grasped her breast in one hand and kneaded it.

The soft and supple flesh distorted between Raul's large hands.

"Touch it."

Raul whispered. Then he placed his hand on Nicole's lower body. Nicole, as if enchanted, took his semi-erect penis in her hand.

From the thick glans to the veined shaft and even the testicles. Slowly, as if fascinated, she massaged and stroked with her hand, and Raul, as if to praise her, slid his palm up while pressing his middle finger inside Nicole.

Nicole straddled Raul's firm thighs, with her own center deeply impaled on his fingers, barely fondling his manhood.

With her awkward touch, his penis gradually became erect again, and a faint pink blush spread across Nicole's white cheeks. Her lips parted, revealing a glimpse of her pink tongue once more.

"Huh, um..... It's too, fast....."

As Raul leaned in for a kiss, Nicole slightly turned her head away.

“You can’t reject me.”

Raul said in a cajoling tone.

“Raul, this is a reward...”

“You’re overusing that word.”

Raul said. But there was an undeniable excitement in his voice.

“Reward or not, I can’t allow you to refuse me.”

“But.....”

“It seems I’ll have to tie you up tonight. That will excite you even more.”

“Uh, ung.....”

Raul did not tolerate Nicole’s clumsy fondling for long. He pulled away from her and laid her down on the bed. This time, he lay down beside her from behind and penetrated her.

Raul clicked his tongue once, then placed his hand under Nicole’s knee and lifted one leg high.

“Ah, you...”

From behind Nicole, Raul embraced her and began to insert slowly.

This position increased the area of friction, allowing even his considerable size to slide in more easily than before.

That didn’t mean it wasn’t overwhelming. It was slightly better, but her breath was still caught in her throat. When about two-thirds of him was inside, Raul grasped Nicole’s chest tightly and kissed the back of her head.

"It's going to take some effort to stretch this out more in the future. Keep relaxing like that."

'This', Nicole thought, eyes widening. Raul moved his hips once and slid in all the way with a thrust.

"Hngh, ah..."

A tingling pleasure prickled up inside her. The large, veined column thrust in and out repeatedly.

Each time a thrilling pleasure was felt, Nicole's opening clenched tightly around Raul's member then released it.

"Haa..."

Raul's breathing deepened as well.

It was more bearable than the missionary position, but still, each time a piercing pressure surged to her lower abdomen, Nicole let out a sound like a kitten's cry.

“Haa, ah...”

Each time his member rubbed and pushed against her flesh walls, Nicole’s insides contracted tightly. And with each pulse, clear love juices flowed out.

Even as she writhed in pleasure, Nicole thought she could bear this much.

Was he being considerate of her by choosing this relatively comfortable position? She wondered for a moment before Raul sat up and gripped Nicole’s waist, pulling her upright as well.

‘Huh?’

Nicole’s eyes widened. In that instant, she was on her knees with her back to Raul. The joining parts clenched tight once again, and Nicole was pierced by him in the reverse cowgirl position.

Thump. Truly, as if hunted from below. As if stabbed by a spear, tight just like that.

“Hngh, aah!”

As she was penetrated in one go, Nicole’s eyes widened, her mouth agape. She wanted to flee, but Raul’s arms, firm like pillars, did not let her go.

“Ah, uh! Raul!”

Nicole moaned. A growling moan from Raul spilled from the nape of her neck. The bed rocked.

Thud, thud.

Raul began to move, thrusting his genitals from below. Nicole’s flesh walls tightly constricted his firm and large member from all sides.

Simultaneously, Nicole gushed forth with love juices just from that alone.

“Aah! Ah, no... ah...”

The pleasure was overwhelming; her head spun round and round, and her whole body felt as if it had been shattered and then put back together again.

The slapping sound echoed endlessly from the connected parts. Tears scattered into the air once, and Nicole's chest and hips shook wildly up and down.

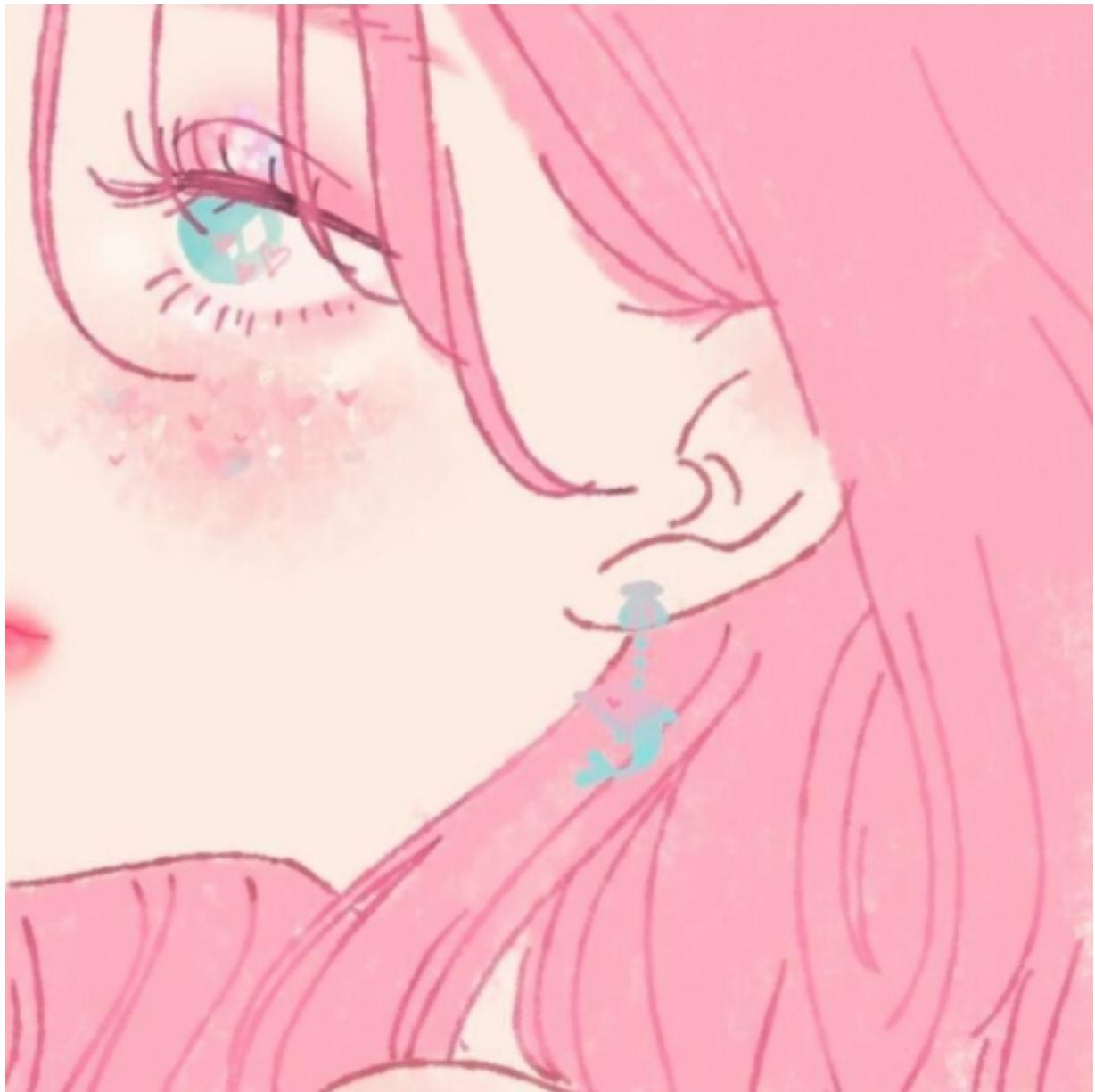
The sensation enveloping her lower half was so intense that it dulled all other senses; she could think of nothing but the pleasure.

“Hngh, ugh...”

Saliva dripped from the corners of Nicole's mouth as she looked back at Raul, not knowing what to do.

His lips stole a kiss from Nicole's sticky ones, making her head feel faint once again.

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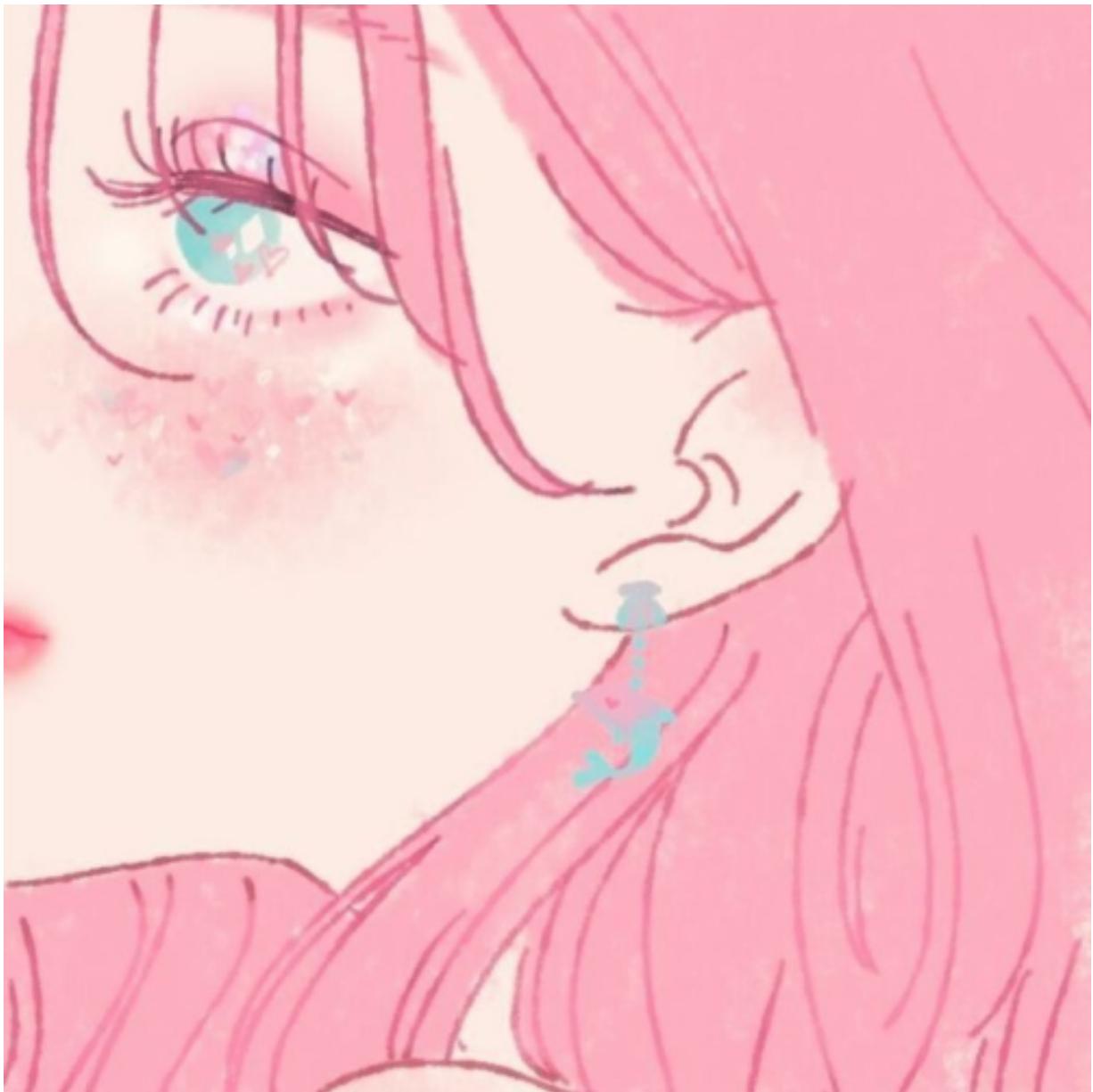


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# Chapter 123

She sobbed with her eyes tightly closed. And for a long, countless time, she had to cry out as she was relentlessly pounded by him.

*Please, stop. It feels good.*

She didn't know how many times she had uttered these words.

The moment Raul released his seed inside her for the second time, Nicole clenched him tightly enough to choke.

Raul teased her to let go a bit. After their second round of lovemaking, they were finally drenched in sweat and languid. Nicole could do nothing but breathe hotly and stare at the ceiling.

“Does it still hurt?”

Raul asked. Nicole, nestled in his arms, jolted in surprise.

“It hurts.....”

It wasn’t an exaggeration. Her mound that had been continuously rubbing against Raul’s testicles was swollen red, and the hole throbbed painfully.

Her waist had no strength left in it, and her legs lay sprawled on the bed like a doll’s, completely limp.

“Then take a rest for a while.”

What... Will they do it again?

Nicole’s vision went dark.

‘Thinking back, it was like this in my past life too.’

The night she had spent with Raul before she died in her past life.

In fact, she didn't remember much of that day. Nicole was too intoxicated by the poison of the night, too excited and half out of her mind.

There were too many emotions entangled between the two of them, most of which were close to hatred. Nicole thought that what Raul did to her until she was a mess in her past life was because of that love-hate relationship.

Sometimes men think that when emotions are too great, they can resolve hatred through sex. At that time, their relationship was just that bizarre.

"Stop now... please. Today was my first time."

"Yes. It really was."

Raul said. Nicole saw him furrow his brows.

Perhaps he thought she would insist that he take responsibility because it was her first time. Nicole felt her heart drop.

To begin with, Karen was from a ridiculously free-spirited and bustling city. In such a place, it was a wonder for anyone, man or woman, to remain a virgin at fifteen.

The Karen that Raul knew didn't match up, and Raul was bound to dislike a woman who clung to him.

"It's just that physically... I was just asking for a little consideration. That's all."

Nicole subtly tried to pull away from Raul, but Raul pulled her back in before she could escape.

"I've never placed any meaning on such things."

"....."

"It's quite enjoyable. You seem to bring out the depravity in me."

Nicole bit her lip. To this man, she seemed like an amusing toy.

“Anyway, I don’t want to...”

“I said no refusal.”

“.....”

“Or should I start the punishment I’ve put off? To stand you naked in this bedroom and whip you all night long. The next morning, I’ll tie up your bruised body tightly and use it as an ornament in my office. Tie both knees and calves together so you’re kneeling... with a gag in your mouth. You’ll look even prettier if you cry. I’ll even decorate you with the flowers you like.”

Raul spoke while leisurely touching her lower abdomen. Towards the end of his speech, he pressed firmly on Nicole’s clitoris with his finger.

“.....Please don’t torment me..... I’ll..... faint if it goes on.”

Nicole had no choice but to plead with him weakly again.

“Don’t worry.”

Raul flicked Nicole's cheek.

"The night is long. I'll let you rest a bit."

His tone suggested it would only be a little while. Nicole's complexion paled at his words.

Nicole had prepared much for this day. Since it was just for one night, she wanted to give Raul an unforgettable night as well.

It seemed that her unrequited love would feel a bit easier then. But now, she was too exhausted to think about anything and didn't feel coquettish at all.

And after the pleasure akin to death, there was an even more intense exhaustion of strength.

'At least that's one lesson.'

Nicole thought incredulously. Who knew this man would be so forthcoming. Or...

'Do we match well? They say that's important between men and women...'

But Raul played with Nicole at will in bed. A man who's this good would satisfy any woman.

"Child?"

Raul looked down at Nicole and spoke. He was lying on his side, propping his head with one arm, looking at Nicole.

"Child?"

"You seem like a child who's reluctantly staying awake. A child who finds sleeping a waste because the day was too enjoyable."

"That's not it."

Nicole said.

“And I haven’t played at all today.”

“It’s an adult’s play.”

He smirked bitterly.

“I know a girl who used to sleep with that expression on her face. Saw her when she was young.”

Nicole briefly recalled her childhood.

(Do you know how cute you were when you were little? You loved fairy tales. You used to ask your father for one more story because you thought sleep was such a waste. If I hadn’t raised you in the nobility’s way, teaching you to control your emotions, you would have grown up just like that, with cute furrows in your brow.)

It was a memory that suddenly came to mind. Freya had once murmured such words to Nicole while intoxicated with medicine before she died.

Raul pressed firmly on Nicole’s forehead where the wrinkles were set, and she fell asleep, unable to resist any longer, as

if she had fainted.

\*\*\*

As the very early morning arrived, Redia and Bluea returned, and Raul gave them orders as if it were the most natural thing to do.

The maids brought in the meal. Raul instructed Nicole to have her meal in bed.

“Eat, all of it.”

“I can’t eat much.”

“No. Eat.”

Raul placed a spoon in Nicole’s hand and persistently watched her as she ate.

‘What time am I in right now?’

Nicole hadn't fully regained her strength yet and felt a throbbing in her lower abdomen. Stranger still was the occasional spasm in her lower body.

However, eating under Raul's surveillance made Nicole recall her past life.

Raul was a control freak. He tried to control everything, from the meals of his deranged wife to her daily routine.

Now, just like then, Nicole had to finish her meal under Raul's watchful eye. After drinking the last of her water, Raul ordered the bathwater to be prepared.

\*\*\*

Raul and Nicole entered the bathtub together. Raul held Nicole in the tub and played with her to the extent that she emerged breathless, utterly melted into his embrace.

"Then, shall we keep the promise?"

Raul said this after they had both washed up. Nicole felt dizzy when she met his gaze.

For the third time, Nicole's hands were tied with her silk scarf.

"A promise is a promise. We agreed to tie you up once last night."

Raul made Nicole kneel on the bed and raise her hips high.

Nicole trembled with shame, exposing both openings clearly.

Raul spread Nicole's buttocks wide open, from the small cute pink anus to the slightly swollen vulva prettily nestled between them.

Nicole's body smelled of water and soap, and her hair was slightly wet but fluffy.

Tied up and exposed to him in every way, Nicole was mortified to death.

“It seems softer than yesterday.”

As Raul knelt and entered her on the bed, she trembled lightly and took deep breaths.

Although she said she didn’t like it, that it was hard, Nicole’s insides spasmed twice as much as her body, clinging tightly to Raul, sucking him in.

Slap! Slap!

As Raul thrust from behind, there was a loud noise as if flesh was being smacked against her buttocks.

“Hng, uh, aah... Ah, ah...”

As Raul pulled out, the gently swollen labia clung to him as if reluctant to let go. When he entered, they clung tightly, squeezing as if begging.

“Not yet.”

Raul said. As he gently lifted her waist from behind, Nicole's buttocks rose higher. Raul then plunged his finger into the small anus that naturally exposed itself.

"No, I don't... But, ah... Uh, ung!"

Nicole gripped Raul's genitalia tightly, squeezing it as she let out petulant breaths. Love juices dripped down.

Eventually, Nicole fainted again after experiencing orgasm twice during their third copulation.

By the time Raul ejaculated, Nicole's bed was soaked with her squirt and her insides were meltingly tender.

Raul let go of her wrists as Nicole reached climax. His genitalia sprang out from between her buttocks with elasticity, and Nicole collapsed to the side.

"Hng, uh, eeh..."

Nicole saw Raul approaching again while rubbing his genitalia.

"Please, Raul. Ahh. Forgive me. Stop now... I can't do it anymore. Just this once."

The last time she pleaded like this, it was already broad daylight.

After that... She remembered nothing more.

By the fifth time, the flesh of her lower body was all swollen and Nicole felt numb all over her body.

By the time Nicole came to her senses again, it was already time for tea.

At that moment, Raul was standing by the bed, preparing to change his clothes. He was wearing a men's robe, likely procured by the maids or brought by Raul's subordinates.

'What on earth is happening? It doesn't feel like my body.'

This time, she really couldn't move at all. It was even hard for her to move her eyes.

Raul came over and kissed Nicole in the temple. He was smiling very faintly.

“I enjoyed it, Karen.”

“.....After doing this to someone..... Is that all?”

Nicole was dumbfounded. At the same time, she couldn't believe that this man was still sane after doing such crazy things.

He was sweaty and looked a bit tired, but this appearance was chillingly sexy.

“Yes. I wanted to keep going more.”

Raul said sweetly. Nicole wished he had just killed her instead. Seeing her eyes of despair, Raul chuckled.

“And don't forget, you have to be punished too.”

“.....I endured it. I did everything you told me to.....”

“I said I would postpone it, not that there would be no punishment.”

Raul said.

“This is the first punishment. It starts today.”

Raul whispered something in Nicole’s ear, causing her ears to flush red hot.

She couldn’t believe what he had left her with:

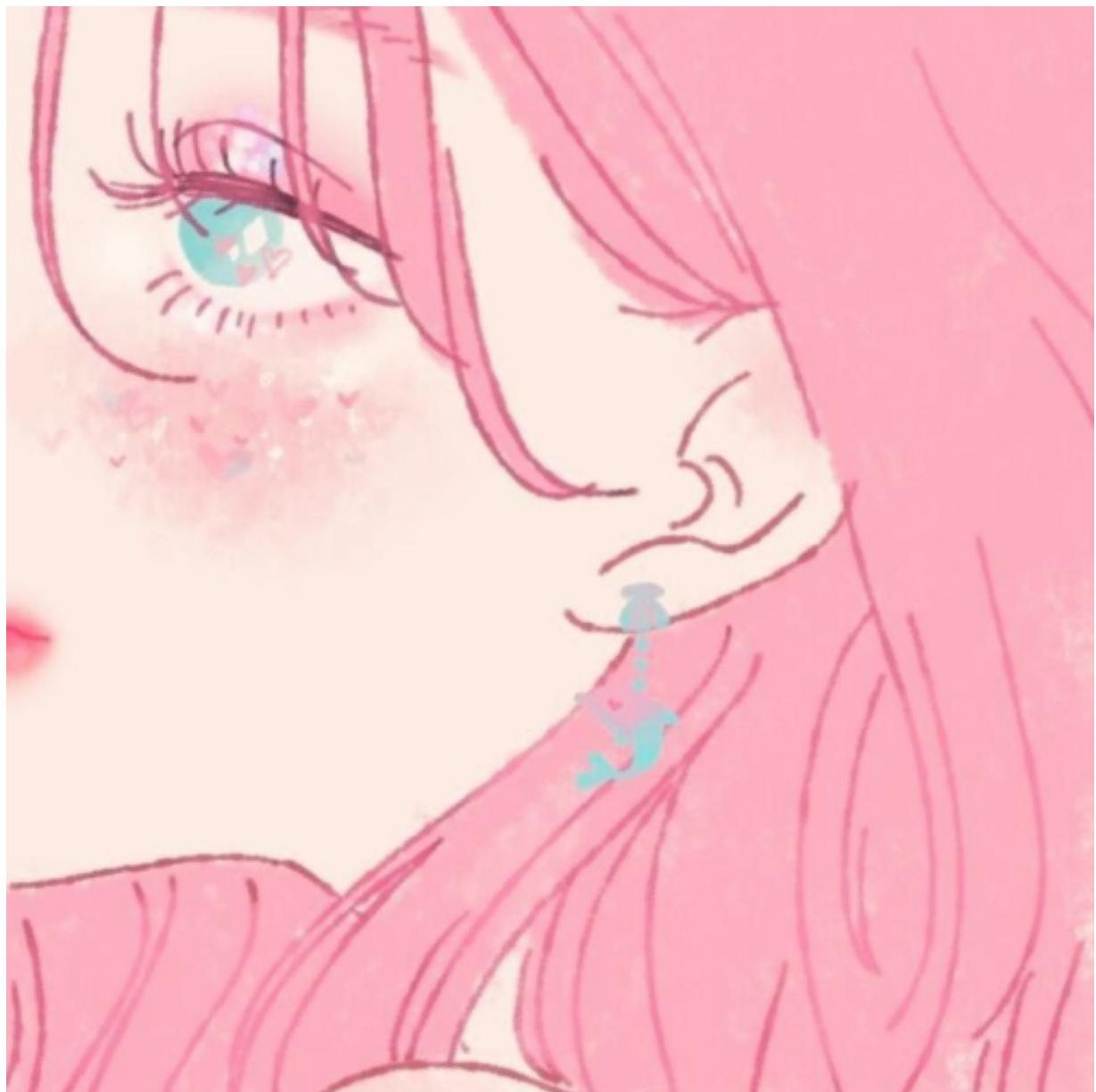
(You sent me notes to lure and bewitch me. Since you seem to like dirty talk, from today on, send me a note once a day with the dirtiest thing you can say. It will serve as your letter of reflection.)

Raul snickered softly.

(Isn’t that generous of me?)

Nicole was at a loss for words. She had forgotten how devilish this man, who had been her husband in a past life, could become.

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# **Chapter 124**

Nicole couldn't leave the bed even after Raul had left. Redia approached.

"Should I prepare some food? Or perhaps some tea...?"

"Nothing. I feel like I'm going to die."

"I think you should take another bath."

Nicole frowned.

"I feel like dying. If I'm still alive in a couple of hours, let's bathe then."

Apoplexy. What a grand ending that would be.

Fortunately, after lying down for two or three hours, she regained some consciousness. Nicole, supported by Bluea and Redia, submerged herself in the bathtub.

“Has there been any contact from Estock?”

Nicole had told them to check the safe house today.

“I tried to look into the interrogation room, but there was only this note stuck on the door.”

Nicole carefully unfolded the note, making sure it didn’t get wet.

(♡Shh! Torture in progress. Do not disturb♡ Do not enter!)

“.....”

Nicole immediately understood Redia’s bizarre expression as she handed over the note.

‘He’s really a strange one.’

Nicole thought, he was the type of person she'd rather not deal with if it weren't for the situation...

"Indeed, he said not to bother him for four or five days because he had something to test."

Would Isabel be alive in the meantime? Nicole thought of Aru's poor mother dying in the hospital even now. It was mercy enough to keep her alive.

"Let's leave Estock be for now. What about the young man named Leos?"

"That person is..."

Bluea made a strange expression.

Nicole looked at Bluea.

Compared to Redia, who was quick in everything, Bluea was a bit slow but careful. She was a tender-hearted child whose emotions showed easily.

"He seems a bit pitiful... He looked incredibly depressed. He even refuses the meals brought to him."

The young man named Leos was quite the pretty boy. Moreover, he seemed mentally unstable, which could evoke sympathy.

"We have to interrogate him to find out what kind of person he is. Bluea, don't get too deeply involved in conversation with him."

".....Yes, Miss."

Bluea nodded. Nicole recalled what Grace had said to her.

(Bluea and Redia, both are the last children I raised, and their skills are top-notch. However, their hearts are too kind, so I didn't send them to Sith. There was also my complete fallout with Raul at that time... Anyway, make good use of them. With such tender hearts, they won't betray you.)

Nicole thought about these words. Then she fell asleep again in the bathtub.

\*\*\*

When she opened her eyes, Nicole discovered an unfamiliar scene: Grace standing inside her bedroom.

Nicole quickly checked her clothing. Fortunately, with the maids' help, she had managed to put on her nightgown and silk robe in a daze after getting out of the bathtub and lay down on the bed.

"Nicole."

Grace called her with a stern face. Nicole sluggishly raised her body.

"Grace, how did you come here? You said you would never come to this house for safety reasons..."

Didn't they agree to call her Karen? Grace's cold face made Nicole's heart race.

"You're doing well. My only formal disciple now, what? With that guy Raul..."

Nicole felt a pang in her chest recognizing the hurt in Grace's eyes.

The two maids serving Nicole could not possibly keep their mouths shut from Grace. Moreover, Grace could gather information about last night's events without going through the maids.

"Did you succumb to temptation? Or was there any coercion involved?"

Grace sighed before speaking. Nicole felt a throbbing pain in her lower abdomen and pelvis as she got up from her seat. Grace was standing by the window.

"It was neither. It was my intention."

".....Is this the success you wanted?"

"It's how not to become the successor of YvesChapel."

“It will catch the eye of the royal family.”

“That’s intentional.”

Nicole said quietly.

“The eldest daughter of the vanished YvesChapel, a direct descendant known to be dead, has returned to become the consort of the Grand Duke—who would think of that?”

“.....”

“To hide something, you must choose the most unexpected, yet nearest place. I’ve hidden myself in a position no one would imagine. Even if it’s revealed that I’m not Karen, my true identity will not be exposed.”

“.....That’s truly an unimaginable idea.”

Grace frowned, but she didn’t criticize as there was a point. She shook her head.

“He’s taken away all my daughters.”

Grace clicked her tongue. Nicole suddenly thought of Freya and became even sadder. Surely, her mother would have blamed her even if she were alive.

“Even if my true identity is revealed, if Raul and I are deeply entangled, he will have no choice but to protect me.”

“.....”

“Even if I’m discovered to be the daughter of YvesChapel... Raul would have to conceal my identity to avoid suspicion from the royal family.”

“You’re clever.”

Grace said.

“I really hope that’s all there is to it. Never get more deeply involved, especially emotionally.”

Grace said softly.

“Once again, he has no heart.”

Nicole gave a bitter smile.

Nicole was just an interesting counterpart to Raul at the moment. She wasn't sure how many times this encounter would continue.

“Grace. I don't plan to end it like this. I'm going to become someone important, someone essential to Raul. I have to work for it.”

Grace looked at Nicole with pity, and then she embraced her for the first time.

“I'm always on your side. Without you, I wouldn't have much reason to live.”

“Grace.....”

"Don't worry me too much, Karen."

".....Yes."

Nicole nodded her head. She felt like bursting into tears but she held them back.

\*\*\*

Thus, Nicole's plans were all proceeding as scheduled.

Except for the fact that her husband from her past life, whom she had resolved to captivate, was a subtle sadist and a control freak.

Raul's dominant personality - even though she already knew about it, it was practically impossible to guard against.

'What, how am I supposed to write this? Lewd words? Is it something I'm supposed to study?'

Nicole barely ate dinner that day. Afterward, she sat at her desk and pondered over the content of the letter.

She twirled the pen in her hand. The events of the previous night flashed through her mind like a revolving lantern.

‘When you entered me, it hurt so much, it was hot... and then there was this tingling sensation spreading, consuming me...’

(The night I shared with you was too... too much. It was big, and I was so scared. With my current feelings, I think I would never want to have sexual relations again in my life. But... as much as I thought I might die, there were good parts too. I had this strange feeling as if I was being completed. My mind is all jumbled up. When you entered me deeply, it seemed like stars were bursting before my eyes and the flesh around that place was twice as hot as anywhere else.)

.....It's still confusing.

(What did you think of me, really? Were there many women with whom you spent such nights just once?)

The last part was mixed with her incomplete views on marriage from her past life. Nicole sighed and put down the

pen. It felt like something a mad person would write.

This was definitely a punishment. It made Nicole hesitate and agonize so much...

She eventually erased all the unnecessary parts and, although it had hurt terribly last night (she gritted her teeth at this part), she honestly enjoyed it and summarized just how amazing he had been.

(Unacceptable. At this rate, it would be better to whip you.)

Raul's reply came surprisingly quickly. Upon receiving it, Nicole was stunned.

'What on earth is with this man?'

Was he always this easy to contact? And what's with the 'unacceptable'? Has anyone ever passed before?

'Ah, this is driving me insane.'

It was as if two versions of herself had emerged. One was her own self, an agent or spy who could coldly concoct schemes.

The other was herself, powerless and blushing in front of Raul, helplessly crumbling in his grasp.

And if Raul's intention was to torment Nicole with this turmoil, his plan had hit its mark.

Anyway, his day would be busily revolving in places she couldn't imagine even today... This man would be enjoying this little amusement of tormenting her.

Like someone casually reading and consuming a newspaper article, Nicole bit her lip and decided to write as lewd a letter as possible. It was a kind of defiance.

Just then, Redia cautiously knocked on the door.

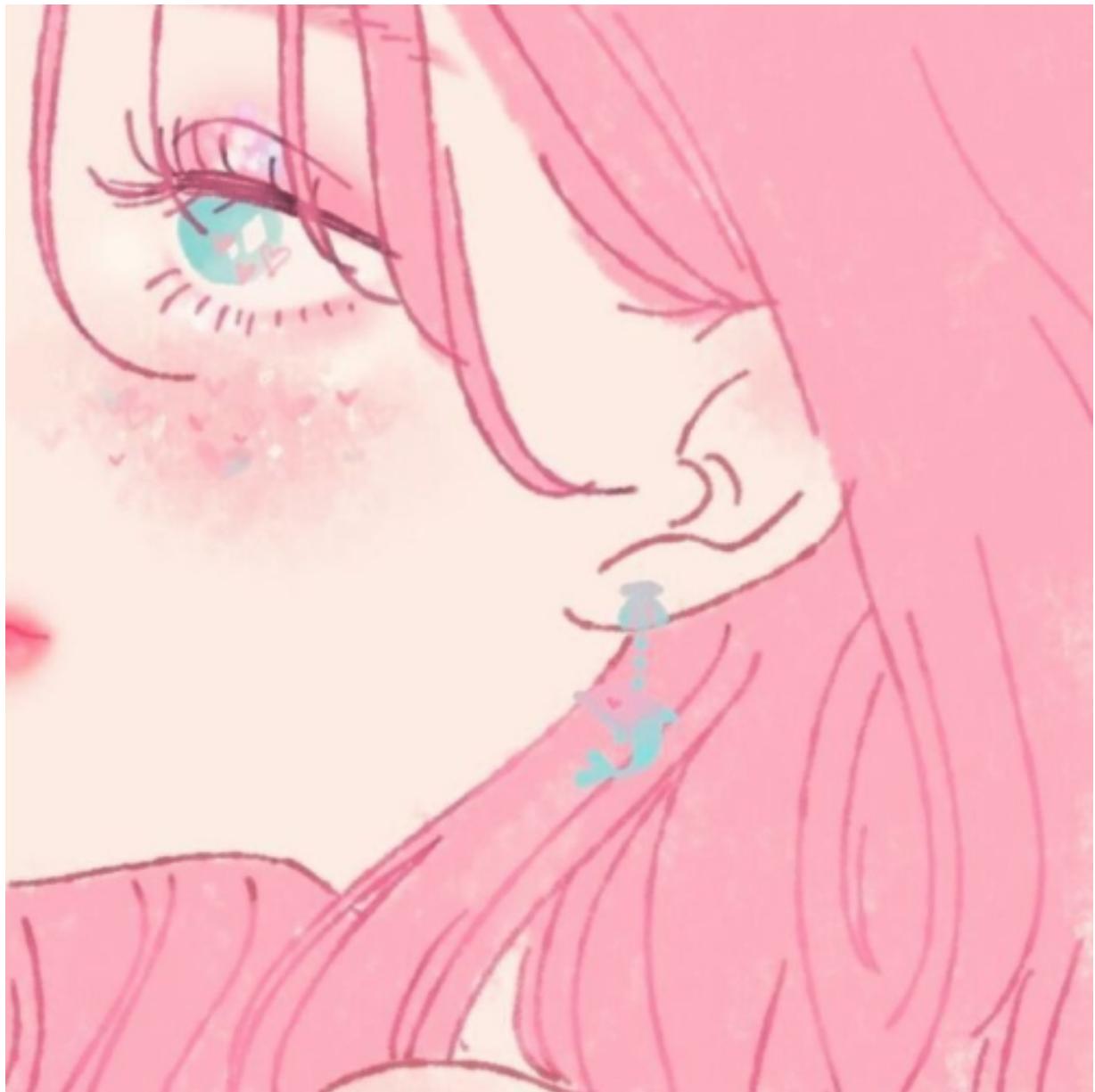
"What is it?"

"You've received a note. From the scouts that you personally employ."

Nicole put down her pen. At the news Redia delivered, she clenched her fist tightly.

“.....What does it say?”

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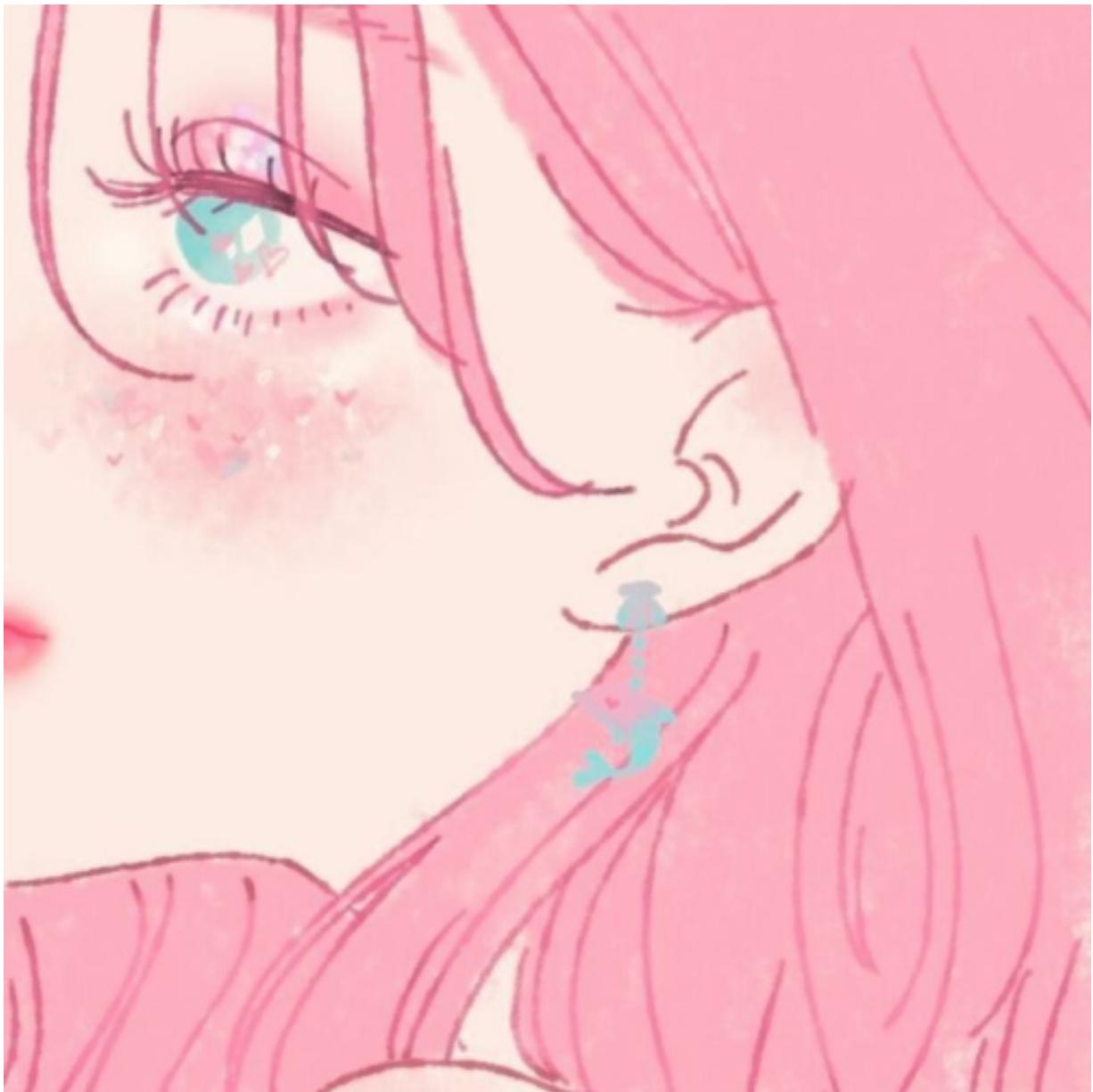


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# **Chapter 125**

Duchess Lisbeth was released. And news related to the drug affair was not covered anywhere.

“How on earth did he silence them?”

Nicole asked Bluea quietly. Her two maids were collecting news about Duchess Lisbeth upon Nicole’s orders.

Grace had her own informants, and Nicole could contact them through Bluea and Redia. Of course, she had to pay them.

“The rumor is widespread throughout the social circle. But...”

Bluea hesitated and then whispered something into Nicole’s ear. Nicole bit her lip upon hearing it.

“Raul handed over Duchess Lisbeth to the royal family and even directly ordered her to be silenced? Just like that?”

“Yes.”

Nicole wanted to ask why, but the maids wouldn’t know, and Nicole already knew the reason.

“It must have been some judicial deal with the royal family, right?”

“...Rumors say that he will receive certain trade rights because of this incident. And according to a royal informant... Duchess Lisbeth will be scapegoated and executed.”

Redia said.

Nicole sighed. Then she told them to send a note to Dagger to come by when he had time.

\*\*\*

Nicole was in a bad mood all day long.

'It took less than three days for the release. Raul, is there something he's even afraid of?'

Nicole recalled the sight of Aru crying. And the petty scam and drug deal as well.

Also, the contemptible appearance of Duchess Lisbeth, who had no dignity and did not deserve to enjoy power as a member of the royal family.

Even the moment in her past life when Duchess Lisbeth tried to force a sterility drug into her mouth.

'I'm not interested in justice or retribution. But...'

Personal disappointment. The frustration of expectations.

The emotion Nicole was feeling towards Raul right now was just that.

Nicole devoted her best efforts to the tasks related to Duchess Lisbeth. And she executed the trap that would capture both the plan she created and Isabel in one fell swoop.

However, she had not expected Raul to give up so easily in the process.

If the drug had been exported, it would have created more victims. Nicole's efforts to expose such atrocities by the Duchess turned out to be in vain.

Upon reflection, Raul could not be considered innocent or incorruptible.

He was a winner, a possessor. He did not discriminate between good and evil when it came to means for his own ends.

'I... That's why I despised him in my past life.'

Her emotions that had bloomed like flowers suddenly dampened and sank into gloom as if doused with water.

And Nicole was in no position to interfere with Raul's decisions. Thus, she ultimately felt powerless.

\*\*\*

'I'm not in the mood to dally with him through lewd notes.'

Nicole thought as she sat at her desk that night. All she had now was her body; that was the only thing she could freely use.

Nicole eventually decided to postpone sending the note to Raul.

She was still not relieved from fatigue. Nicole took some headache medicine and lay down on the bed.

\*\*\*

That night, something unexpected happened.

A bouquet of flowers arrived from Raul. The profusely beautiful bunch of roses had only the tips of the petals tinged with a light pink hue.

The overall white roses were clearly a very rare variety. The roses were adorned with fresh green leaves.

“It’s very beautiful. Shall I decorate the bedroom with it?”

Bluea said, unaware of her own abilities, her face flushed pink like a girl who believes in love.

Nicole looked into Bluea’s eyes. She tried to furrow her brow...

‘To be swayed by something like this.’

She knows that Raul thinks of her as nothing more than a plaything.

But Nicole... She was greatly shaken by Raul and was giving him her heart. She didn’t want to be caught being overjoyed by a mere bouquet of flowers.

A card came with the flowers. Nicole unfolded the card.

{To the Grand Duke's residence, by 9 p.m.)

'So, this means that, right?'

If it were a new assignment, he would call during the day.  
'Adult play.' That must be what he's implying.

Nicole knew she shouldn't, but the heart is something not even she could stop, and in that moment, her pride was truly hurt.

'How soon after releasing Duchess Lisbeth do you expect me to come running into your arms of my own volition?'

And then another night full of confusion that makes her dizzy will follow. And then again.

Nicole might find herself willingly submitting to Raul.

Nicole caressed the petals and sighed softly.

“It’s hot out, so it might be better to leave them outside rather than inside the house. Put them in the garden.”

“Then...”

“Don’t do anything, just leave it out. That’s all.”

Bluea, noticing Nicole’s mood, said she would decorate the outdoor table with the flowers.

“It’s best to rest tonight. No need to send any response.”

“But his subordinate is waiting for an answer.”

Raul likes to be in control.

Raul likes to dominate.

Raul likes possessing ‘Kären’.

But the natural-born hunter that he is, he doesn't wish for a fool who just does everything he's told...

Whether it's because of Raul's charm or his status, there's no shortage of people willing to give themselves to him.

Raul doesn't invest much time in easy targets. Besides, he dislikes people without principles.

'I know you.'

Nicole decided to ignore Raul's command once again. She was still worried about the consequences.

But she also knew that not going now was the right answer...

"Just say I'm sick. That should do it."

\*\*\*

3 hours later.

Nicole awoke from a light sleep due to the sound of someone approaching.

Raul was standing near the bed.

“It’s surprising that you can sleep after defying your master.”

Nicole lifted her head and slowly got up.

Nicole was wearing a new nightgown, a pale sky-blue one made of thin silk. Without any undergarments, it was quite revealing.

She hadn’t worn any undergarments because the skin around her private parts had swelled up and hurt from last night, so she had applied ointment and cream.

“I didn’t expect you to come.”

Nicole replied without surprise.

“Someone defied my orders again. It is always a big deal when such a thing happens.”

“...At most, it’s not such a big deal that you would come over yourself for a note filled with lewd comments from your subordinate.”

“You’re always scheming behind my back.”

Nicole faintly lifted the corners of her mouth; she couldn’t deny the truth in his words, so she decided to change the subject.

“You don’t need to worry. I couldn’t move because I was in pain. If that displeased Your Grace—”

Raul took a step closer and leaned towards Nicole.

“You know you’re being punished, right?”

As Raul reached out, Nicole turned her head away from him.

Instead of being rough, Raul gently caressed Nicole's nape, causing her eyelashes to flutter...

Then, Raul gently grasped Nicole's chin and turned it towards him.

"I told you not to avoid my eyes."

"But this is a private time now, isn't it?"

Nicole said softly,

"I am not on a mission right now. So, I can do as I please."

Nicole wondered if anyone had dared to be so directly defiant in front of Raul in recent years.

In her past life, Nicole had been the only one to ever humiliate him, resist, and raise her voice against him.

*Would you show the same patience as you did back then?*

Her blue eyes scrutinized Raul closely, and Raul noticed it.

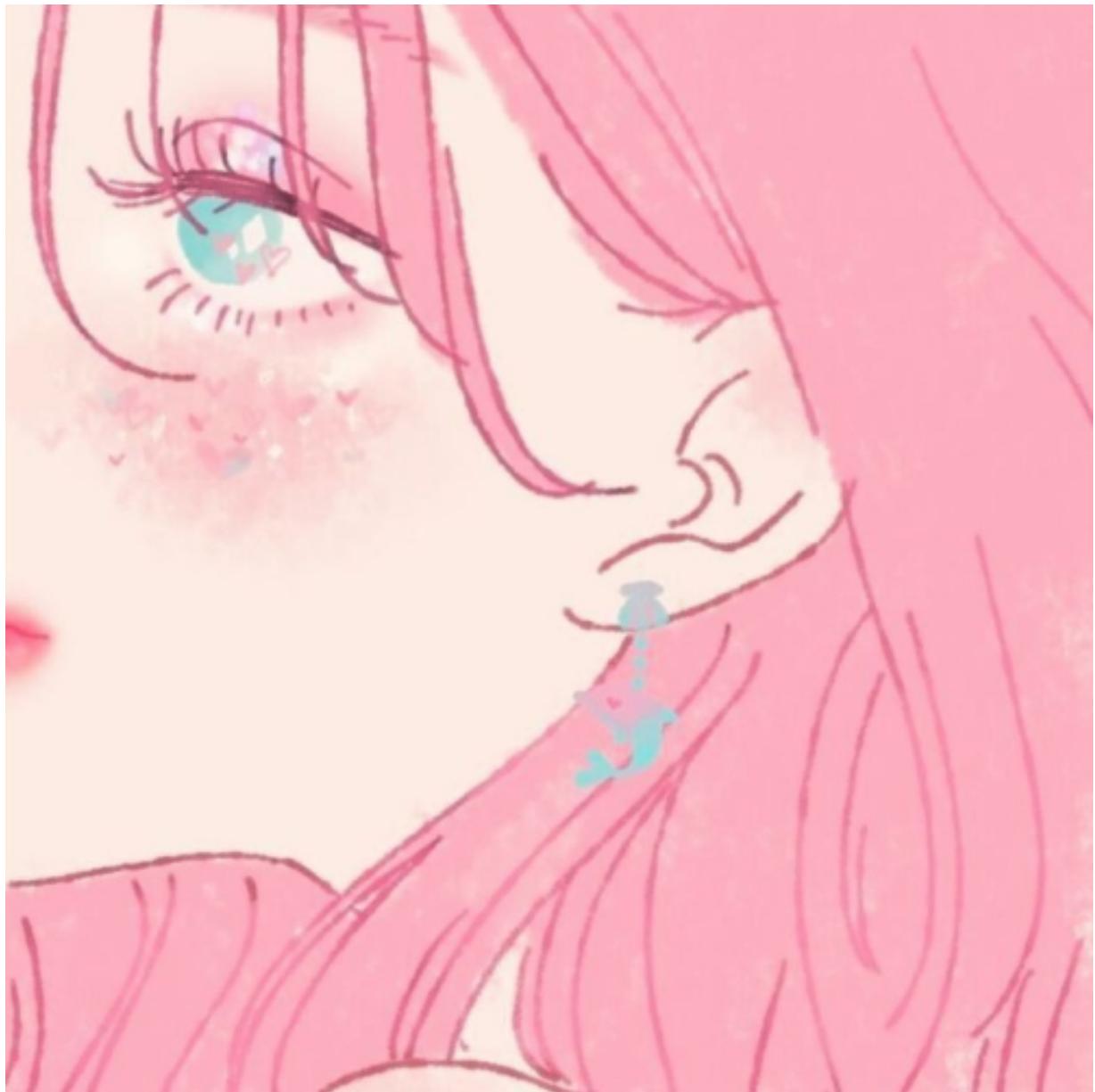
A brief sneer crossed his face.

“Yes, Miss Karen.”

Raul dropped his chin.

“It seems you have a lot to say. Go ahead.”

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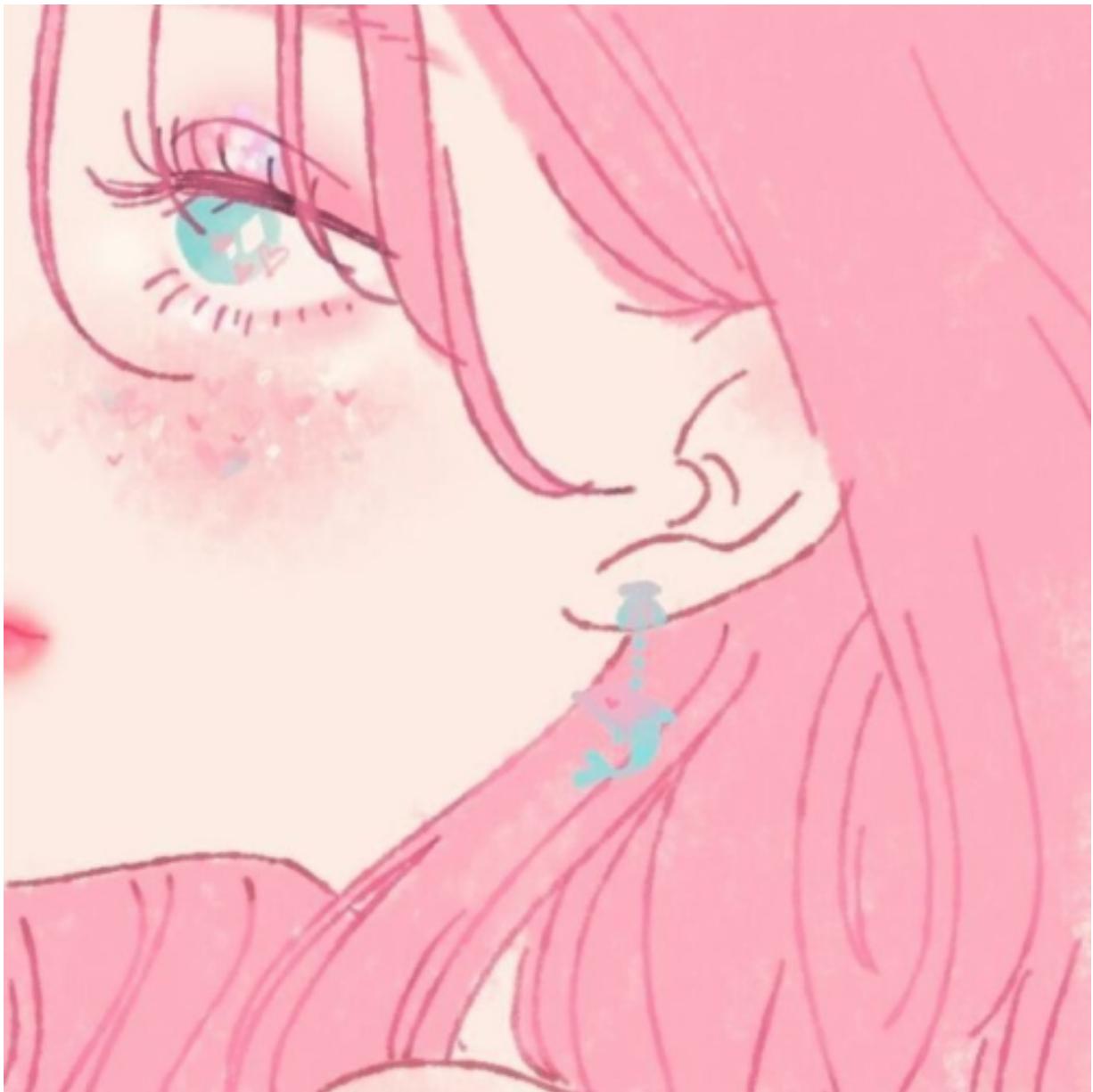


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# Chapter 126

“I... did my best.”

“So?”

“But you mishandled the results I gave you.”

Besides, she didn’t even receive proper compensation, aside from the night of pleasure that pushed her to fainting.

Nicole thought.

“Are you going to preach that I shouldn’t have handed over Duchess Lisbeth to the royal family?”

Raul had an expression of disbelief that Nicole could say such a thing. It was closer to contempt, actually.

“You sent her back immediately, without even a day of detention.”

“So what, should I have detained and tortured her for a few days, then killed her in secret? Do you know the value of a royal’s death?”

Nicole struggled to suppress a snort. She spoke as meekly as possible.

“You probably never even considered it.”

Raul touched Nicole's chin again and then pressed her onto the bed.

Before she knew it, Nicole's face was between his two arms.

Their bodies weren't directly touching, but Raul was on top of Nicole.

"You're acting like some kind of fool."

"What do you mean?"

"The delusion that if you act dumb on purpose, the other person will feel sexual desire towards you."

Nicole's cheeks soon turned red as if burning. Now she felt direct shame.

She bit her lip and looked at Raul, speaking slowly.

"It seems to have no effect. Right. I guess I wasn't dumb enough."

Raul clicked his tongue.

"You looked dumb enough, and it did have an effect. You have a talent for making me angry. Provocation is something you do well."

"Should I soothe your temper then?"

"You have that obligation. Shall I undress you? Or will you?"

Nicole subtly turned her head away, avoiding him once more.

"I am not your mistress, Grand Duke. Even if I were, I could refuse when I don't want to."

Nicole's eyes fluttered slightly with fear. She didn't have the courage to look directly at Raul's expression.

Raul shook off his body with a look of disdain and swept back his hair once.

"You're not even my mistress, I suppose."

Provocation was something this man did well too. Nicole was so angry that her body shook.

Nicole sat up and covered her chest with the sheet, then glared at Raul.

"So what? Do you want to hear from my own lips that it was a one-night mistake? Shall I tell you that you don't have to pay any price for it?"

"Then, do you want compensation from the second time onward?"

Raul said sarcastically.

And one more certainty: Nicole didn't know how to speak as viciously as Raul in an argument. And this man knew how to draw out her venom.

'I know that all too well. I argued to exhaustion in my past life.'

To be precise, it was Nicole who self-destructed and screamed, while Raul continued to treat her as if she were an insect.

"You won't be able to give me the compensation I want. The house and the salary I receive every month are not because

I undressed in front of His Grace the Grand Duke. I earned it by working, and that's enough for me."

Nicole retorted sharply. Now, Raul was faintly smirking at her, his lips curling up at the corners.

"No, that's wrong. I've already bought your first night at a high price."

"With just a bouquet of flowers?"

Raul's brow furrowed.

"That can't be."

"Then what will you give me?"

"You have no right to ask. If you really want to know, find the answer yourself."

Nicole let go of the sheet in her hand. Her pale and plump chest and thighs were completely exposed.

"That's right. But I do have rights over my body. Are you going to touch me again against my will? Even if that becomes rape?"

This was a bit harsh, but even in that moment, Nicole said what she thought was the most fitting for the woman 'Karen' in Raul's mind.

'Would you force yourself on a woman who dislikes you, just to satisfy your pride and self-conceit?'

As expected, a faint contempt appeared on Raul's face. It hurt Nicole, but not enough to cause regret.

"I don't want it today."

“If you were really Karen, that would be the case.”

Nicole’s body stiffened.

“What do you mean? Who I am has nothing to do with this situation.”

“Pride. Haughtiness. And sometimes a rebellious nature stemming from high intelligence – shall I call it a rebellious psychology? A woman like you wouldn’t be complete in the circumstances that a woman named Karen is in.”

Nicole hung a crooked smile on her lips.

“That’s right. I am rare. I don’t fit in with the environment I grew up in. You collect such things, don’t you? Those that are not befitting of their status, not obvious.”

Nicole added softly,

“The insolent ones.”

Raul stood by the bed and straightened his attire. While tidying his sleeves, he said indifferently,

“But now you are trivial and predictable.”

“If I am boring, then you should never keep me by your side privately again.”

“Are we in a private relationship?”

Raul acted as if he wanted to argue with Nicole, circling around and speaking sarcastically. In this process, what he wanted was to draw out Nicole’s shame.

“Who would become your private woman? It must be hard to become something to someone who has everything like

you."

"No one is omnipotent."

Raul said. Nicole lifted her head.

"I don't like dealing with drugs. If there's a way to deal with such trash all at once, will you tell me?"

This time, Raul did not speak sarcastically. Slowly, Nicole's cheeks tinged with a soft pink.

And she had behaved in a mess before her superior. She had shown a pathetic side to the man she liked.

"I am really in pain. You were too rough last time."

Nicole said quietly, suppressing her emotions.

She didn't apologize for her remark. However, she implied a willingness to surrender subtly. She thought this would be enough.

"I expect you to be more compliant next time. Even if you are not my consort."

".....Next time will be better."

Nicole spoke softly. But even as she did, she thought.

If there was to be a next time, that is.

That night, Nicole did not see Raul out.

\*\*\*

The next morning began with fatigue.

Nicole had her meal in the garden, as usual.

And it was only when she went out to the garden that Nicole discovered a bouquet of flowers lying on the garden table, not even placed in a vase.

Redia and Bluea hesitated.

"I'm sorry..... You said not to put them in a vase."

"Did he see this when he came in?"

"Yes....."

Nicole looked down at the bouquet. Normally, such meaningful flowers would be decorated in the bedroom.

Nicole had carelessly thrown his gift about and even made sarcastic remarks about the bouquet.

'Did it upset him?'

Was this a gift worth that person's while? Or, there was a good chance he didn't even know what the bouquet was, having sent it through a subordinate.

'That must be it. Yes.'

Nicole smiled bitterly. She knew that this rare rose was a precious variety grown in the Grand Duke's greenhouse. And she wanted to ignore that fact.

"Bring a vase. Also, open the fourth compartment of my dressing room's medicine drawer for the plant nutrient labeled as such."

Nicole instructed the maids. Then she arranged the flowers in the vase herself, decorated the table, and sprinkled it

with the nutrient.

The plant nutrient she made was effective, so the flowers would soon revive vividly.

“Miss, please take a look at the newspaper as well. There’s a front-page article about Duchess Lisbeth.”

Only then did Nicole unfold the newspaper. It was not a good article.

“It seems the Duke Lisbeth will eventually be divorced. And it looks like he might be executed,” Nicole said indifferently.

Duke Lisbeth had undergone various evaluations just before his appointment as a general. Among these, it was revealed that he had a history of smuggling years before – including drugs – and would be stripped of his position and punished.

And Duchess Lisbeth, as a member of the royal family, was said to bear the sin of failing to ‘manage’ her husband and would embark on a long journey of atonement.

“Grace said that divorce is a great shame for those in the royal family,” Redia spoke softly.

“So now, the only official sin of Duchess Lisbeth is just that she got divorced,” Nicole said sarcastically. However, as she read further into the newspaper, her expression became peculiar.

The territory of the Grand Duke, now the holy land. It was said that Duchess Lisbeth would head there and spend her life praying in the Great Temple, becoming a devotee of the goddess.

'Why even mention such trivial details in the article?' The article contained very specific information about which routes Duchess Lisbeth would take and through which cities she would pass.

'Grace had said that the shame of the royal family is always covered up and disappears.' As if something was being hinted at.....

Could Raul have had a hand in the publication of this article? Nicole frowned at that moment.

'Wait a minute. They released the article on purpose?'

Nicole called Redia.

"When did Duchess Lisbeth leave?"

"The scouts brought news in the morning that she left at dawn," replied Redia.

Nicole had already ordered that Duchess Lisbeth be watched closely.

'Surely not.'

\*\*\*

And the next morning, the 'body' of Duchess Lisbeth was found.

And that too, right in front of the intersection overlooking the capital's square.

Ellerwester Street.

Beneath that sign hung the corpse of Duchess Lisbeth.

She looked very peaceful, and there was not a trace of color in her face.

There was no damage to the body. And at the feet of the Duchess, black flowers were scattered.

White flowers were usually used at funerals. Black flowers in themselves were a mockery.

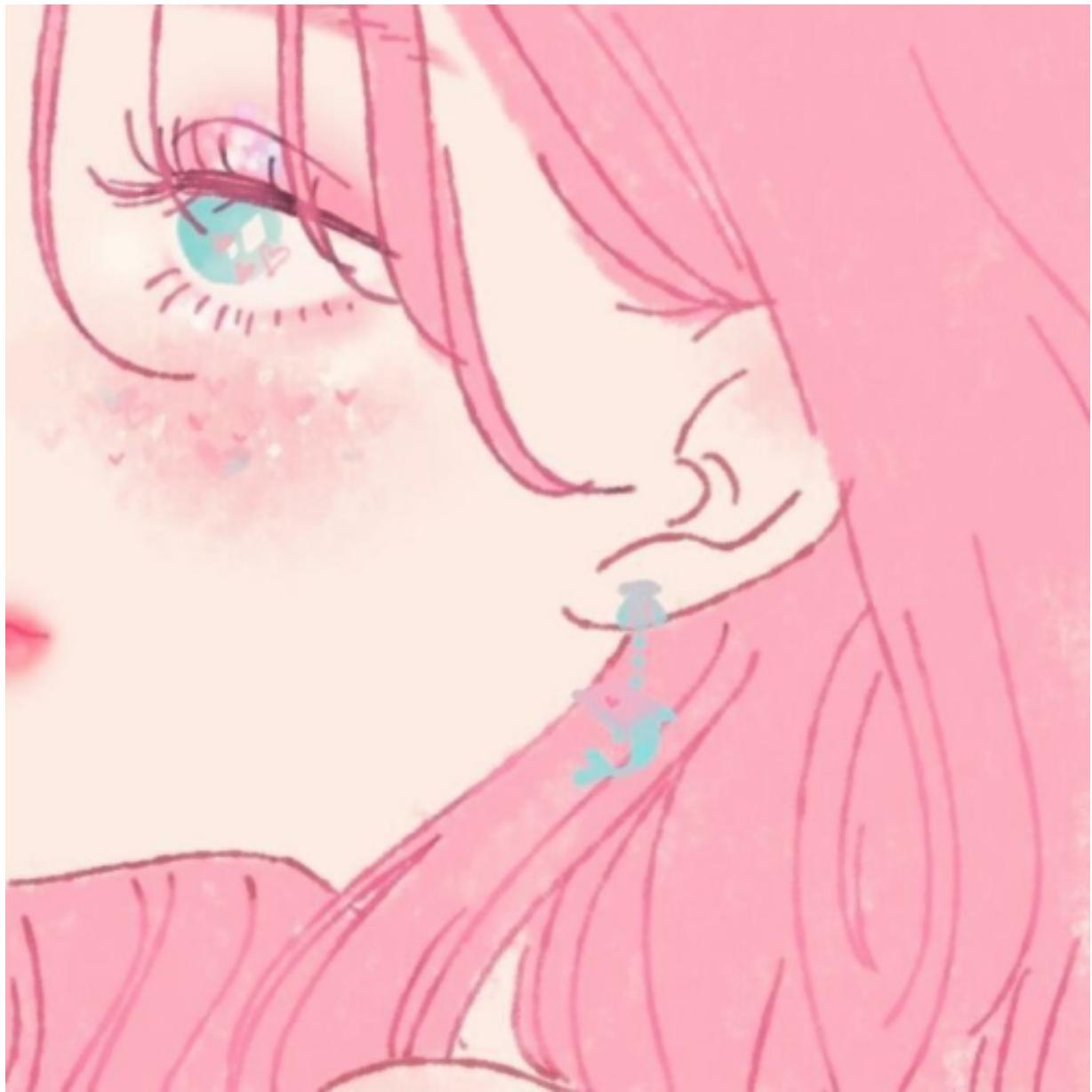
Between those flowers, a box filled with pills was found.

They were pills of very bright and beautiful colors.

It was a clear murder, a warning,

And an insult to the royal family.

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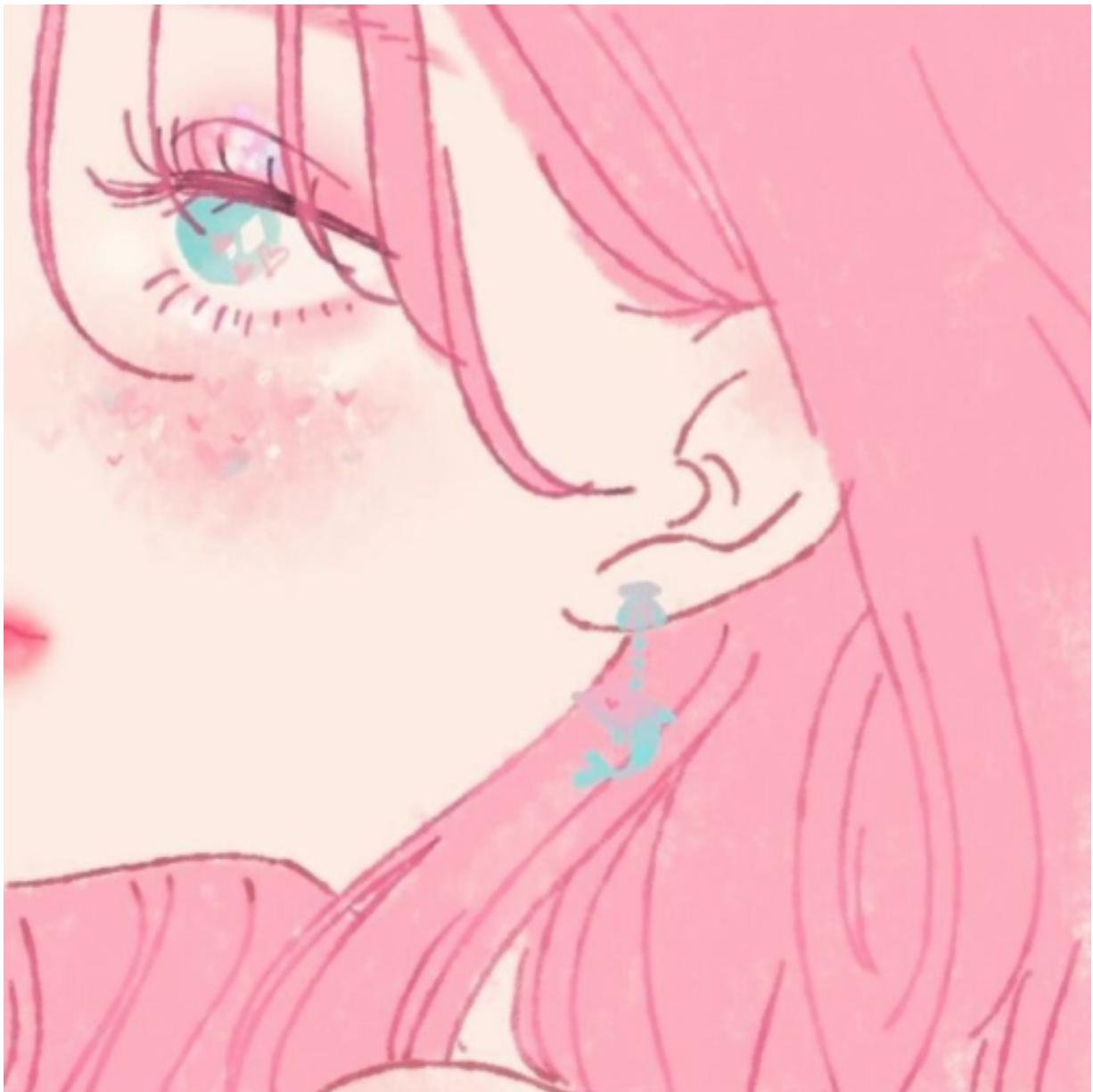


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# Chapter 127

The dubious death of Duchess Lisbeth.

The capital was abuzz with the shameful death, unbecoming of royalty.

The royal family hastily managed the aftermath of Duchess Lisbeth's death.

What followed was a succession of rumors.

Duchess Lisbeth's body appeared intact at first glance, but there were traces of torture through drugs before her death.

The royal guards were very lax, as if she had been treated like a prisoner...

Nicole listened to these updates one by one while waiting for someone.

\*\*\*

That afternoon, Dagger visited. The boy seated in Nicole's garden was served tea as if it were a given.

Nicole brought out fresh cookies and cake baked that morning.

"The desserts are getting better and better."

"Thank you. I'm glad you came today; it was a day for making desserts."

Nicole quietly sat opposite Dagger.

"Was Duchess Lisbeth murdered?"

"Clearly. Even royalty can die like that when their luck runs out."

Dagger flicked his tongue with a mischievous expression.

It was as if all the pieces of the puzzle finally fit together.

"Dagger, what kind of work did you say you've been doing recently?"

"As I mentioned before, I'm infiltrating the base of Mr. Snake, the drug dealer who has the capital in his grip. He's a very bad person. It was so hard to even get close."

"What would Mr. Snake do if he knew that a high-ranking royal like Duchess Lisbeth was making a new kind of drug?"

Dagger smiled broadly.

"Noona, you already know the answer."

Nicole let out a mournful groan.

"Dagger, it was you who leaked the information about Duchess Lisbeth. And her travel route was advertised in the newspaper, wasn't it? The guards were lax, weren't they?"

Dagger smiled with his eyes.

"That was the picture painted by the Grand Duke, right?"

"Yes. Why dirty our hands when there are beasts no different from ferocious snakes, criminals around."

"A viper bites everything that comes into its mouth. That's what differentiates it from humans."

Nicole sighed.

'So, he didn't release Duchess Lisbeth after all.'

He had set Duchess Lisbeth loose in a hunting ground, to be killed or assassinated by anyone.

And Nicole had misunderstood him.

'Is this a situation where I should wave the white flag to Raul?'

Perhaps if they were in a normal relationship, friends or lovers... it might be a situation where an apology was due.

"I'm sorry, noona. I would do anything for you, but I can't speak about major secrets either."

Dagger clicked his tongue.

"I understand completely. I should have known that much without being told."

Then Nicole suddenly felt a strange emotion blooming inside her. The desire to see Raul. A kind of peculiar responsibility towards him.

Even though she knew they were not in that kind of relationship.

\*\*\*

That evening, Nicole sent a note to Raul asking if she could visit him at the Grand Duke's residence.

'He won't meet me easily.'

As expected, Raul rejected her. The same happened the next morning.

'Is this the end?'

Nicole thought to herself, feeling as if she had hit a wall. Was this a warning from Raul? Or just a game? But...

Nicole knew the answer. Raul had given her an order, and she had to comply.

'It really... feels strange.'

Nicole once again took out pen and paper that day. She chose the prettiest stationery she had at home and sprayed it with perfume.

(My body has recovered now. I dream of the day you enter me again. In truth, I've been holding back for too long. I yearn for you to fill me... with your...)

Your...

Nicole closed her eyes tightly. She now knew how to describe a man's genitalia.

Through popular novels. The kind of novels that describe the love stories of men and women and even their bold nightly encounters.

In the Empire, the sale of obscene materials is illegal, so they are sold clandestinely as illicit goods.

{I really enjoyed yours. I thought it was a bit too much... but it was amazing how it entered my body. Actually, even now....}

Nicole felt strange as she thought about that night. It was incredibly painful and scary, but at the same time, she also felt happy.

(I felt like I've known you for a long time.)

It was like the night she had tasted the poison of the night. Nicole got a bit excited while writing the letter and felt a tingling sensation down below.

'I want to touch it.'

Suddenly, Nicole had that thought and unconsciously her hand went down to caress her lower abdomen.

She wanted to slip her hand inside her underwear but didn't have the courage to do so. She just clenched the hem of her silk pajamas tightly.

{At this very moment, I want to touch myself thinking of you. But I will resist. I am neither your mistress nor anything else to you. But the night we spent together, rejoicing in it, becoming one, at that moment, it was just you and I in this world. Even if it meant nothing, still, to me, you were my world. I want you....}

Nicole clenched her teeth.

(I love you more than anyone... In this life and the next, more than anyone else, in a special way....)"

"He doesn't expect a love letter from me."

Rather, it would be fortunate if she were not truly punished for being caught with this. He would be furious that a woman he took in as his subordinate harbored such shameless emotions.

However, as Nicole continued the letter, she kept confirming her own inner feelings.

In the end, Nicole put down her pen. What she needed now was not a lewd letter to obtain a man's night of pleasure. She had to bring something greater, something different.

\*\*\*

"As expected, the royal family is enraged by the death of Duchess Lisbeth. The drug criminals have crossed the line this time."

"....."

The butler, Las, spoke indifferently. Raul nonchalantly rested his chin on his hand, clenching and unclenching his fist.

"Bring me the list of nobles who Mr. Snake has been financially backing from behind the scenes."

"He is the financial lifeline for several nobles. He's even..... reached out to the confidants of the Emperor."

The butler, as if expecting this, presented the documents. Raul looked at them and faintly smiled.

"If a dog has bitten someone, it's time to start the hunt. Take care of it. Clean sweep. Gather the Siths."

"Yes."

The butler nodded.

"Don't bother arresting those involved, just kill them. If there are those whose guilt or innocence needs to be determined, bring only them to me," Raul whispered.

"Start the hunt. Kill as many as possible."

"Yes, Your Grace."

The butler said respectfully. A faint smile appeared on his lips as he left the room.

\*\*\*

Nicole took a breath.

'I can't believe I'm doing this.'

She was standing in front of Grand Duke Raul's office now. Bastard glanced at Nicole and silently let her in.

Anxiously, she knocked on the door of Raul's office.

The heavy door was engraved with golden sculptures of lions and horses.

It was a door she had seen dozens of times in her past life.

Knock, knock.

"Come in."

Raul's voice came from inside the room.

Nicole was currently cloaked, covering her entire body.

Her golden-brown hair was let down long, and her lips were plump and pink like summer roses.

Her eyes were the usual clear blue.

Nicole approached Raul with every joint in her body tensed.

“Your Grace.”

Raul casually scanned her.

“I did not summon you. How did you get here?”

“The Grand Duke’s manor seemed quiet. And I have a good memory for directions.”

Nicole replied calmly. To her, the pathways of the Grand Duke’s family were as familiar as the palm of her hand.

“Am I to believe that? Whose idea was it?”

“I’m a spy too, so I have this level of infiltration ability.”

“Alright, I got it. Now, you may leave.”

Nicole quietly watched him, and with her hand, she gently touched the string of her cloak.

“I have a note to give you. It’s what you wanted.”

“It must be the punishment you still deserve.”

Raul spoke as if he was bored.

“And, you’re testing my patience right now. If you cross the line one more time, I’ll start the whipping immediately.”

But he had never done that before. Nicole took a step closer to Raul as she looked at him.

".....Just once..... please take interest in the contents of the note."

This was a sign of Nicole's complete surrender. Raul's gaze shifted strangely.

He placed his arms on the armrests of the chair. As he leaned back slightly, he assumed a languid posture and scanned her.

Nicole mustered her courage and took another step closer. Now she was right beside Raul, who was seated in the chair.

The tips of her ears were tinged with a soft pink.

And then she slowly approached and untied her cloak.

Rustle. The teal cloak slipped off, revealing the same silk nightgown as the night before, completely sheer and revealing all underneath.

Nicole's pink nipples, her well-shaped moderate and delicate-sized breasts, her slender belly below, and even her faint pubic hair that was uncovered beneath.

Everything was exposed, revealed through the sheer fabric.

Nicole tried not to tremble as she looked at Raul.

"I'm not accustomed to writing reports. I haven't written much since I was young. So....."

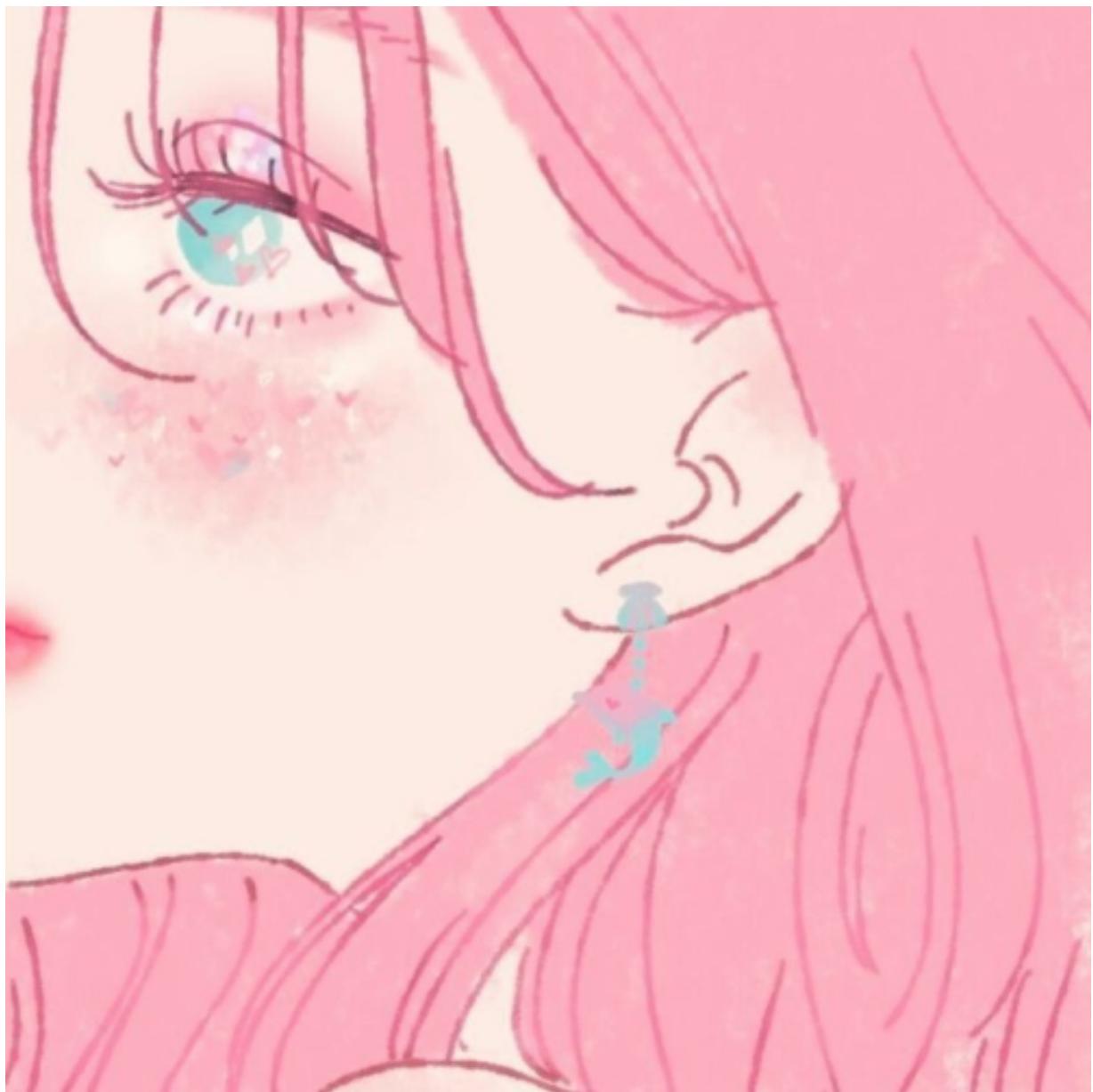
Nicole bent her body forward.

"I came to report verbally, in person."

And then she whispered.

“Will you listen to my report?”

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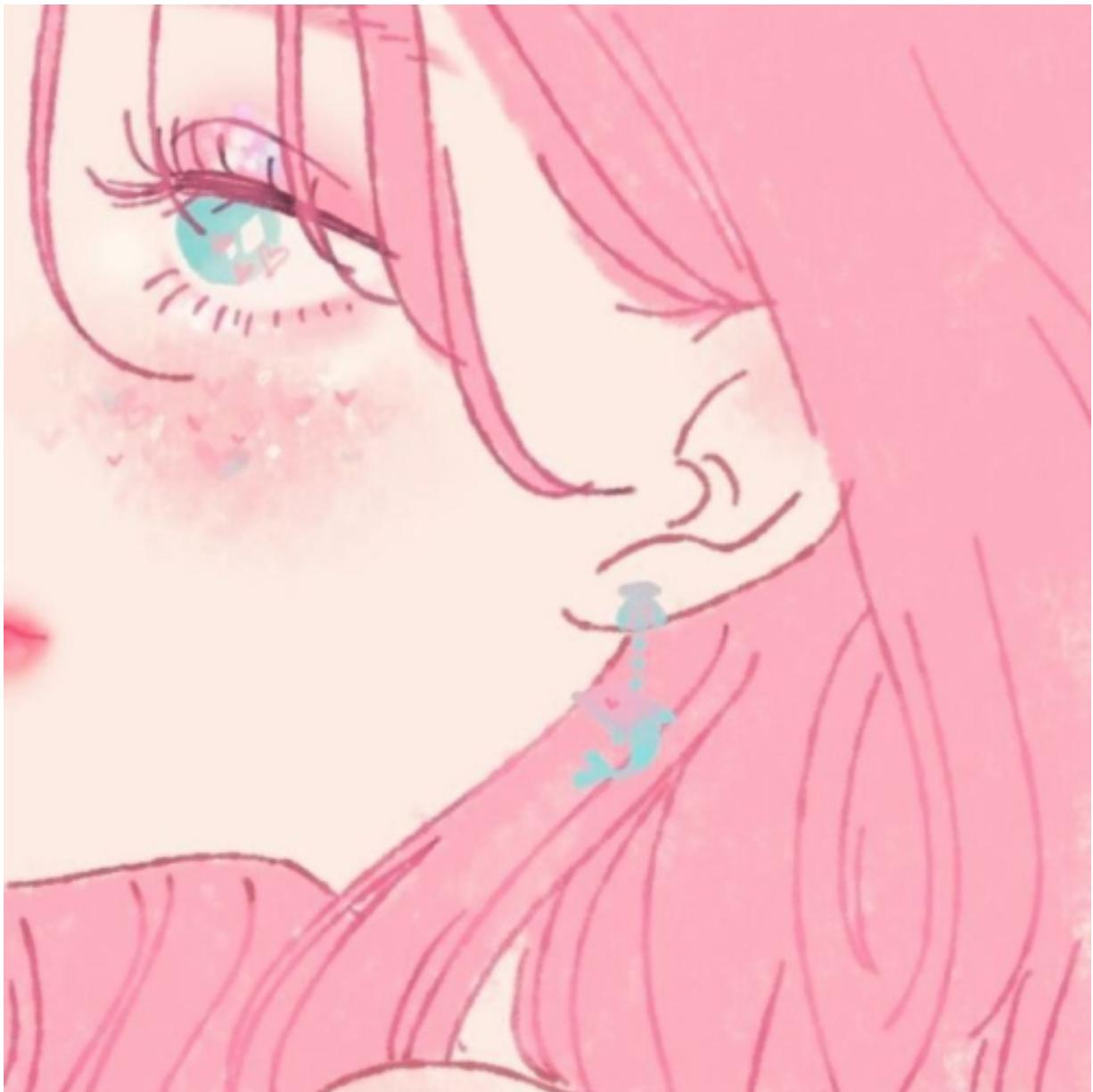


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# Chapter 128

A smile spread across Raul's lips, one that could be either a sneer or a sign of pleasure.

"Start when you're ready."

Raul whispered, lust spreading in his eyes, along with the desire to dominate.

The moment Nicole discovered this, she felt a strange thrill run down her spine just by standing before him.

That feeling gave Nicole courage.

'I never thought I could do such a thing.'

She had never acted this way before. She had only just had her first sexual encounter.

But it was an action very much like Karen. And it was the boldest way of reconciliation she could ask of Raul.

Nicole approached and leaned on the armrest of Raul's chair, then cautiously reached out her hand to him.

Raul grabbed her wrist, his strength so fierce that Nicole found her shoulders trembling anew.

She suppressed her feelings and began to whisper softly.

It was the most provocative part of the note Nicole had written before coming here.

"I want you today. My body has recovered a lot. So... I want to experience that feeling again, the one when you first entered me."

Raul furrowed his brow and looked up at Nicole.

Nicole felt as though she was being mocked, but she tried not to look away.

Nicole thought she might burn up with embarrassment, turning to ash from the heat of it all.

"I really want it so much. The feeling of your throbbing heat inside me, moving and writhing. If you dislike that, I'll use my tongue."

"....."

"I want to suck it. Yours."

As soon as the words left her mouth, her mind seemed to ignite.

*How did I do this? Did I have this side to me?*

But was that not enough, or did it not have any effect?

"Ah!"

Raul abruptly pulled Nicole by grabbing her wrist.

He growled,

"Do you know what you've done wrong?"

Then Raul released her wrist and reached for her nape, to which Nicole obediently bent her knees in submission.

The hand on her nape grew firmer, and Nicole naturally found herself kneeling down.

"I don't know. Please tell me."

Nicole looked up at him and thought to herself how strange she was.

She had detested Raul until just a moment ago, her feelings firmly hurt by him. But now, she was... excitedly engaging in such behavior voluntarily.

Her emotions were fluctuating wildly, her composure flying away. Raul was a tempest in a teacup to her.

"You've acted so foolishly that you wouldn't know what I gave to have you."

Raul grabbed Nicole's hair and pushed her neck down. Nicole glanced up at Raul and crawled under the desk.

"Guess, Karen."

".....I really don't know."

Raul's eyes slightly crinkled with amusement.

"Think about it. But first,"

"....."

"Suck."

The command fell over her head. Nicole cautiously brought her trembling hand to the waistband of Raul's trousers.

She felt like she had become a truly bad person.

When she loosened his trousers, his manhood sprung free. Nicole opened her mouth and took it deeply in one go.

“Uh, hmm....”

Tsup, tsup, tsuuup....

Nicole’s mouth was wide open in a perfect O shape.

Her gaping mouth was swallowing his thick gl\*ns and veined sh\*ft.

She relaxed her throat, used her tongue, and without clenching her teeth....

Nicole tried to remember the technique; thankfully, it was all written in erotic novels.

Her mouth was small and Raul’s was too large, but knowing the technique, she managed to swallow it somehow.

‘But could men’s g\*nitals in books be this big? The book talks about swallowing it whole, but that’s impossible. It feels like my mouth would tear, like I would pass out from being choked....’

Nicole’s eyes widened as she thought this. At the same time, she understood why she was doing such a thing.

Saliva dribbled from the gap between her rounded lips and the pillar.

Each time his g\*nitalia entered deep into her throat, her breath caught, and she exhaled sharply through her nose.

“Haah, ha....”

It was overwhelming, but she was aware that she was doing some ‘work.’ This realization slowly came to her as focus began to settle in her hazy mind.

‘It feels strange....’

A part of Raul was inside her mouth. And depending on how she used her tongue, how quickly she moved it, Raul’s breathing changed.

It was a new form of connection, a playfulness.

Raul looked at Nicole with a slight frown between his brows. It wasn’t just his genital pillar that was hard.

Both his thighs where Nicole rested her hands were also very firm. Everything made saliva pool under Nicole’s tongue.

“Tell me.”

Raul said this while holding the back of Nicole’s head.

“You came all this way in this state?”

Nicole momentarily detached her lips and then grasped his genital pillar with her small hand, nodding as she rubbed it up and down.

“Yes... by carriage.”

“This is maddening. You need to be punished.”

Raul said, as if in disbelief.

“Suck it again.”

Why is he angry?

Nicole truly thought he was as difficult to understand as Estock. After all, Raul also had his oddities, just like any other man.

'He gets excited by me while fundamentally despising who I am....'

A woman like Karen. In a way, a woman from a lower place than herself. A woman who no one would treat like a lady.

The ambivalent psychology towards such a woman. Nicole thought that it was in those moments when he occasionally got angry that such feelings were revealed.

Consequently, Nicole found him to be somewhat despicable.

So, she stuck out her tongue long and began to suck on his thick t\*sticles, delicately poking her tongue into the wrinkled area and pushing up the pouch with the tip of her tongue.

'I can't believe I'm doing this.'

Before she knew it, her tongue, her body moved on its own. Nicole discovered a part of herself she never knew existed.

It was a first in her past life, and in this one too.

At that moment, there was only Raul.

"Ugh..."

Raul's frown deepened and Nicole savored the moment he shuddered.

Up until now, she had been completely at Raul's mercy in this respect. But she could have a bit of control herself.

“Where did you learn to do this?”

Raul placed a finger on her forehead, and with just that, Nicole stopped her tongue and spoke.

“Why have you suddenly become so good at this, huh?”

Raul said with a voice tinged with laughter.

But his hand that held her chin tightened, and Raul’s eyes darkened slightly.

At that moment, Nicole felt a primal fear that a wrong answer might lead to trouble, an emotion close to instinct.

“I learned it.”

“From whom.”

Raul’s grip grew stronger. Nicole flinched.

“...Books. And writings.”

“...Is there some kind of manual?”

A s\*x manual? Isn’t that really strange? Nicole frowned.

“It’s a book only for women. Something secret... like that... I imagined it after reading that.”

“Imagined whom?”

Is the imaginary ‘someone’ of a woman who might just be a one-night stand that important? Nicole wanted to frown.

“Of course, it’s you, my lord...”

The strength in Raul's hand gradually eased. His gaze became languid.

His m\*ember, which had momentarily subsided, was erect again, poking Nicole's cheek sharply. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Continue what you're doing."

Raul whispered as if satisfied. His hand thoroughly searched through her hair, a strange pl\*asure racing down her spine from the itchy sensation on her scalp.

This time, Nicole gently bit the tip of his gl\*ns and started making moist, small noises between her lips.

Tsup, tsuk.

As if she were sucking on a candy.

It was then.

Knock knock.

There was a knocking sound. Nicole froze completely under the desk.

Raul slowly caressed Nicole's hair.

As if telling her to be quiet, yet the touch seemed halfway reassuring.

"It's Marquis Vexstein. He has come under the orders of the royal family."

The butler's voice was heard.

"Enter."

Raul commanded succinctly.

Has this man gone mad?

Nicole was horrified, and with his m\*ember in her mouth, she placed her hands on the floor and froze.

The door opened and an elderly man entered.

“Marquis Vexstein.”

He seemed to lift his chin slightly in acknowledgment.

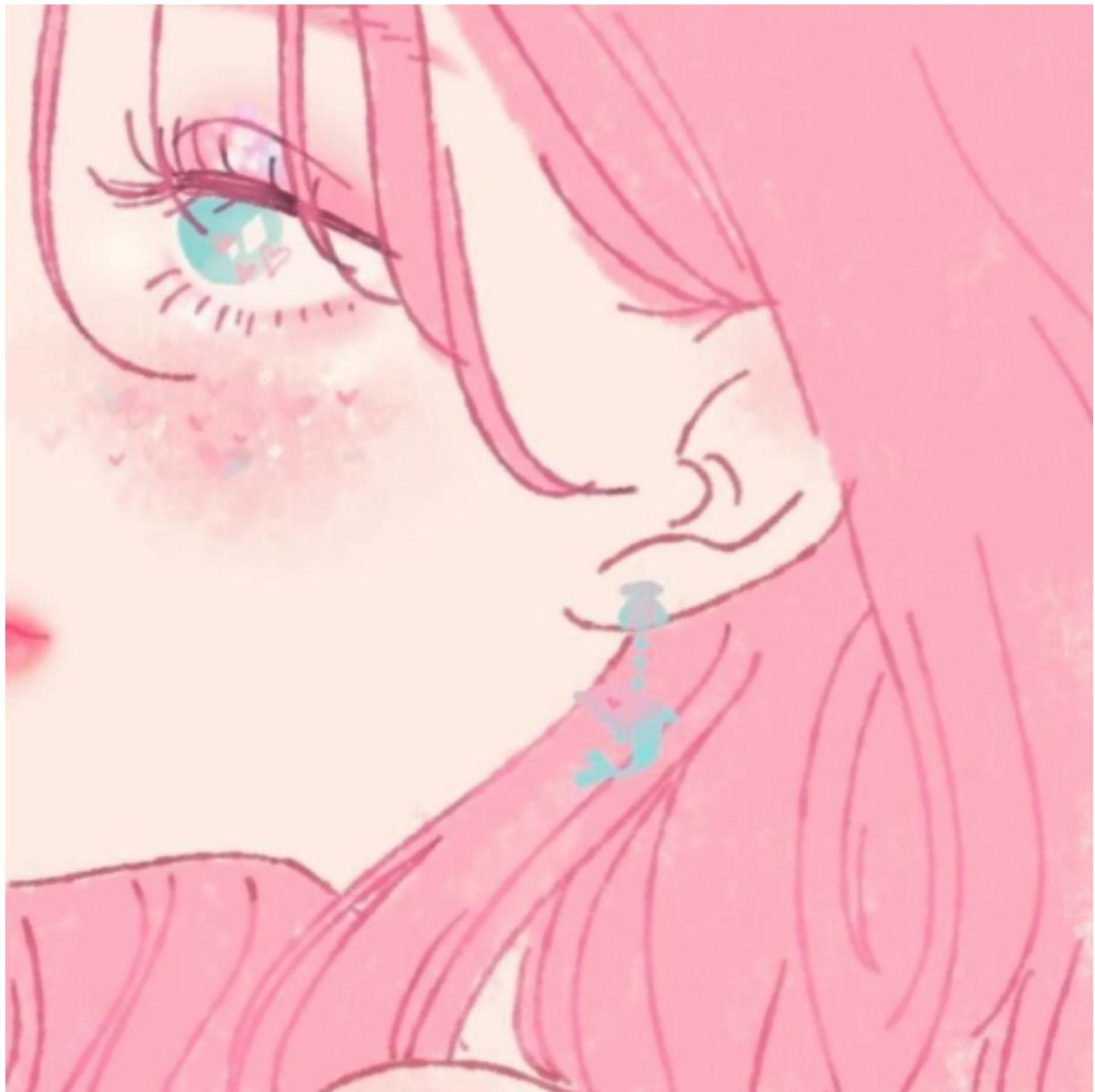
Nicole’s back began to tremble.

Marquis Vexstein was one of the royal family’s close associates and one of the high officials in the court council.

‘What am I going to do if we’re caught.....’

Strength entered Nicole’s hands resting on Raul’s thighs. Raul simply pressed down on the back of her head.

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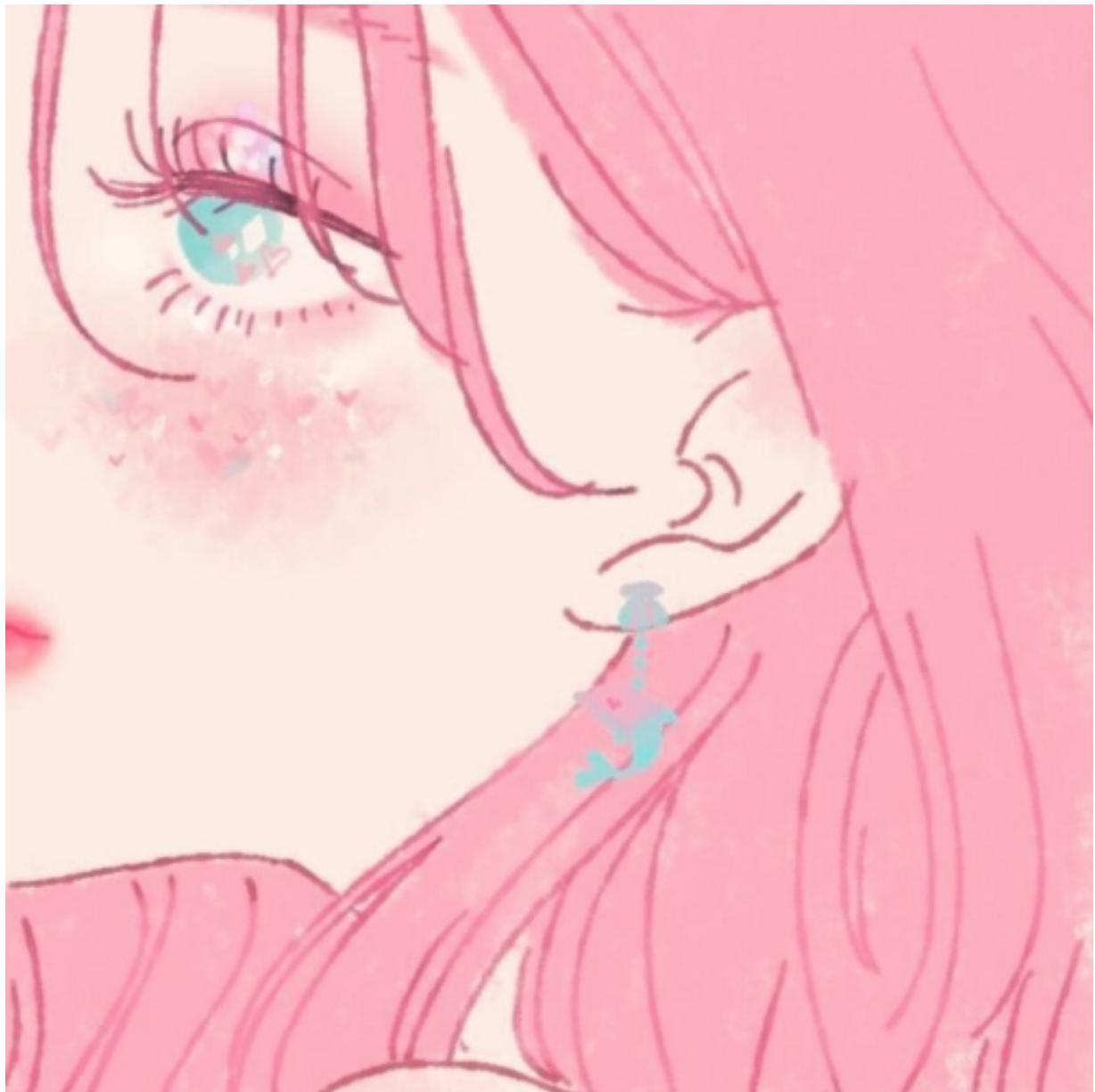


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# Chapter 129 - R19

“The royal family will grant permission for a major crackdown on drug dens. We hope this will cleanse the disgrace of the royal house.”

Marquis Vexstein conveyed the letter and statement from the royal house. Raul furrowed his brows with an arrogant expression.

“Do not worry, it has already begun. Have you forgotten that I hold the greatest authority over the capital’s security? It’s disappointing to hear you speak as if you’re assigning a novel task to a stranger.”

Raul gently caressed Nicole’s hand with his index finger. Nicole’s hand was placed on Raul’s thigh.

Marquis Vexstein was angry and fell silent. Nicole, beneath the desk, also felt the heavy atmosphere.

‘Marquis Vexstein... a close vassal of the royal family?’

And there Nicole was, in front of the royal family’s spokesperson, sucking on Raul’s... thing.

Nicole, taking notice, began to move her head back and forth again. Now one of Raul’s large hands was on his thigh, the other near her shoulder. She saw his veins stand out in the hand gripping his thigh from the force he was applying.

“Is this incident really a coincidence?”

Marquis Vexstein said.

"Of course it's inevitable. There is a murderer, isn't there?"

"There is also such a thing as indirect murder."

"This is not the time for a talent in deduction. Better go stick that heavy backside in one of the royal family's golden rooms and meditate; isn't that what you're good at?"

Marquis Vexstein, unable to say anything, gave a perfunctory bow and left. His steps were rough.

"Uh, hng, aah..."

Nicole barely caught her breath. She had been so tense that she couldn't even breathe through her nose at will.

Then, the butler came in and briefly reported on the subjugation of the drug offenders.

"Lock the door and leave."

Raul ordered the butler, who seemed to have noticed something amiss.

"Yes, Your Grace."

The butler answered accordingly, closed the door, and left. Raul pushed back his chair and moved away.

"Uh, hmm..."

Before she knew it, Nicole, with silver drool at the corner of her mouth and a hazy look in her eyes, looked up while holding his thing in her mouth.

Pre-c\*m flowed from the tip of Raul's m\*mber.

"You endured well."

Raul smiled faintly. Then, without any mercy, he grabbed Nicole's head and began to move it back and forth.

From her mouth to her throat, a thudding sound was made as the club-like g\*nitalia penetrated.

"Uh, hmm, ugh... tsup, tsuup..."

Lewd and explicit noises continued to resonate from within Nicole's mouth. She gasped for air and clenched her small fists tightly.

"Open your mouth wide and let go."

Raul commanded. Nicole did as she was told. Raul pushed the chair completely back and stood up to approach Nicole with her mouth open.

Then, with his gloved hand, he rubbed his g\*nitalia vigorously two or three times and ej\*culated precisely onto Nicole's tongue.

The cloudy s\*men flowed to the tip of Nicole's tongue, then trickled down her throat to the upper part of her chest with a plopping sound. It had a fishy taste but surprisingly wasn't d\*sgusting. It was just bizarre and hot. Once again, her whole body began to feel itchy and warm up. Am I becoming a pervert? Nicole thought.

"Huh, ah, haah... Ah..."

"Haah..."

Raul let out a sigh mixed with a sense of emptiness as he looked at Nicole, then straightened his clothes.

Nicole thought his grimacing expression was cruelly sexy.

“Can you swallow it?”

Raul caressed Nicole’s head with a gentle voice. Nicole shook her head. It was still too much for her.

“It seemed like that.”

Raul smiled faintly. He took out a handkerchief and offered it to Nicole.

Nicole spat out the s\*men. For a while, she was so stunned that she couldn’t move. Raul flipped the handkerchief to the clean side and gently patted her mouth with it.

“You should get up. Are you going to live there?”

Nicole felt a tingling in her legs as she got up.

Once again, a wave of embarrassment rushed over her...  
Nicole silently looked up at Raul.

“So. Is there anything else to report?”

Raul asked tenderly as he brushed Nicole’s hair aside.

“Yes...”

Nicole answered softly. Raul lifted her up and sat her on the clean desk.

Nicole reached out her hand. As Raul approached, she wrapped her arms around his neck as if enchanted and whispered in his ear.

“I felt strange while writing a letter. Inside my body... it’s tickling and continuously being stimulated... I wanted to

touch myself.”

“.....”

“But I’m not skilled at that...”

Nicole realized she was babbling. Heat rushed to the top of her head.

“So, teach me. How to pl\*asure myself.”

Nicole said. Raul immediately laid Nicole’s body on the desk.

Nicole was not flustered. She just looked at him with wide eyes.

“Ha, really...”

Raul muttered a curse under his breath.

“I have no idea where a woman like you rolled in from.”

“It was the Grand Duke who brought me here.”

“Raul.”

He commanded shortly.

“...Raul.”

Nicole said softly. Raul lifted her nightgown up and then slowly placed his hand on her knee.

He bit off his gloves with his teeth. Nicole watched this with a dizzying feeling.

“Huh, ah...”

For reasons unknown, Nicole was already drenched below as she sucked on Raul's thing.

"Wait, I'll clean it."

Raul tapped Nicole's lower abdomen and said. Nicole waited while he washed his hands with disinfectant and water in the adjoining small room.

His thoroughness sometimes sent chills down her spine. The devil who might devour her at any moment was a rational man.

A small sound of water came from the faucet. Raul soon returned.

"I've changed my mind. Come here."

Raul commanded, and Nicole did as she was told. She also knew the layout of Raul's office.

'I don't remember well, but I must have been here a few times in my past life.'

There were times like that. Her married life in the past life became increasingly unclear as Nicole went mad, and sometimes bodily memories filled in those blanks first.

As if she knew about the small space attached to this office now. Raul had a large dressing room in his bedroom.

However, because he often had to leave on a busy schedule without a moment to spare, there was another dressing room in his office as well.

It was a space close to a small waiting room, where one could prepare by changing clothes or fixing up their

appearance. The space was connected by a small door.

‘This door, I’ve seen it in my past life.’

Nicole experienced a sort of semi-delirium amidst her trembling body and excitement because she saw an illusion of herself with Raul from her past life.

(I’m sorry for my clumsy hands still. But... this color suits you well.)

The her in the illusion said so. Nicole, on tiptoes, met Raul’s eyes and shyly adjusted his tie. The thin tie made of soft silk, not a cravat, would become the latest fashion in a few years.

‘Now I’m even having delusions.’

Nicole was astonished. This wasn’t even a memory from her past life.

Clearly, she felt sorry for not having been good to Raul. She had failed to perform any of her duties as the Grand Duchess. She should have at least said one warm word.

It seems she’s seeing such illusions because of that regret.

Right before the divorce, Nicole was almost out of her mind, so she couldn’t have spent such tender moments with Raul.

“What are you thinking about?”

Raul was watching Nicole in front of a small washbasin made of porcelain with an amused look. The basin was white with beautiful patterns etched in blue glaze.

The area around the washbasin was dry except for a few specks of water. This small room was clean to the point of

being obsessive. The floor around the basin was tiled, and next to it lay a clean carpet.

"Just... uh, I was thinking about what happened earlier."

Nicole's voice had become slightly husky. Her throat stung.

"Come here."

Raul said. Nicole followed him further into the room.

One side of the room was occupied by a very large mirror. Framed in gold, it was an ancient piece, fully attached to the wall. The luxurious craftsmanship suggested it was certainly one of the Grand Duke's heirlooms.

Raul smiled with his eyes.

"Don't freeze up. You said you wanted to learn."

As if enchanted, Nicole approached him, lifting her silk pajamas while looking into the mirror.

Delicate down and a slightly swollen mound appeared, along with softly parted lower lips.

"Did you really come without wearing any underwear?"

Raul asked as if he couldn't believe it.

"Yes. So please don't tear it this time. It would be troublesome if I have nothing to wear when I go back."

Nicole answered calmly, but her ears were red. Raul embraced her from behind.

He laughed silently. Nicole could tell by the warm breath on her nape. He still had a masculine yet strangely pleasant

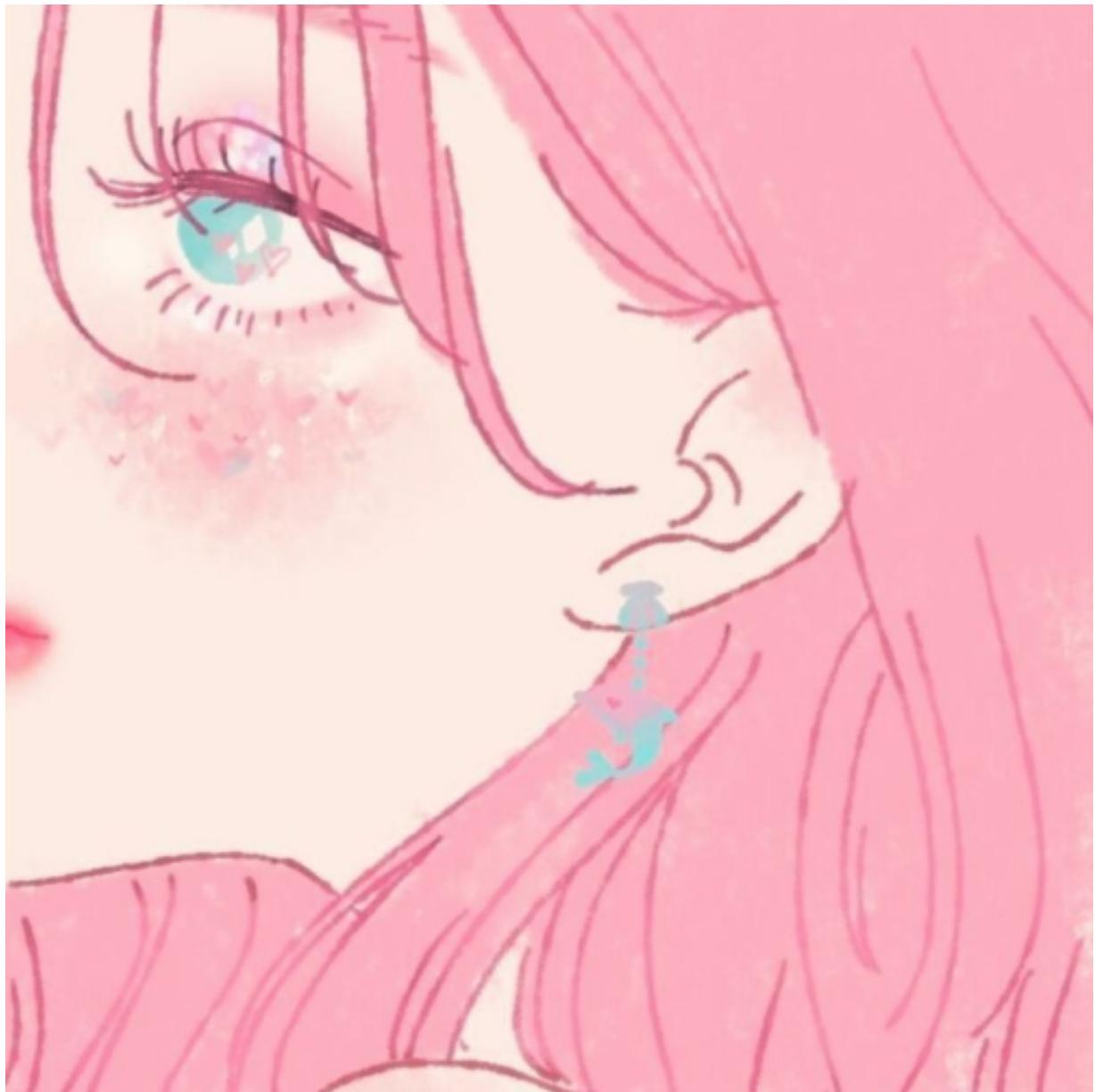
scent.

“Don’t sit down until I give you permission.”

Raul said. He turned his hand to slowly stroke Nicole’s collarbone. His other hand warmed her lower abdomen, gradually moving downward.

His two fingers naturally slid towards her mound.

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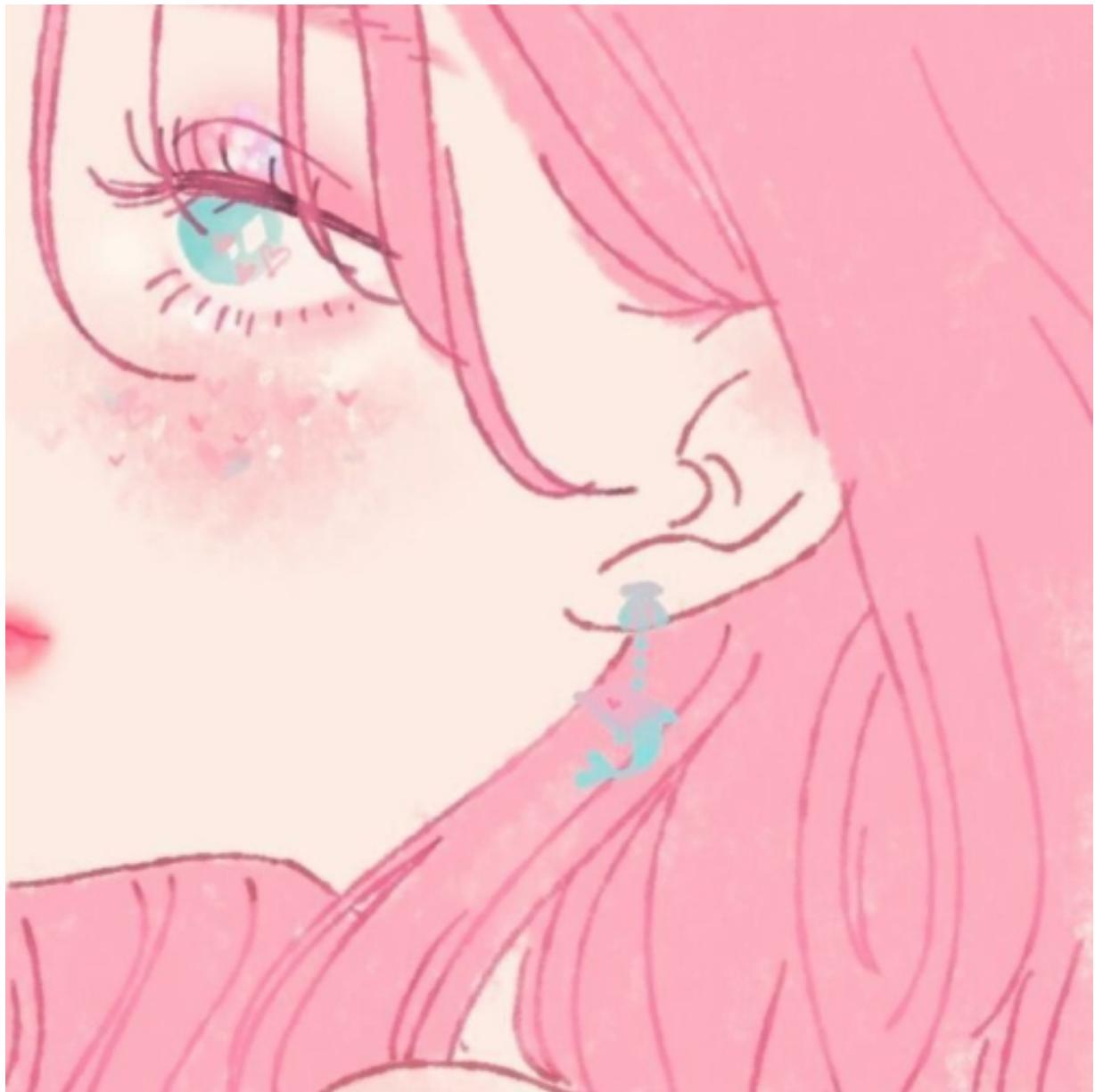


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# **Chapter 130 - R19**

Raul's index and thumb fingers naturally parted her l\*bia.

Her slightly swollen, thickly folded area was revealed.

As the cool air touched her, excitement was added, and strength gathered below her belly. Nicole had already been sufficiently aroused by sucking on Raul's.

Clear ar\*usal fl\*id stretched out, and clear water had already flowed down to her thighs.

Raul seemed to chuckle again. When Nicole looked up, the smile had vanished from his face, leaving only desire.

"It seems a bit swollen."

"It has subsided now....."

Nicole said softly.

Raul pulled at her shoulder part and completely removed Nicole's nightgown. She became n\*ked in an instant. The silk nightgown fell to the floor, and Nicole awkwardly stepped out of it completely.

Encouraged by her cooperative behavior, Raul stroked Nicole's v\*lva as if he were scratching a puppy's chin, as though in praise.

"Huh, ah....."

Nicole's body shivered. A tingling pleasure flowed through her.

Raul's body, firm like a pillar, supported Nicole's entire body so she wouldn't fall backward.

"You touch it."

Raul whispered in Nicole's ear. His lips grazed the hair beside her ear and the area around her neck.

"One by one, slowly, as if tracing over."

Nicole nodded slightly and obeyed.

The large mirror reflected Nicole's embarrassed figure. Nicole formed her fingers into a hook shape and slowly traced the shape of her labia majora.

"You're quite obedient. It would be nice if you only acted this way."

Raul said. Even his sarcastic words sounded lewd now. Raul's second finger lightly flicked Nicole's clitoris, then started to rapidly stroke and tease it as if pushing it up.

"Uh, hmm, hnn....."

Strength drained from her waist down to her legs again. Nicole felt her hips tense up and begin to shake slightly without her realizing.

"Come to your senses."

Raul said. He seemed amused.

"Touch your chest with one hand."

Nicole complied. Her pale br\*asts were very soft and voluminous compared to her body, feeling heavy in her hand.

Raul's soft baritone voice controlled her from beside her ear.

"Knead it like that, then slowly touch the center. Just like that. You can stroke and pinch gently without hurting yourself."

Nicole did as he instructed. Now it felt like the inside of her pelvis was melting away. Her n\*pples, kneaded and lightly pulled by her own hand, became erect and sensitive.

Raul kissed Nicole's nape and head as if to praise her.

"Now lift your head and look."

In the mirror stood Nicole, not a thread on her. Her white body, with few blemishes, was flushed pink here and there as if she had been drinking.

Raul was lightly embracing her from behind. She examined Raul's expression in the mirror with an uneasy look. He appeared aristocratic and indifferent as usual.

However, if one looked closely into his eyes, they were full of refined excitement. He was enjoying himself. And for Nicole... he was aroused.

"Not there. Keep moving your hand."

Raul said, putting pressure on the fingers resting on Nicole's lower abdomen. Nicole watched herself in the mirror as if mesmerized.

Her l\*bia majora, layered like petals. Nicole tugged and rubbed inside as Raul led her. From the reddened flesh, fl\*id incessantly sprang forth.

At that moment, Nicole felt unbearably embarrassed and simultaneously overly stimulated.

“Now insert your finger.”

Raul said. Her knees kept trying to bend, but Raul prodded them to stay in place.

Raul lifted one of Nicole’s knees completely. Now everything from her delicate p\*bic hair to her red and swollen legs spread wide, to her slightly protruding red and pointed cl\*toris was exposed.

It became an even more embarrassing sight, with nothing at all hidden. Nicole didn’t know where to look.

“In your hole, quickly.”

Raul said. Nicole hesitated then reached out with a trembling hand and stroked around the hole with her second finger.

“Ah, umm...”

Nicole arched her head back. Now Raul began to gently caress her b\*ttocks and the area around her waist.

Her entire body’s senses prickled at the touch. Nicole slowly inserted a white finger into the hole, her body trembling with a strange sensation.

“Huh, uh, euh...”

“How is it?”

“I’m not sure. It feels different from when you do it.”

Raul pressed his lips to Nicole’s hair.

“It will start to feel good.”

Squelch, squelch.

Nicole nodded her head. She moved her fingers carefully. In truth, it wasn’t incredibly pleasurable. Her fingers were clumsy, and she just felt tense and embarrassed.

However, there was one reason for the constant w\*t sounds from the friction between her finger and her hole. It was Raul’s gaze looking down on her.

“Huh, uh... uh...”

As she continued to probe, a subtle excitement began to build. There was a warm sensation in her lower body and a small stirring in her belly.

Nicole’s hips began to shake slightly and quickly. Raul’s rod-like g\*nitalia now rose fiercely, pressing into Nicole’s body as if jabbing her.

‘How have you not had a lover until now while being this perverted?’

Nicole thought even at that moment.

“You did well.”

Raul said. He caressed the back of Nicole’s hand as if it were adorable. Then he made her remove her hand.

“Huh, uh, aah...”

Raul inserted two of his fingers into Nicole. Then he overlapped them to make a cross shape, lifted them up in one swift motion, and began to stir inside Nicole's body.

Squelch, squelch.

'Ah, his fingers, too much... His skill...'

Nicole leaned her whole body against Raul with disjointed thoughts. She was overwhelmed by a pleasure incomparable to before.

If a moment ago the sensation was like a constant tingling thread, now it felt like a snake-like pleasure slithering through her lower abdomen.

"Hold on."

Raul commanded, and understanding his words, Nicole grabbed the mirror and turned her head.

Fortunately, the mirror was a very solid object attached to the entire wall.

It was strong enough to support the weight of both of them.

Raul lowered his body and found the angle. He made Nicole remove her hand to grab lower and then sufficiently hunched her body over.

"Ha, uh, aah!"

Raul surged from behind in one swift motion. Nicole pressed her cheek against the cold mirror and let out a loud scream.

Thump, thump! Smack, smack!

Soon, her ragged breath was overtaken by pleasure, and she found her body shaking uncontrollably. Nicole's chest touched the cold mirror, feeling strange. Her knees kept bending.

"You have to stand firm. Only then can I continue to thrust. Got it?"

Raul whispered. As he spoke, he momentarily loosened his waist and then began to thrust rapidly.

Up to Nicole's raised buttocks. All became one wave, violently shaking.

Raul pulled up her collapsing body. Nicole felt a greater heat than before from the vigorous movement of the organ below.

"Ah, hah. Uhng..."

The sensation of being forcibly twisted and opened had lessened. Instead, what remained was the thrilling sensation of a flesh rod pushing into her sore lower half.

Like gasping for food when hungry. This time, a more urgent sensation gripped Raul. Nicole clutched the hand holding the mirror and sobbed at the thrusting member.

"You need to look forward."

Raul whispered. Nicole lifted her face.

Raul grasped Nicole's waist and pulled her back slightly. Nicole stared straight ahead.

'This is me.'

Nicole saw her reflection in the mirror.

Her slightly wavy golden-brown hair was all tousled, covering half of her face.

The area around her eyes was flushed red. Her eyes were w\*t, and every time she took a deep breath with her mouth slightly open, the tip of her pointed tongue peeked out.

Thump, thump.

Raul began to move again. Each time he moved, from her curving waist to her pelvis and tightly pressed thighs, her flesh quivered.

Watching those lewd movements made the sensations in her lower half feel even more vivid.

“Hah, ah, ah...”

“Can’t you see well?”

Raul stopped moving his hips. Without realizing it, Nicole tensed her toes and pushed her hips towards Raul.

A protest as if to ask why he stopped. Raul grimaced as if he couldn’t believe it.

“You’re being impatient.”

“Uh...”

“I’ll show you well.”

Raul said.

‘Just before c\*mming, why.’

Nicole turned to look at him with a slight sense of regret.

“It’s going to be fun.”

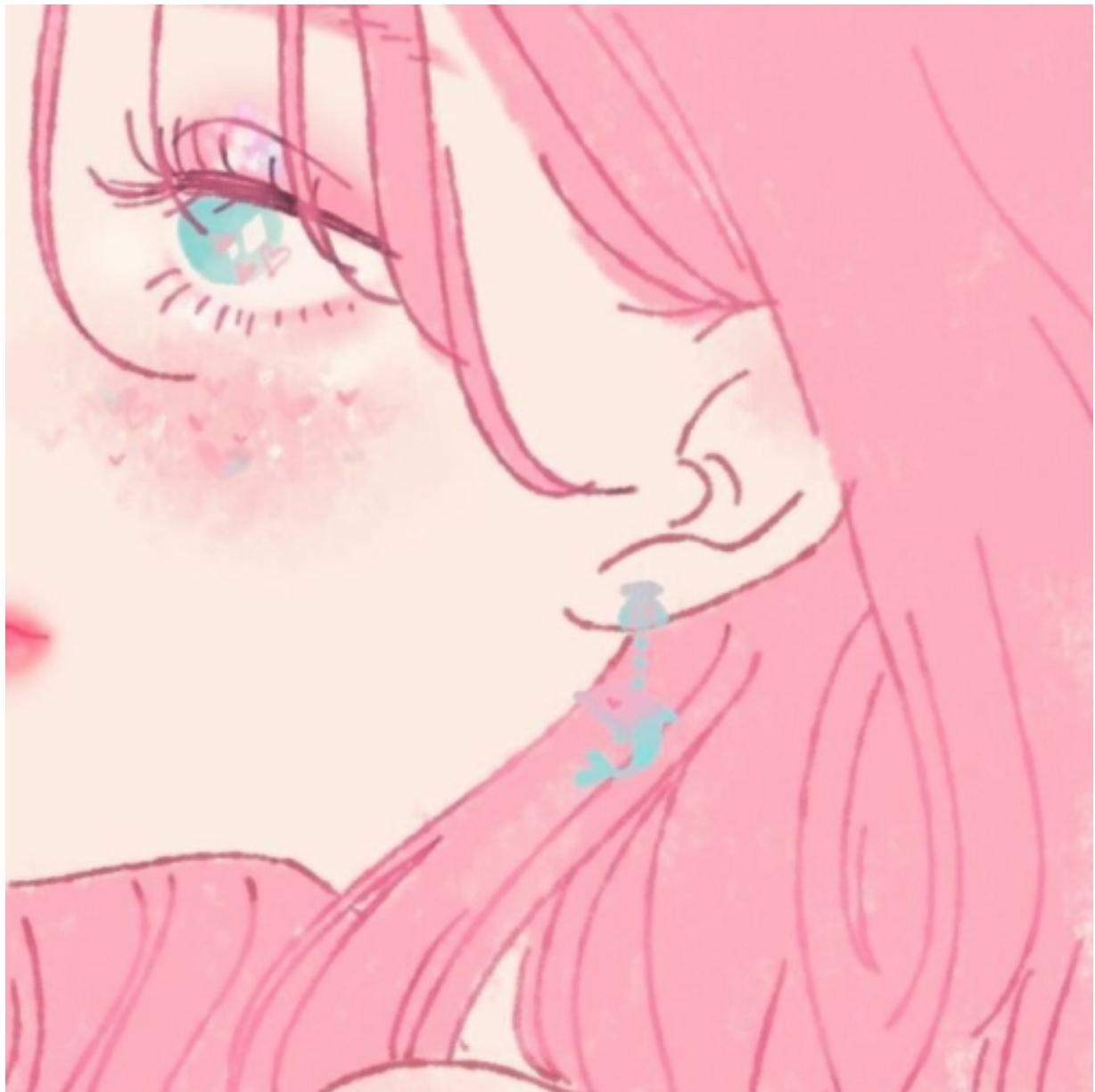
Raul said. He made Nicole sit on the floor.

The floor was half tile, half soft carpet. It was very clean. Raul embraced Nicole from behind. It was the same position as before.

“Uh, ah, aah!”

Nicole cried out in surprise because Raul had sat her down on his knees just like that.

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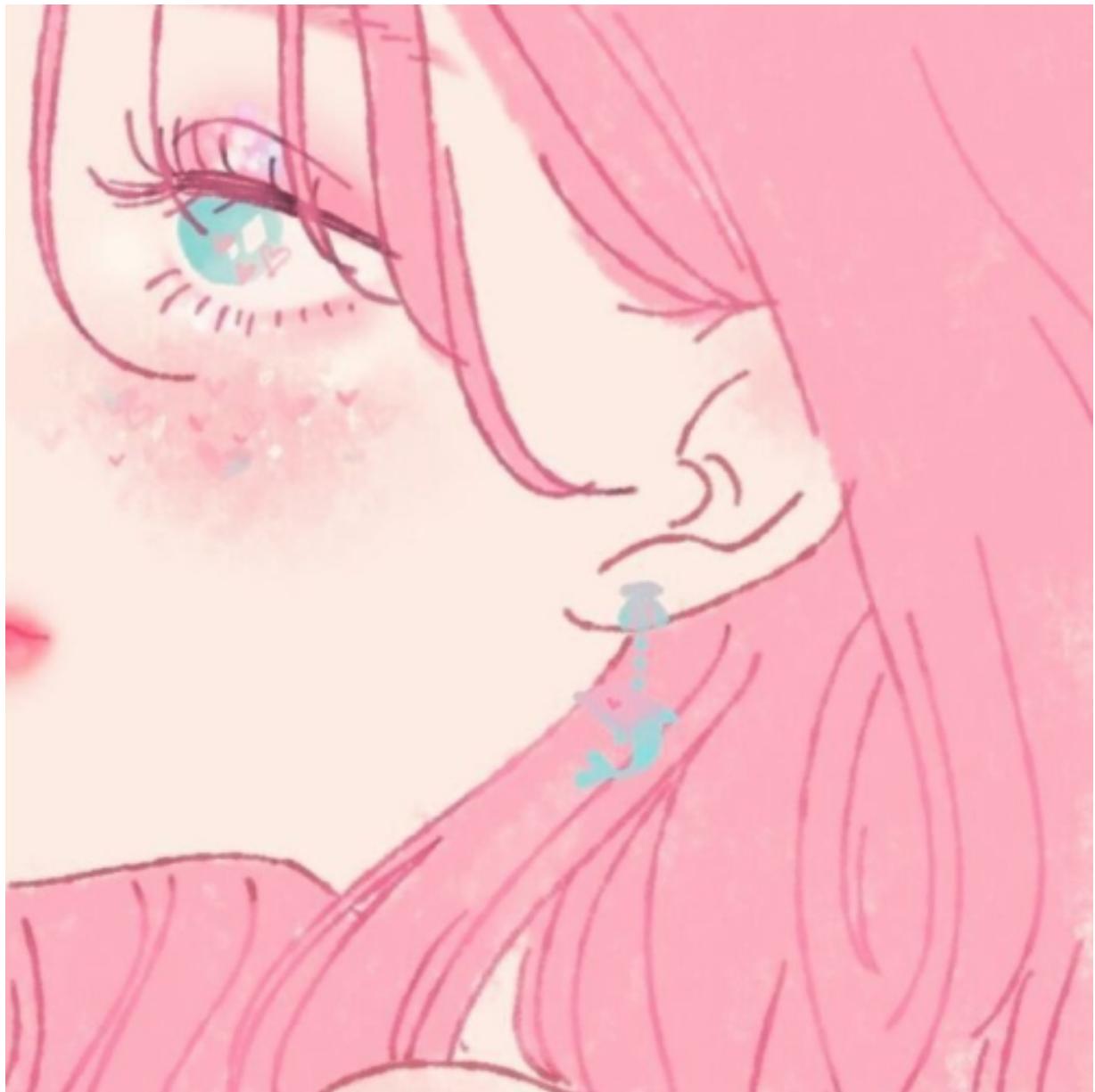


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# **Chapter 131 - R19**

With a throbbing sensation, Raul's erect m\*ember entered Nicole. Nicole leaned on Raul's back and took a breath.

"Spread your legs as wide as you can."

Nicole was now sitting on him, showing her back to him, and followed his instructions with hazy eyes.

Then she noticed her reflection in the mirror. Her legs were stretched out in a straight line.

Her spread entrance was also fully revealed. The intersection where they were joined was exposed.

A lewd sight was revealed through her widely opened lower lips. It showed her swallowing his throbbing m\*ember with his veins visible.

His dark red m\*ember looked ominous, and her body was a light pink color. Her folds clung tightly to Raul, with her entrance distorted, and moist hairs stuck next to it.

"Ah, ungh. This is... too much..."

Nicole made an involuntary gasp, and a thick saliva gathered at the corner of her mouth again.

It was the most lewd and stimulating thing she had ever experienced.

“Isn’t it fun? This is human instinct. It’s our true nature.”

Raul whispered as he embraced Nicole from the front and began to move his hips slowly.

“Huh, ah, ungh!”

As he started to vigorously lift his hips from below, the sight of w\*tness splashing vigorously from their joined area came into view.

Thump, thump, thud!

Nicole’s opening began to greedily entwine and pull him in. His dark red m\*mber disappeared into her body, then reappeared soaked in fl\*id. Her chest began to shake more violently now. Beads of sweat scattered into the air.

His firm thighs and the twitching movement of his arm muscles sketched a perfect form at a consistent angle, drenched in sweat.

“Ah, that feels so good. It’s so... More... More... Raul...”

Nicole couldn’t help but murmur, unable to take her eyes off their quivering bodies in the mirror.

“Say it louder.”

Raul said. She complied.

“Raul, ah. I like it, Raul...”

Raul gently turned his waist and then started to thrust upward forcefully for the last time.

Nicole, feeling the cl\*max, buried her face in his shoulder.

"Ah, ah, ugh...!"

As Nicole reached her cl\*max, every inner wall of her body clung to him, tightening and releasing a moan.

Even the steadfast Raul shook for a moment at that instant, nearly falling backward. Soon his robust body enveloped hers from the front and held her tight.

"Next time let's do it facing each other. Then you'll have to do it properly."

Raul chuckled as he looked at her exhausted self. With a playful voice, Nicole only replayed the words 'next time' in her head.

Could there really be a next time?

"Yes."

Nicole nodded again and Raul rose from his place. Nicole's legs gave way and she collapsed in front of the mirror.

Raul, glancing at her figure, began to straighten his clothes.

"Come out. Or rest there if you wish."

What an annoying man. Even as she was unable to regain her senses from the aftermath of her cl\*max, Nicole glared at him.

She knew that once the pl\*asure was over, Raul had no need to attend to Nicole. The rising sense of disappointment was a kind of instinct.

With trembling hands, she grasped her fortunately unripped shabby nightgown. It seemed she would have to wear thicker clothes next time.

\* \* \*

Nicole calmed herself a bit after washing her hands at the sink. Raul, looking neat, dried his hands with a towel and straightened his clothes before sitting at the desk.

"Are you going to punish me for not sending a note?"

Nicole asked.

"Are you asking for forgiveness?"

"...Yes. It's still a violation of orders, after all."

"It's strange to see you pleading so obediently."

Raul chuckled.

"It seems torturing royalty excites you. I should have done so sooner."

"Duchess Lisbeth?"

Nicole tried to hide her expression, nearly laughing at Raul's joke. Instead, she looked down and spoke softly.

"I judged too hastily, as if criticizing your decision to release Duchess Lisbeth... I won't make such a mistake again. Next time, I will show better insight."

By the time she finished speaking, Nicole had calmed down considerably. If not for her flushed ears and cheeks, there were no other signs on her body.

"Not bad."

"..."

“If you’re curious about something, ask.”

Raul was in a good mood, displaying a generosity of spirit. Nicole, having many questions herself, did not refuse.

“...How far have you planned ahead?”

“Hasn’t Dagger spilled everything?”

“Even though I’m close to Dagger, there’s no Sith stupid enough to spill secrets. The same goes for the Shadows,” Nicole replied quietly.

Raul nodded agreeably.

“I’ve said it before. The value of a royal’s death.”

“...Since Duchess Lisbeth is royalty, you couldn’t have killed her carelessly.”

“I had to retrieve something, right?”

“You speak just like a loan shark,” Nicole added quietly.

“If I were a loan shark, that woman got off easy. Her death settled everything.”

“Rumors say that the culprit... Mr. Snake tortured Duchess Lisbeth.”

“Even the most reckless ones wouldn’t dare torture royalty; they might silently assassinate, but not torture.

And that was one of the most animalistic and simple rules. Nicole suddenly shuddered.

Before they knew it, it was late at night. The moonlight shone on them through the window.

“That’s impressive. Honestly... I was surprised.”

“Do you feel a bit better now?”

“I didn’t wish for Duchess Lisbeth to end up like that. I hoped she would receive proper punishment.”

“But you hated drugs, you know.”

Nicole stopped speaking. To be exact, it was Isabel she disliked.

The lives of many people Isabel could have ruined in her past life. And the knowledge of YvesChapel that she would have sold as if it were her own. Nicole hated those misdeeds born from Isabel’s desires.

“You can be pleased as my Shadow. The streets will be fairly clean, after all. It’s better without things like drugs.”

Raul spoke as if he had already become bored. Nicole suddenly became curious.

“Is there a next time?”

“What next time?”

Raul asked.

“I mean... That is... Next time, something like earlier...”

It might not have been a very attractive action, but Nicole didn’t want to play the game of probing each other’s hearts any longer tonight.

“There’s no carriage. Go to my room and wait. Where do you think you’re going looking like that?”

Raul said expressionlessly.

“Then...”

Nicole’s eyes widened.

“The ‘next time’ will start soon.”

A faintly cruel smile appeared on Raul’s lips.

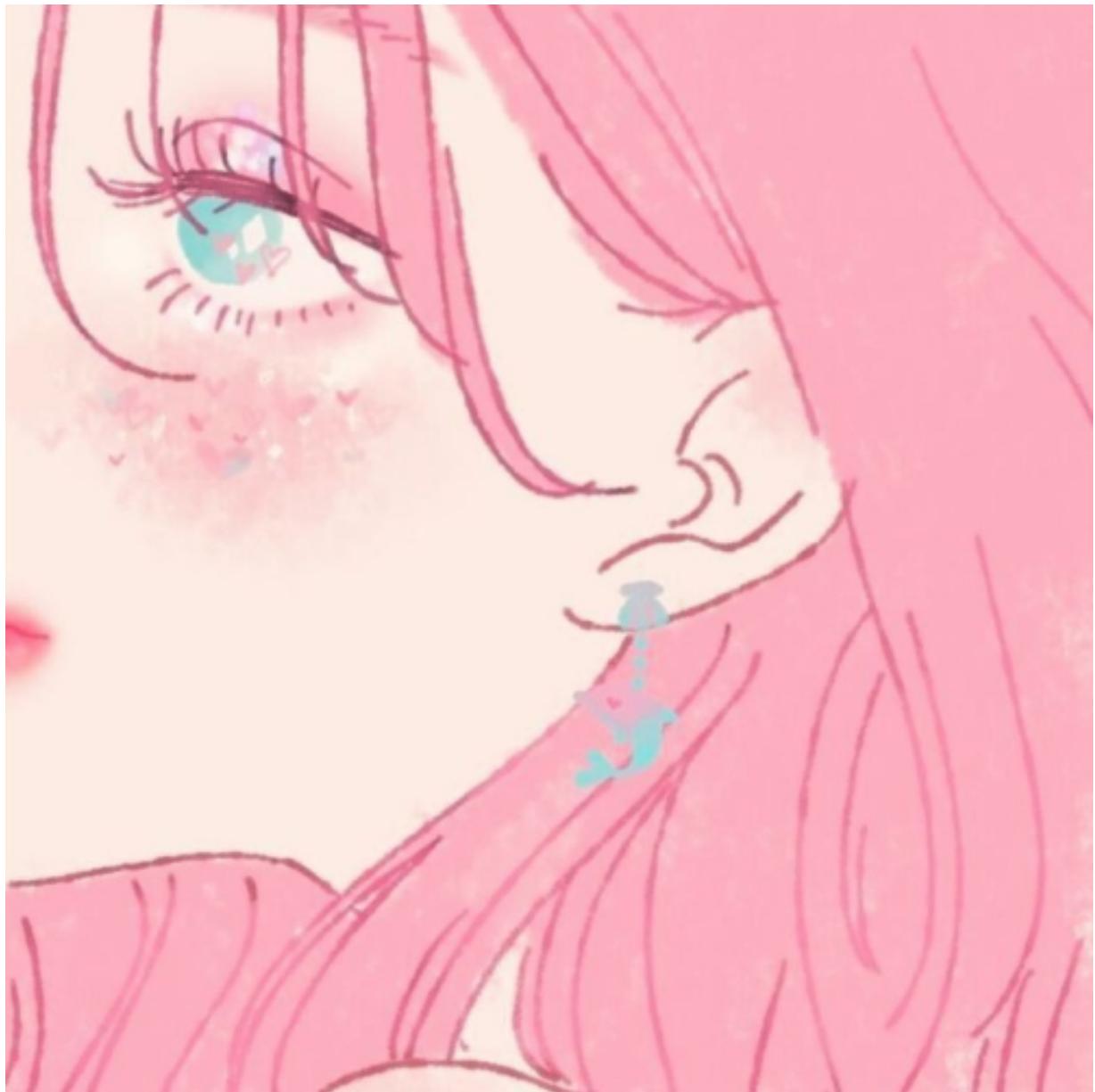
“After my Siths finish the hunt. Then it’s time for a party.”

Nicole’s hand twitched.

A light shiver raced through her body. Nicole looked into his eyes and nodded slightly.

In any case, this man was an irresistible poison.

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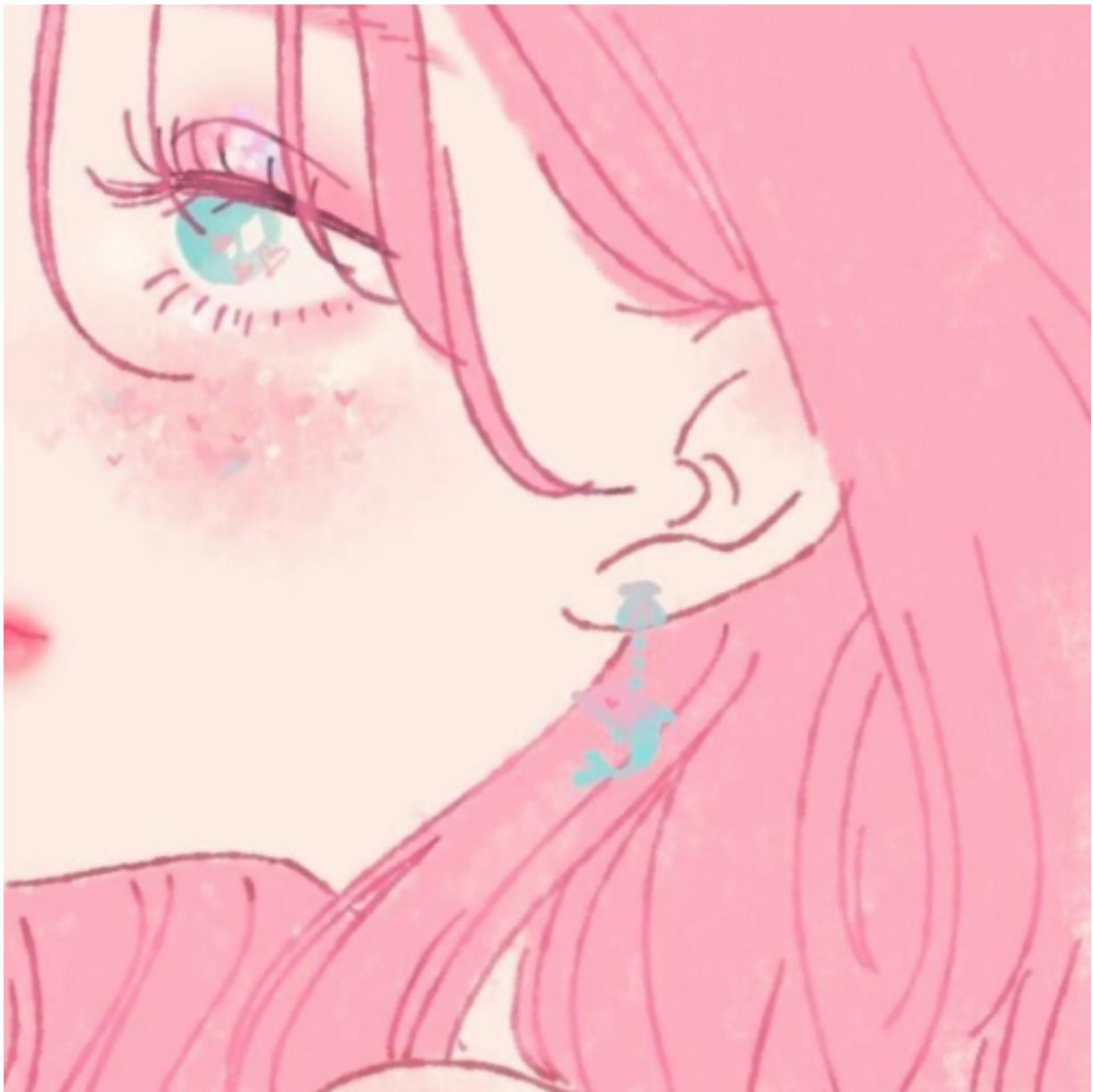


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# Chapter 132

Nicole followed Raul's instructions without a word of argument.

Raul truly sent her to his bedroom.

The silent maids of the Grand Duke's household approached to prepare Nicole's bathwater and new clothes.

In her past life, the maids of the Grand Duke's household often changed. Nicole, who couldn't properly fulfill the role of a duchess, was an object of contempt, so the maids did not treat her with courtesy.

Back then, she would get angry about everything, but now she understands.

'The Grand Duchess is not an ordinary position. In a way, those who sit in high places have their own duties. If you can't fulfill them, you have no right to complain about being treated like a fool. I wasn't a Grand Duchess worthy of respect.....'

Now, things that are easy to understand seem so difficult back then. Nicole immersed herself in the bathwater and let out a small laugh.

"Shall I help you remove your makeup?"

"I'll do it myself. Just leave the facial cream and the ointment for swelling in the dressing room, and I can handle

everything else. No need for a dress; just bring any simple nightgown that I can wear."

Nicole spoke quietly to the maids. Her tone was like that of a noblewoman, but not arrogant. The maids looked at each other and then bowed to Nicole.

Nicole glanced to see if she had acted too naturally, but the maids had already disappeared.

The prepared nightgown was made of very smooth and white fabric, and it smelled very nice, reminiscent of an old tunic-style nightgown. Exhausted, Nicole fell into a short sleep. When she woke up, it was just before dawn, with a deeper darkness settled in. Raul had already entered the bedroom.

"What is that garment?"

"Is it not allowed for me to wear this?"

Raul scanned Nicole from head to toe. She shrank under his intense gaze.

"That's the pajamas I used to wear in my boyhood."

".....Is that so.....?"

This confirmed that no woman frequented the Grand Duke's residence, whether family or lover.

If there were frequent visitors, at least one set of guest pajamas would have been prepared.

Raul sat on the bed. Nicole recoiled under his peculiar look. Sensing the atmosphere turning strange, she spoke cautiously.

"I have a question. What did you give to buy my first night?"

"You still don't know?"

Raul said, sitting beside Nicole.

"I bought something no one else could have."

".....An opportunity? Or something that can be gained with power....."

"Indulgence, favoritism."

Nicole felt her heart drop. She blinked and looked at Raul, her throat feeling parched.

"Something like a personal feeling?"

"Utterly personal."

Like a lover or a sweetheart. Nicole tried not to entertain such thoughts, but her fingertips tingled. She didn't want her pounding heart to be discovered.

Raul brushed Nicole's hair aside.

"I never thought my boyhood pajamas would be stimulating for me, it's intriguing. I suppose we should take that off and talk."

Raul leaned over the bed. Nicole couldn't resist at all. And she thought.

Something had definitely begun. Even if it wasn't affection. A bond between Raul and herself. A relationship. Another beginning.

\*\*\*

After the sun had risen. At a time unclear whether it was morning or noon, Nicole had a formal meal with Raul.

The large dining room meant for the Duke.

It was the first time Nicole was having a meal with Raul in her right mind there, and she was a bit surprised.

After that, Raul did not let Nicole go for three days. During that time, she was confined.

Of course, since she didn't particularly resist, it wasn't forceful.

During that time, Nicole spent her hours on Raul's bed. Raul, tireless, seemed determined to satiate all his desires as he devoured Nicole.

'The hunt' was underway, so Raul was extremely busy. He stopped by from time to time to hold Nicole.

On the second night, they did nothing and just slept in bed. Nicole was already completely drained of energy.

'Wouldn't it make my head strange if I continued like this?'

On the third day, there was not a single part of Nicole's body that Raul's teeth and tongue hadn't touched, and her entire body was so bruised it was embarrassing to look in the mirror.

After returning from the bathroom and tidying her clothes, Nicole recalled how Raul came in late last night and held her twice. She trembled uncontrollably until she eventually fainted, unaware of what Raul did while she slept.

When she woke up in the morning, she felt absolutely no strength throughout her body.

'I'm losing all sense of time.....'

Now, her swollen lower body didn't even hurt anymore.

Nicole worried if she would never be able to return home like this. It would be troublesome if all her freedom was taken away. She had been scheming various things behind Raul's back up until now.

'What could have happened to Isabel, to Estock?'

Since the Sith's hunt had begun, Estock must have had to return as well. In such cases, Estock was supposed to secretly convey the situation to Nicole's maids and ask them to tidy up afterwards.

Nicole's two maids were well-trained spies, so they would have kept Isabel and Leos securely locked up.

'More importantly, I wonder if Estock spared Isabel's life? It would be problematic if Leos was put in too much difficulty.'

Deep in thought, she had not slept well the previous night, which made her look sharp, and her face was sulky.

Raul's large hand suddenly approached and pressed against Nicole's lips. His muscular body twisted.

"What's with that expression?"

"...When will you send me back?"

"Well. Do you want to go back?"

Raul seemed very pleased to have Nicole. He lifted his chin and laughed.

'He seems like a man with a great desire for exclusivity.'

Nicole clicked her tongue. She thought she should indeed doubt Raul's past.

A man with such strong s\*xual desire couldn't have lived quietly until now.

He must have had a woman hidden away, even if she didn't frequent the Grand Duke's household....

But Nicole was too tired to argue with imaginary lovers in her head.

"Being by my side isn't good for getting what you want, is it?"

Raul whispered softly.

"If I keep doing this, trapped in a room, my mind will break.... I want to return to my hard-earned home."

Nicole added softly.

"You could come to my house if you wish." (Raul)

"A concubine is such an existence. A being that waits in the house provided by the master." (Raul)

Raul stood up from his seat. He really... looked too pleased.

His spiteful words were irritating. He gave hope like the other night and then immediately drew a line.

'He's not wrong. And I shouldn't think beyond my station. Right now, I am... not the Grand Duchess. Nor can I be.'

Becoming his concubine was her goal, but she didn't like hearing it from Raul's mouth.

And Nicole felt a bit sad about her willfulness.

"It's an honor to even be a concubine, better than being a nobody."

Nicole spoke as calmly as she could, jokingly. And she marveled at how easily she now said things she didn't mean.

"Let's go out. Let's have a cup of tea in the city."

"Me? With the Grand Duke...?"

Nicole felt a bizarre sensation.

A woman of unknown origins, let alone nobility. No man would openly walk around with such a 'concubine' in broad daylight.

Perhaps he wouldn't know if she just wanted to stay holed up in a cubbyhole and engage in lewd acts.

"Should I tell you to go out alone like this and have some tea?"

"Usually... I would rather do that. Especially someone of high status like the Grand Duke."

Raul narrowed his eyes slightly and smiled.

"Yes. But your master of such status doesn't do that. Get up and get dressed."

Soon after, the maids of the Grand Duke's household came and simply dressed Nicole.

She put on minimal makeup and new clothes. It was a light pink dress with no particular features.

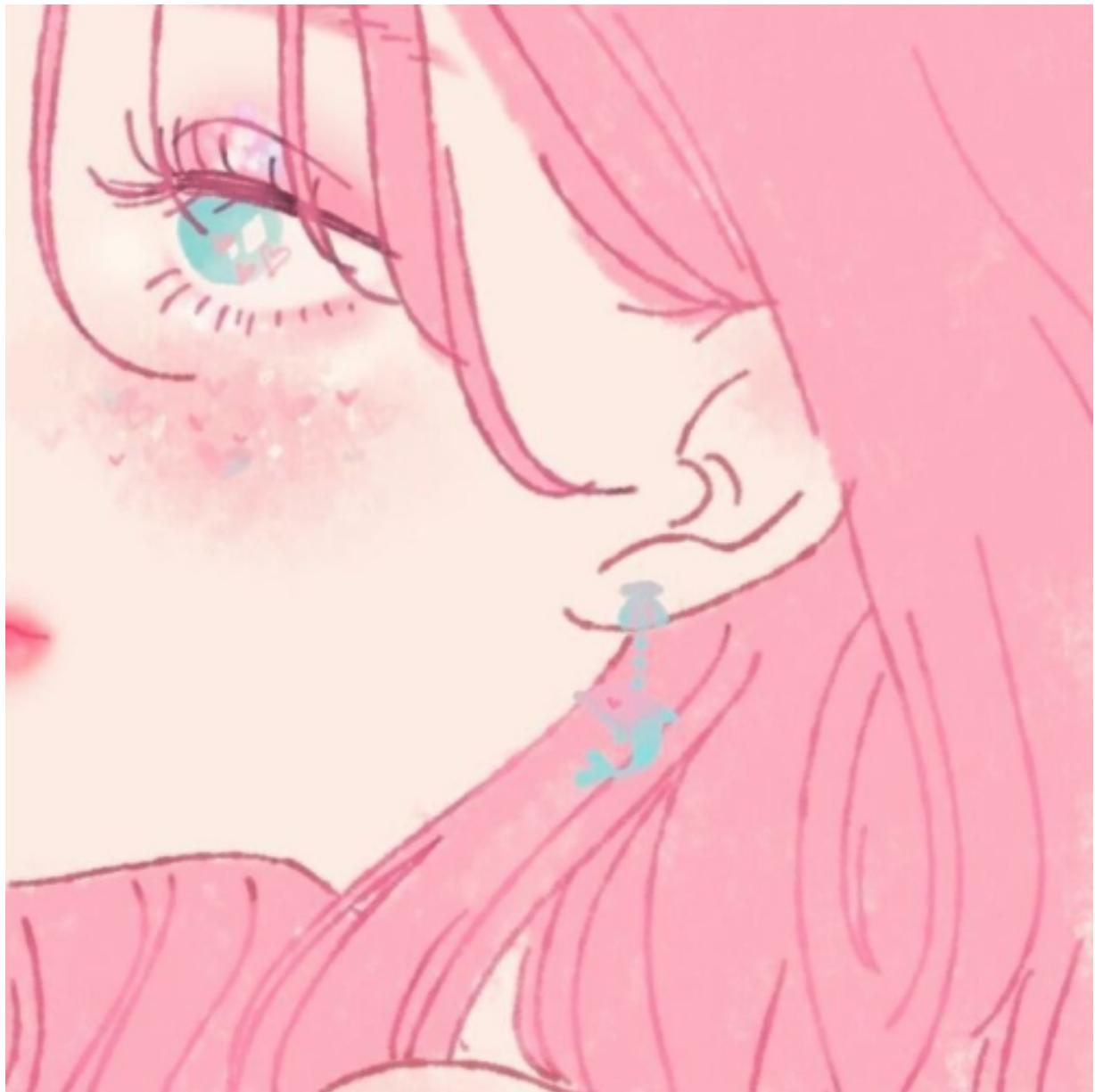
However, the material was top-quality silk. Nicole felt the dress. Coincidentally, she knew what this dress was.

It was one of the old dresses from the Grand Duke's warehouse. Undergarments or nightgowns couldn't be recycled, but well-made dresses were a kind of legacy and property. Therefore, the butler brought a few of these dresses, altered them so Nicole could wear them.

It seemed that a skilled maid had altered it in the past few days. It was very clean and in good condition.

Since the makeup was light, the dressing up was quickly done.

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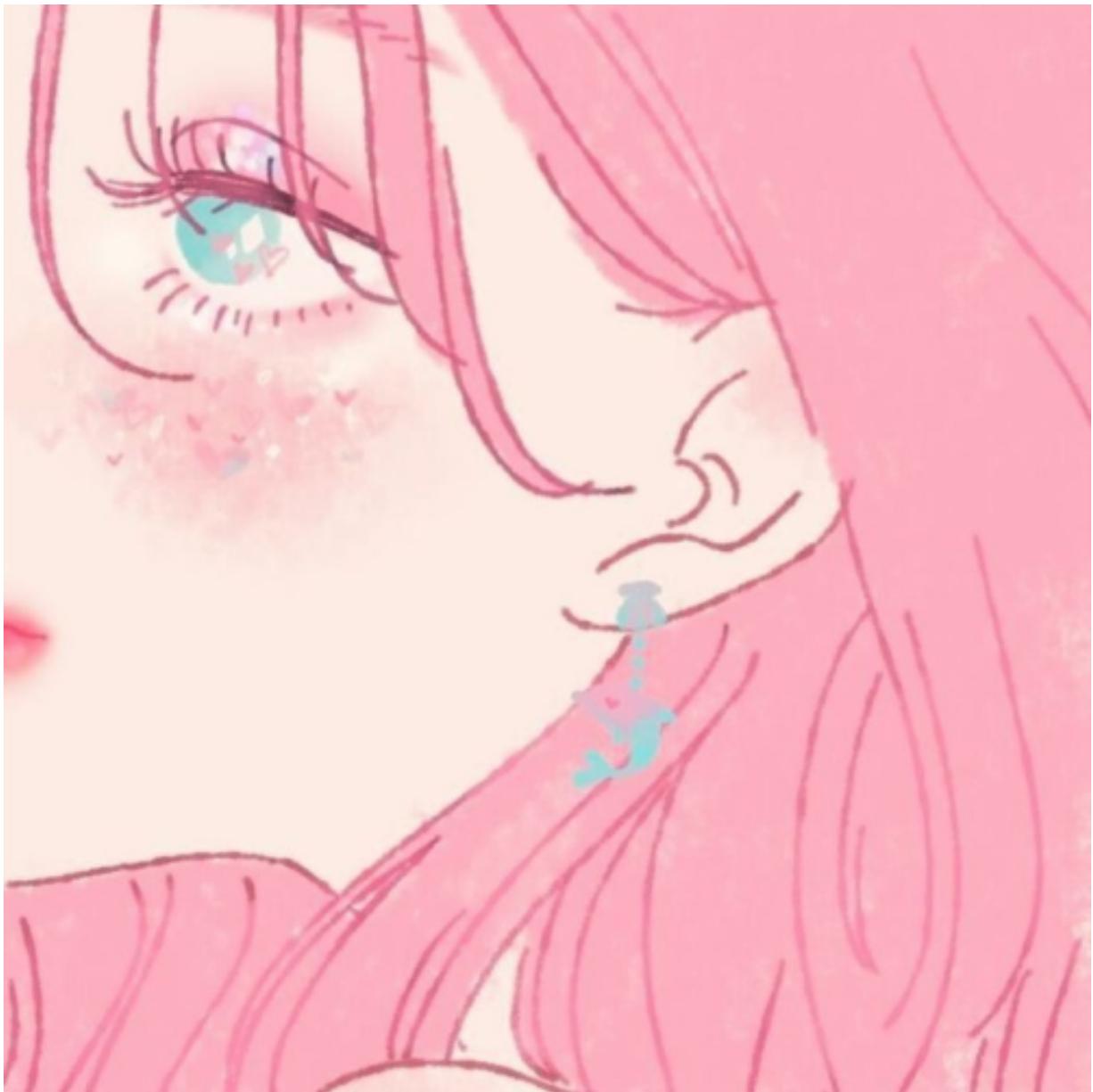


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# Chapter 133

Raul took Nicole to an unexpected place.

It was a large building in the middle of downtown. On the first floor, there were large stores and cafes.

Raul passed all that and took Nicole to the rooftop of the building. There was a tent on the rooftop, and underneath it, a white table was set.

As the curtains fluttered faintly, Nicole was momentarily dazzled. The table was set with tea food and tea.

“Where is this place?”

“It’s one of the buildings owned by the Grand Duke’s family.”

“And what’s so special about it?”

“It has a great view.” Raul said.

Now, Nicole could roughly understand what Raul meant. It meant that he often came to this rooftop to enjoy the view. It was his personal space,

“It’s certainly a good spot for observing people.”

Nicole walked to the end of the rooftop and observed. Then she returned to the table. There was a pleasant shade beneath it.

Upon sitting down, she felt a tingling pain in her lower abdomen due to not resting for several days. And on the way here, Raul's playful touch had left her body languid. It was the kind of sensation that rushed over her belatedly as soon as she sat down.

As she took her seat, the servants filled her teacup.

Raul had been drinking brandy since midday.

"People are gathering in the square. Is there an event today?"

"You'll find out soon."

He doesn't speak without purpose. If he says you'll find out soon, it will indeed be so.

Nicole smirked every time this happened. She had come to know her husband, whom she had lived with for years in her past life but never really knew, much more easily in this life after a few nights together.

His manner of speech. His elegance that inevitably shows when eating food and drinking tea. And when he sips a sweet drink and slightly furrows his brow. When his tongue briefly comes out to lick his lips.

When she looked up and met his gaze, Nicole sometimes felt as if her breath would stop.

And Raul must have noticed Nicole looking at him.

'Besides, he's someone who mustn't show any weaknesses. Like now.....'

Nicole pretended to drink her tea and looked away. Raul smiled faintly with his eyes. She decided to change the subject.

“With so many people around, how did we manage to come here so easily? On days like this, carriages are jammed everywhere you go.”

“I know a shortcut. It’s a bit complicated, so it gets bumpy.”

Nicole had to grasp the carriage wall and breathe every time it shook violently because Raul would raise his finger up at those times.

In the end, this wasn’t a good question either. Nicole pressed her thighs tightly together.

“When... will I have to go on the next mission? Can I take a month off?”

“Are you hoping for the former or the latter?”

“Both. I want to do both rest and work sequentially.”

Raul put down his teacup and spoke leisurely.

“If you don’t want to, you don’t have to work anymore.”

“What?”

Nicole was taken aback.

“Someone who sleeps with me doesn’t need to work. You can be under my protection without it, and I will support you. It’s also my responsibility.”

This time, she was truly at a loss for words.

“So, you mean I should retire and just play the role of your consort?”

“I said it’s my duty.”

It meant that it wasn’t a coercion.

“Am I not a capable agent? Won’t you miss me if I’m gone?”

Raul took a small breath and went, “Hmm.”

“Wildcard.”

“What?”

“You won’t fail, but there’s some risk when you’re used. You handle things flamboyantly, just like me. It’s thanks to us having the same master.”

“If that’s what you think, then why did you spend three days with me?”

“I’m worried you might cause another incident while this is being settled.”

Nicole was momentarily at a loss for words. It was true that she had caused many incidents.

Anyway, getting upset over being protected and paid seemed like falling for Raul’s provocation. Nicole didn’t have the energy to get angry over trivial matters. But...

“What I want to be is not just a woman to warm your bed.”

“.....”

“There are many substitutes for such a person, aren’t there?”

“Do you think so?”

“There are many substitutes for simple pleasures.”

“Yes, you are a pleasure to me. Perhaps simple.”

Nicole sometimes felt like a fool in front of Raul. Becoming a mistress, sharing pleasure.

It wasn't all forced upon her. But it hurts to be openly treated as such a partner. At the same time, she learned detachment and resignation.

'If this is growth, then it's growth. Understanding one's place isn't a bad thing.'

On one hand, she thought Raul deserved a better partner.

She hoped that someday he would find someone who genuinely cared for him, unlike her past self.

Nicole put on a businesslike expression to hide her melancholy.

“I... I like this job. It has given me a status, coming from the slums near the holy site. I've obtained a house and food with my abilities. If you don't fire me, I want to keep working. And a useful partner is more attractive than a useless one. That way, you won't lose interest in me.”

She thought he would be pleased with her words, but Raul frowned strangely.

Just then, a loud noise began to come from the square. Nicole got up from her seat without being able to further check Raul's expression.

‘This is...’

In the center of the square, imperial soldiers clad in silver lined up.

Gallows.

Today was the day of the execution.

"I should have a drink for Mr. Snake."

Raul approached, a glass of alcohol in his hand.

The execution proceeded quickly. Mr. Snake and his followers were led out in a line to the gallows.

When Mr. Snake stood in the center, his face became more visible. He had no particular features, except for a grim impression and a dark face.

'Someone much prettier than that man is more poisonous. After all, they sent Mr. Snake to the gallows so quickly.'

Nicole narrowed her eyes and looked at 'much prettier' Raul.

"Want a drink?"

Raul asked tenderly. The shouts of the people continued from the square, as if someone was about to be hanged.

The roaring madness dulled Nicole's mind. She shook her head slightly.

"I'll pass on the memorial drink. A villain must depart as a villain."

"That's a sensible thought."

Raul said.

"Anyway, it's good to be with someone on such a day, isn't it?"

"So, did you usually enjoy these days alone?"

"Not enjoy, but let's say I commemorated them. I'm a villain, unlike you."

Raul drank the brown liquor. The elaborate crystal glass sparkled in the sunlight.

"And I was always alone."

But now, he was facing her like this.

Nicole refrained from asking its meaning. He's a bad man, toying with her, picking her up and putting her down.

"Not bad at all. No matter where I am, the finest tea leaves always please me."

Instead, Nicole decided to act nonchalant. It seemed to please Raul, as a smile formed at the corner of his eyes.

Ah, this is cheating. She felt like she was seeing his smile much more than in her past life.

Was it so easy to be deceived by this man's smile? Nicole thought under the stinging sunlight.

"It's a fine day."

Raul said. People were hanged on the gallows. The square erupted with screams and shouts as if it would burst. Amidst the frenzy, Nicole thought.

'Ah, it's not a romantic day,' she mused. But for some reason, her mind began to falter little by little in front of this

man. She kept trying to find peace and happiness.

Feeling like she was becoming a villain just like Raul, Nicole didn't watch the execution to the end and returned to her table to rinse her mouth with tea. Her palpitations didn't stop even after she finished a cup of peppermint tea.

\*\*\*

"Miss!"

"Are you alright? How is your body?"

Nicole was finally granted permission to return home that afternoon.

As soon as she arrived at the mansion, two pale-faced maids and other employees rushed out to greet her.

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

Nicole went to the dressing room with only Redia and Bluea.

"Was there any trouble?"

"There's quite a bit of news actually."

Bluea brought over some notes. The first note was sent by Estockk.

- I've been urgently summoned due to the Mr. Snake hunting case, so I'll be off to fight. Isabel will be sedated for a few days in the meantime, so do not disturb her. I will deliver the detailed interrogation report soon. However, the interrogation is not yet complete. Isabel turns out to be more venomous than expected. Currently, Isabel is undergoing the brainwashing process as you wished. If she's forcefully awakened now, she might go insane earlier than

planned, so shh, no interrogating her on your own without me knowing! Leave the tasty bits for me. Promise♡

- Estockk

“He really has a bizarre personality...”

Besides, Leos seemed to remain imprisoned, with Bluea coming and going daily to check on him.

Isabel reportedly slept for three days straight, exhausted from whatever Estockk had done.

“Is this person named Leos doing alright?”

“He asked for books, so I brought some. And pencils and notebooks too. I gave him specially made pencils so he couldn’t harm himself.”

Bluea glanced around before speaking. Since he wasn’t yet confirmed as a criminal, leniency was needed. Nicole tolerated Bluea’s unilateral actions.

“You did well. Keep watching him.”

Next, as expected, was a letter from Grace. It was filled with concern for her.

The last was... something Nicole hadn’t anticipated at all. It was a message from Raul.

Specifically, it was those ‘messages.’

“Is this all... from the Grand Duke’s residence?”

“Yes.”

Redia said with a slightly anxious face. Nicole quietly looked at the boxes piled up in the dressing room.

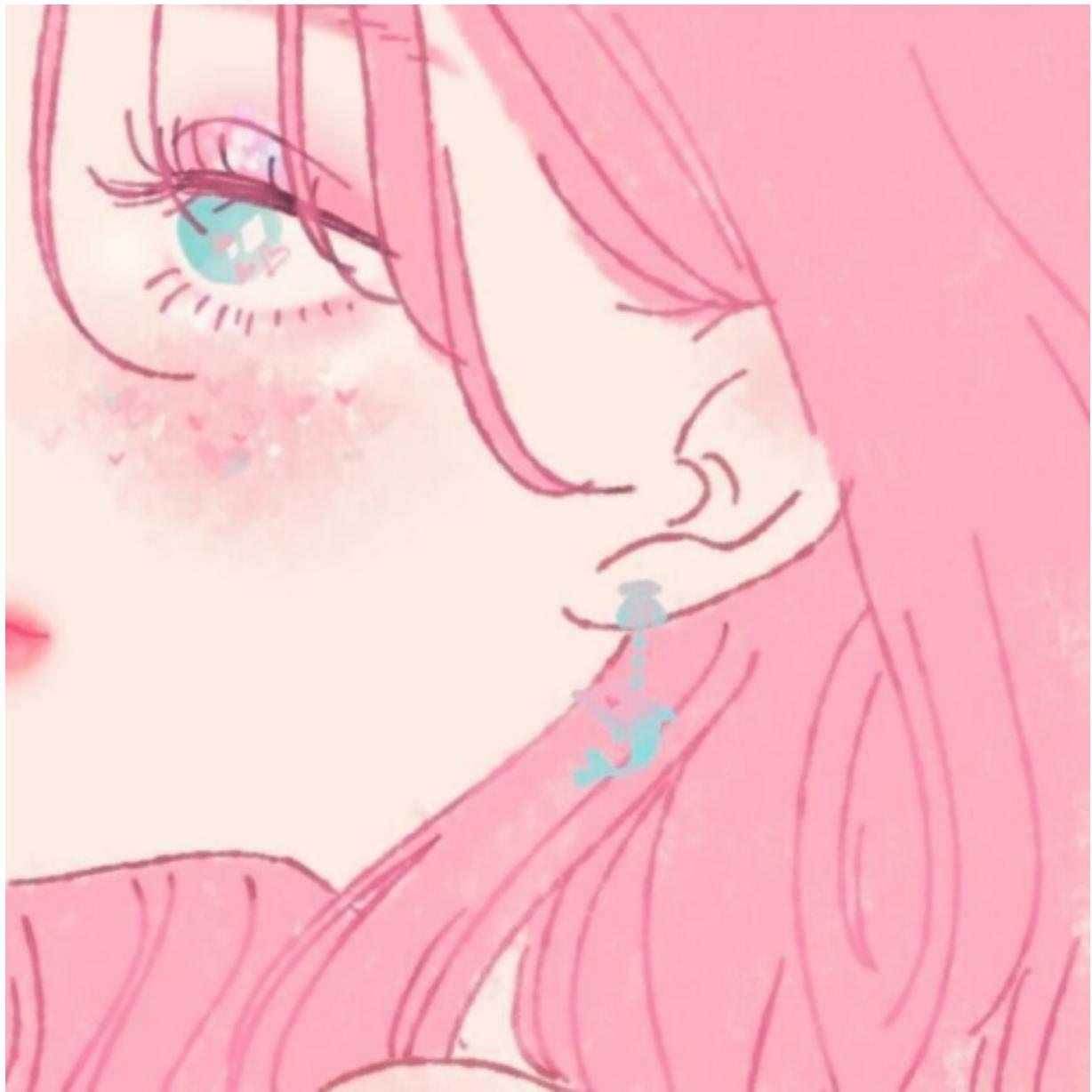
'What is this?'

Raul had sent various boxes enough to fill the dressing room. She felt a chill again.

'He wouldn't do something for no reason, would he?'

Nicole had the maids bring the small boxes first and then opened them one by one.

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# Chapter 134

Two maids quickly took out the valuables from the gifts and placed them on Nicole's bedroom table.

Click. The wooden gift box opened.

"Oh my, in the world."

Bluea's mouth opened wide enough to hurt her jaw. Nicole looked at it for a moment.

'Pretty.'

Even if one was not interested in jewels, one could not be unaware of the value of these items.

The luminous sapphires, emeralds, and the pearls that were strung out next to them.

The most impressive among them was a necklace made of threaded diamonds, a net necklace in the shape of an inverted tiara.

"Does it even have a name for the piece?"

The diamond necklace was named 'Pure White Light'. The sapphire piece was named 'Memory of Blue Light'.

Although the names were mundane, the name tags adorned with the artisan's handwriting appeared impressive at a glance.

“I learned from Lady Grace. Jewels with the artisan’s name on them are something special...”

Redia said softly. However, none of them were jewel experts, so they could only think that these beautiful items must be very expensive.

“It’s like opening the queen’s treasury. Lady Grace never mentioned that the Grand Duke was such a generous person.”

“I doubt it.”

Nicole flipped over the card. Even by the handwriting, it was clear that Raul hadn’t written it himself.

(Be careful as it can be traced if sold, and keep it well. Looking forward to seeing you wear it in person next time.)

It was a business-like note. It seemed likely that the butler had written it on his behalf.

“Could we possibly find out the year of manufacture for this item?”

“Hmm, ah! Here under the box is the date of the artisan’s signature. It was made five years ago.”

Nicole nodded at that.

“Have you heard from the scouts what he did today?”

“The scouts will be coming soon. I’ll ask them. It’s not difficult to find out about the Grand Duke’s official movements since his face is well known,”

Bluea nodded.

Like all spies, Nicole also had Leafs who brought her information. They regularly delivered the information Nicole collected along with the evening newspapers.

The competent Leafs were already well aware of the movements of the capital's celebrities. The child that Nicole had been frequently summoning these days was no exception.

Soon, Bluea returned.

"Starting today, the Imperial Palace's hunting festival begins. They say there will be a night hunt tonight. He went to the government office for a while during the day and then directly to the Imperial Palace. There's been no talk of him visiting a jeweler these past few days."

If a person like Raul had gone to buy jewels, the whole capital would have been abuzz just once.

If he bought jewelry himself, it would undoubtedly mean there is a woman who would receive it, and Raul was a celebrity of the capital and a groom-to-be whom everyone admired.

Nicole gazed at the beautiful jewels. Like these jewels, that man was a shining existence.

Something Nicole could never possess. Something that couldn't be 'socially' acknowledged even if obtained by hand.

This is another tightrope walk of power.

"Then, this is just a security deposit."

"What?"

Redia's eyes widened, not understanding her words.

Nicole had given him pleasure and would receive various compensations in return. This was one of them. Ordinary jewels might just be taken, but this is a kind of official cap and restraint. An official mark.

"If the jewel is this expensive, its history will be traceable. Probably it was in the Grand Duke's warehouse. It will be convenient for the mistress to later claim 'relations' with high officials or royalty."

Unlike a wife, there will be no official record left by the mistress. So, the man has two options.

The first is to debut the woman in society.

The second is to give a very luxurious gift that leaves a history. A mansion. The family's heirloom. And jewels, etc.

Of course, the former is more advantageous. Just by debuting in society as a very important person's mistress, that woman becomes special.

'Of course, his reputation would plummet. Just by being the mistress of a powerful man, she becomes a woman whom anyone can insult on the street.'

Nicole did not want that, and Raul would feel the same. Nicole was still his spy. There was nothing good about a spy's face becoming known.

So there was only one option left. He had handed over a few of the treasures he had played with in the Grand Duke's warehouse.

“If it’s a deposit, isn’t it money that will eventually be returned?”

Redia said with a confused look on her face.

“Yes. He said not to sell it. Besides, treasures like these would be hard to sell, so it probably means to wear them when desired and then pass them on to a successor when one comes along.”

Nicole said calmly. In fact, it was more likely to be returned to the next Grand Duchess rather than a successor. But she was not sad because it was an anticipated event.

“Even if this jewel is considered a deposit, what does that have to do with the Grand Duke’s actions? What about the year of manufacture?”

“If the year of manufacture is this year, then he probably went and chose a designer product himself. But that’s not the case. It’s an old product and since he didn’t go to the jeweler today, we can guess the meaning. Why today? Because I’ve been spending time with him these past few days until today, so he wouldn’t have had time to go to the jeweler before.”

Redia and Bluea looked nauseated.

“We can’t know the thoughts of those high up.”

Nicole thought calmly. If they really knew the person Raul was, they would faint.

With that person, one cannot afford to be careless with a single thought, nor can they lightly make a move. That’s the kind of person he is. Never an easy opponent, nor has he become easier.

“It’s not romantic, is it?”

“It’s just brutal.”

“It seems not just anyone can seduce such a man.”

Bluea, who reads romance novels, had a look of shattered dreams, but Redia was lively.

“So, aside from these dazzling jewels, can I take the things over here?”

In fact, aside from these ‘masterpieces’ of tremendous weight, there were several boxes of small and lovely – obviously top-quality – jewels suitable for wearing. And endless boxes of silk.

They all contained shoes, clothes, hats, and the like.

“These are clothes from the most expensive boutiques in the capital. There’s also a note attached saying that if you want any clothes in the future, you should get them all from there.”

“At least I can take this. It seems he likes women dressed in silk.”

At the same time, Nicole thought to herself, ‘Well, that figures.’

‘If that man gives a gift, it wouldn’t just end with a bouquet of flowers.’

At the same time, this was a kind of proposal.

A proposal that if she became his, he could easily provide this much for her.

Praise for Nicole taking the first step towards him, and compensation for being compliant. Things too expensive and beautiful to be simply called a fee for her company.

But to Raul, money was the lowest resource. He was born and raised in wealth as naturally as breathing.

The moment Nicole foolishly falls for him, he will lose interest.

Nicole tried to cool the heat of her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“You should write a thank-you letter.”

Redia said anxiously. Whether it was because she was well educated by Grace or because she had developed a fondness for Nicole, she had a kind of loyalty to her.

She seemed worried that Nicole might anger Raul and put herself in danger.

“Yes, I should accept it. If I refuse this and make a fuss, his interest will wane. The powerful do not desire women who diminish in the face of wealth.”

Nicole immediately wrote a brief letter.

(I have received all the items you sent. I will keep and cherish each one of them.

The jewels, flowers, and dresses are beautiful, but so is the value of the tea you provided today.)

Still, beautiful objects attracted attention. Not out of greed, but literally because their form drew the gaze of people. Nicole gazed at those jewels.

She had never seen anything so expensive before. Even in her past life as a Grand Duchess, she had never worn such things.

But strangely, as she continued to look at them, they felt familiar, as if she had seen them before. Nicole tilted her head in curiosity.

'That can't be right. I've never possessed such expensive jewels before.'

However, she did not dwell on the thought any longer and instructed that they be carefully stored away.

'With more valuables in the house, I'll need to enhance security.'

Nicole thought with a bitter smile. She wondered if she had to get used to the glamour if she were to become a mistress.

\*\*\*

Two days later, Nicole headed to the safe house.

Estockk was leaning against the door, wearing clothes that were tight but did not reveal the lines of his chest and hips as usual.

Today too, he was the owner of androgynous beauty, with his unique mysterious aura still present.

"How did the mission on Sith's side end?"

Nicole greeted with her eyes and immediately asked.

"Hmm - There was a party on the day Mr. Snake died."

"Regrettably, it seems I was not invited. I was not aware there was a party at Sith's."

"Indeed. Shadows usually do not attend official parties. It's better for spies to not reveal their identities."

Estockk added naturally.

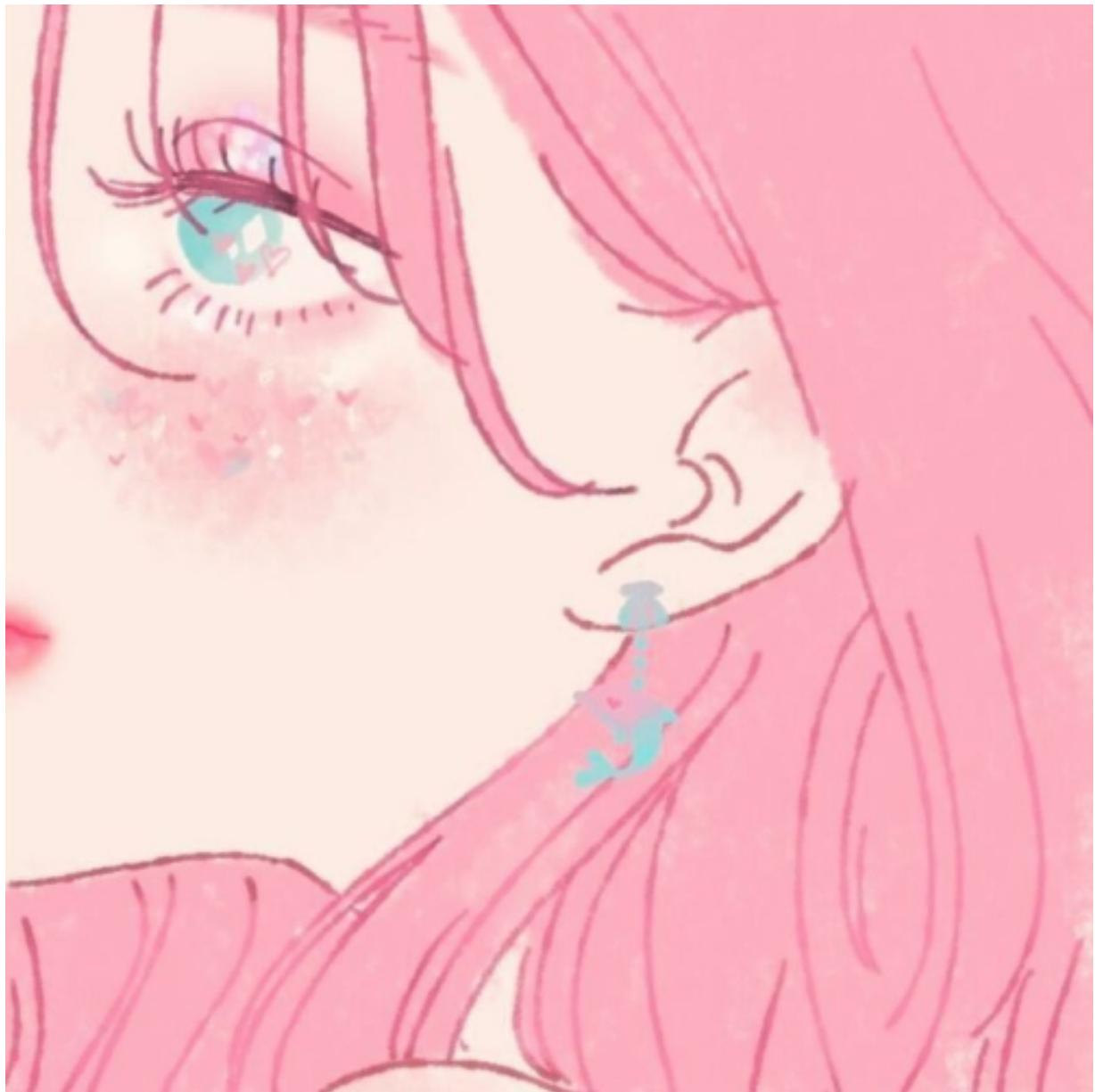
"Of course, that gentleman's possessiveness wouldn't allow attending the party. It seems you've become quite close with our boss, Miss Karen, while I haven't seen you."

Nicole had tea with Raul on the day Mr. Snake died and went home to open the jewel box. Her ears reddened.

Estockk added nonchalantly.

Whether Estockk knew and was teasing her, she began to feel confused. She was not pleased, as Estockk was as young as Dagger.

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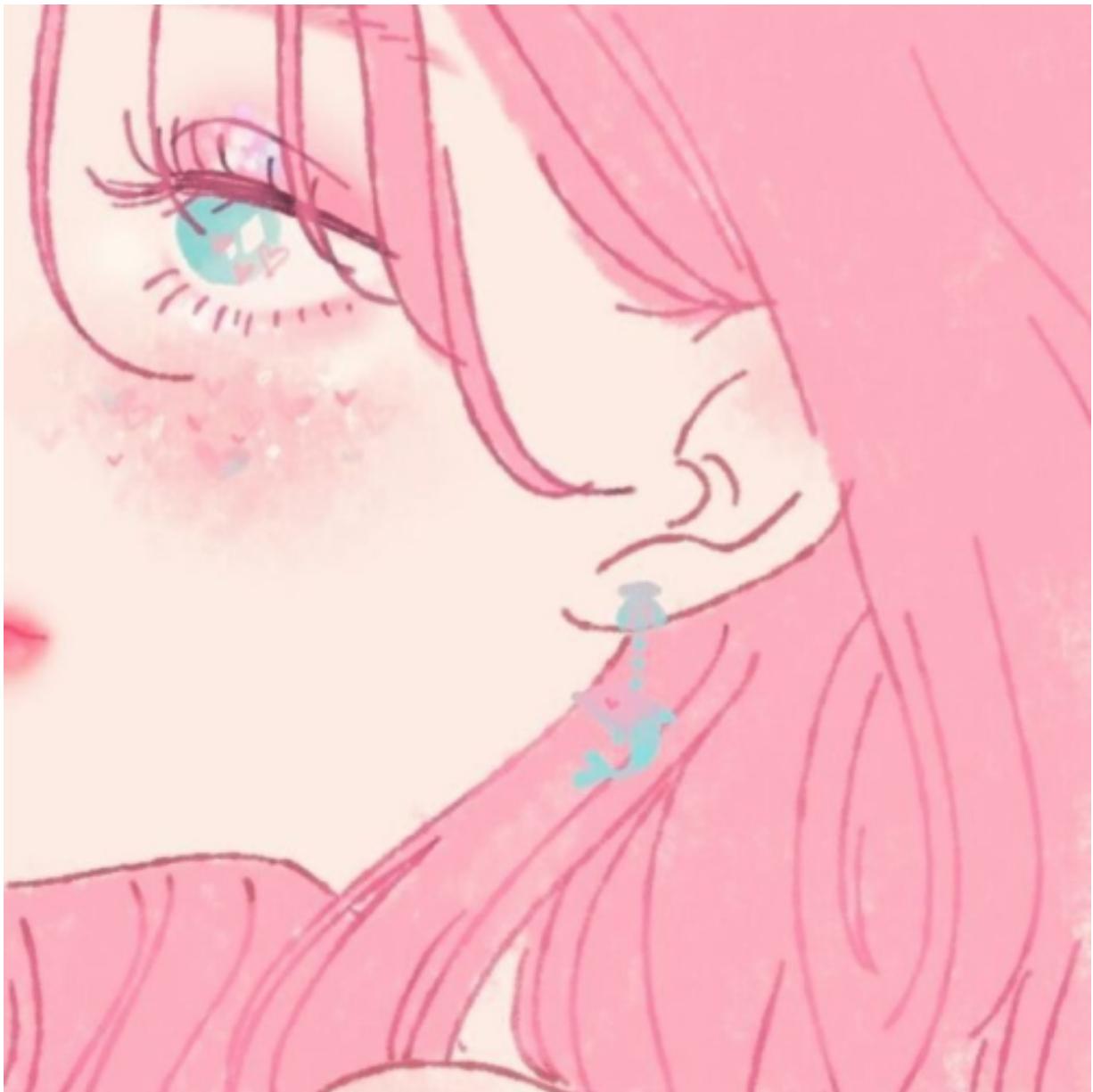


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# Chapter 135

“Anyway, it looks like you’re free now.”

“Yes, since the Grand Duke is attending the Imperial Hunting Festival, it’s pretty much a holiday for everyone for a few days.”

“It’s really strange. The Grand Duke seems to fear nothing in the world, yet he can’t refuse the royal family’s events. He may struggle for power with the royal family but doesn’t seriously challenge them.”

Of course, she knew that Raul’s goal wasn’t rebellion. A vassal has the duty of a vassal.

However, she heard that the royal family tried to force Raul into marriage and has been involved in his life since he was young.

Moreover, the royal family has lost their close associates and military power. Furthermore, their authority has fallen to the point where a duchess, one of their own, was assassinated by a mere drug dealer.

“Ask him sometime later.”

Estockk said with shining eyes.

“What is it that our boss, the Grand Duke, is afraid of?”

“Does he have something he’s afraid of?”

"Would there be? But if you coax him well, he might tell you what he dislikes the most."

Estockk chuckled. He seemed to think that he had become very close to Nicole.

"Don't underestimate the royal family. If the royal family's power seems weakened even once, their enemies 'disappear' in an instant, for all sorts of reasons..."

Nicole felt a chill in her stomach at those words. It wasn't surprising that the royal family did dirty deeds.

"There's something more important than that to talk about."

"Oh, right. We were talking about our Sith party! Everyone drinks and drinks heavily. They are all good at drinking. Do you like alcohol? I'm good at it. Speaking of which, if we go to the brewery, could we fill it up with alcohol and swim in it? It was Dagger's and my dream. A wine bath..."

Before the pointless chit-chat could tickle her ears any further, Nicole cut him off. Estockk was strange, too strange.

"How did the interrogation go?"

The smile that rose to Estockk's lips thinned out.

"It's quite serious."

"Yes?"

Estockk handed over the interrogation record – that is, the statement to Nicole. Nicole felt a sweet taste in her mouth.

"My father, what about my father?"

"Your father is safe."

“As expected.”

Nicole’s intuition was correct. Isabel valued the card she held in her hand very much. She hadn’t killed Father.

“Then where is he?”

Nicole asked while browsing through the statement. Estockk shrugged his shoulders.

“I will never tell that.”

“...Pardon?”

“I’m not sure. She says he is safely hidden somewhere and she’s stubbornly holding out. There’s a limit to the amount of truth serum that can be used at once, so I haven’t reached that point yet. If we give it a few more days, we might be able to try.”

The truth serum was almost perfect, but not entirely so. If a person is trained, it’s possible for them not to speak.

Since Estockk pressured Isabel to the point where it wouldn’t be strange if she died, she must have confessed most things.

However, Isabel is holding out on just one thing, her last card, avoiding revealing it at all costs.

“I don’t understand how that’s possible. That woman hasn’t received any truth serum training.”

Nicole’s mouth twisted coldly.

“Damn devilish wench. Dirty pr\*stitute. The demon my mother bore. I could have thrived if you were gone. I should have killed you without sympathy. I’m just too pitiful.”

Estockk spoke as if humming a song. Nicole's brows furrowed slightly at his words.

"She says that every time I try to make her confess your father's whereabouts. Usually, resistance to truth serum is due to a fortress in the mind, something that can't be surrendered. A shield, so to speak. Unfortunately for her, that shield is..."

"Hatred towards me. She's holding out with that."

Estockk shrugged his shoulders again.

"Pitiful indeed. You are cursed by your own sibling."

Nicole looked at Stockk while holding the statement.

"You must know my secret by now."

"Yes. As I said, this has become a very big deal."

Stockk said cheerfully.

"I never imagined YvesChapel would be involved. I wasn't surprised when that woman confessed about her healing powers. After all, I had heard about it beforehand."

"Dagger told you everything?"

"Yes."

Nicole nodded. Now Stockk knew all the crucial information.

"Moreover, that young master above..."

"Leos?"

"Why don't you first take a look at Leos's statement?"

Estockkk shrugged his shoulders and then added, after a pointless grumble, that Leos was too submissive and had already half given up on life, which made it no fun.

Nicole tried to maintain a calm expression.

"Where are you going to talk about that, Estockkk?"

Nicole's eyes narrowed.

"Nowhere. I keep my promises."

"...Thank you."

Nicole said after a moment of silence.

"And anyway, since I'm involved with YvesChapel, if I reveal this, I too would be killed by our Grand Duke. No matter what, that would be crossing the line and there'd be no chance for redemption, right?"

"Thank you for that as well. Though I did draw you in knowing everything."

Estockkk giggled at Nicole's words. It seemed that Estockkk still took a liking to Nicole.

"I have one question. Why do you want to manipulate people's memories?"

Nicole asked finally. She was very curious about his statement, but it felt like if not now, she would never get the chance to ask Estockkk again.

Estockkk whistled.

"Oh, good. Time for a secret exchange. Perfect for getting closer. Finally, our relationship is getting closer."

"Cut the clinginess and get to the point. Estockk."

Nicole cut in sharply. Strangely, it seemed like Estockk enjoyed being treated this way.

Estockk whispered.

"Someone did the same thing in my head too. My memory isn't complete. It's from when I was very young... That's why I want to experiment. To complete it through others and then in my head. Bang."

Estockk made a gesture next to his head as if a bomb had exploded with a bang.

In the dimly lit safe house, that gesture looked terribly grim. Then Estockk crossed his arms, indicating he would not answer any further.

(No one knows where Estockk came from or who he is. No one...)

Why is it that Dagger's words come to mind?

Suddenly, Estockk moved closer to Nicole, his face near hers as he spoke.

"It can't be undone now."

"I knew that from the beginning."

"After reading this statement, many things will change. We are involved in this, and now even the Grand Duke can't save us."

It was a chilling voice.

“Who are you, exactly?”

A smirk spread across Estockk's androgynous face.

“I am Estockk, the Grand Duke's most disobedient sword. And I'm the one who will thrillingly pierce the pretty lady with this enormous statement.”

Nicole wanted to click her tongue in disapproval. She sighed and then sat down on an old chair in the corner of the room.

First, Nicole unfolded Leos's statement.

Why Leos met Isabel. What his identity is and what happened after he met Isabel.

It was a statement taken with the minimum administration of a truth serum.

‘Is this the truth?’

Nicole's hands trembled as she quickly skimmed through the content.

Only then could Nicole understand Estockk's words. The seven noble families.

It wasn't just YvesChapel, who had become a traitor, that was involved. This matter also involved the sole heir of the Rodria family.

And Isabel's statement. The first page was about... the Glassworm.

It was implanted into a person's head to enslave and make them obey.

‘The name Glassworm felt familiar.’

Since one day in her past life, she had been obeying Isabel.

And the sickly face of Leos, who had killed his adoptive parents and was being manipulated by Isabel.

Isabel had used that Glassworm on her in her past life.

‘Isabel, how could you do such a thing...’

Estockk leaned against the wall, looking at Nicole with an expression as if he found it interesting, as if he knew this would happen.

“Don’t worry. Karen isn’t the only one who’s shocked.”

Nicole didn’t have time to care about Estockk’s words. She snatched the key from Estockk’s waist and opened the door to the interrogation room.

Isabel was sleeping on a cot.

“Umm, what is it?”

Isabel, upon waking up, seemed as if she had just emerged from a daydream. She looked a bit disheveled and emaciated but somehow happy.

“You, what have you done?”

“What have I done?”

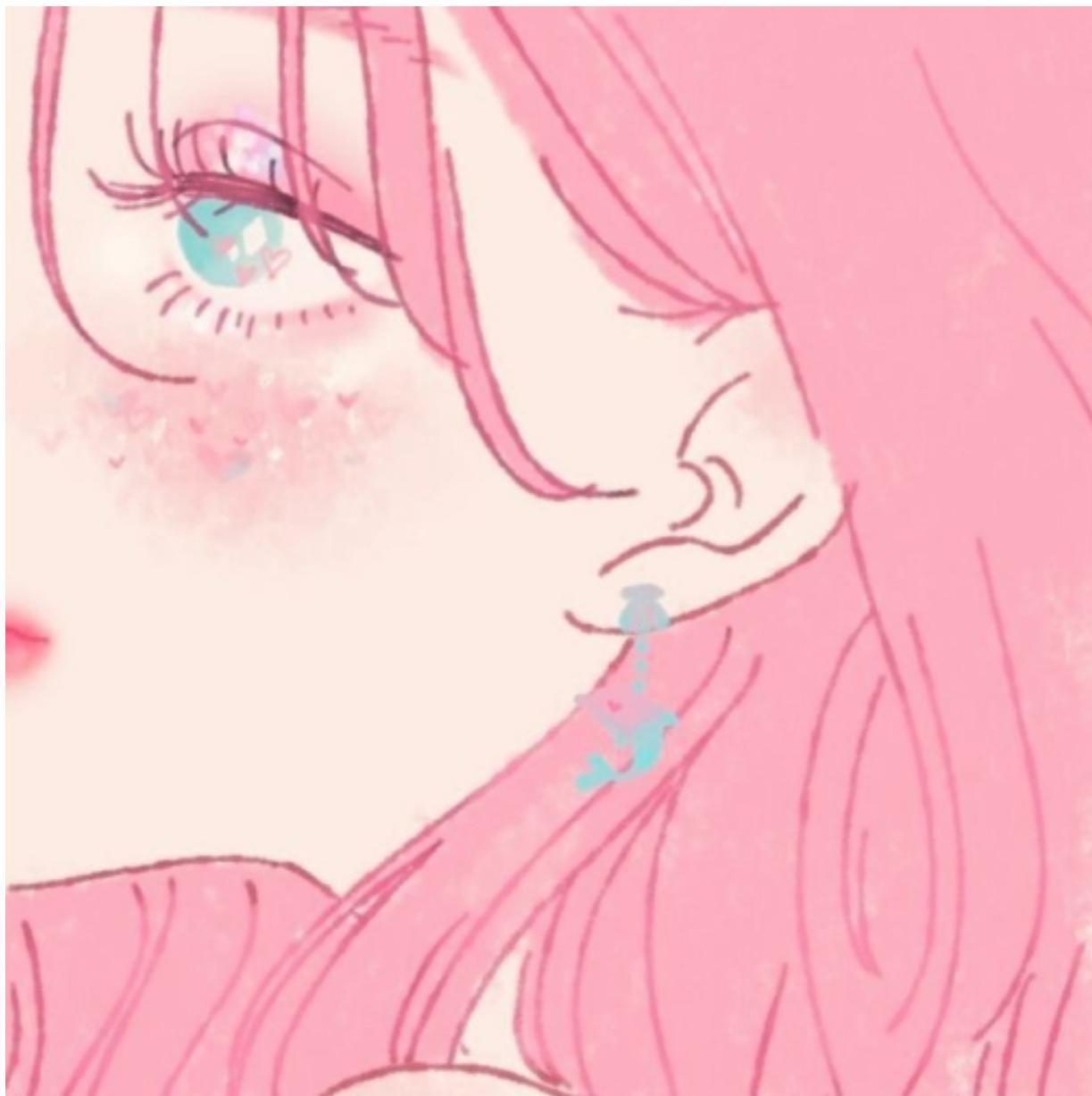
Isabel asked back in a daze, as if she knew nothing.

“Leos.”

Nicole said.

"You incited Leos to kill his parents. Even though it was as if they had stolen Leos from his biological parents. Still, they were the ones who raised him. Did you make him kill such people? By controlling him with a Glassworm?"

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# Chapter 136

“Glassworm? What is that?”

Nicole was shocked. Isabel seemed to have no memory of what she had done.

Nicole wondered how Estockk had managed to ‘clean’ Isabel’s mind so thoroughly.

“You did it. You used the glassworm to make Leos obey you. And you controlled him.”

Nicole’s voice lowered.

“Hmm, I did? Oh my. It seems that man really likes me.”

Isabel laughed as if she found it amusing.

“Isn’t it a matter of one’s own will? Just because I give an order, he killed his foster parents? It seems he’s that stupid too. I’ve done nothing wrong, fool~ More importantly, who are you?”

Nicole felt a sense of disgust.

This was Isabel’s pure nature, with some memories erased due to the aftereffects of interrogation.

Nicole knew she had to erase Isabel’s memories of Nicole herself to keep Isabel from speaking out.

Estockk had said that overdosing on truth serums and drugs could cause confusion in memory. That was what Estockk found intriguing.

Whether it was indeed possible to erase memories of a certain time and specific people only. Nicole had agreed to Estockk's experiment and ordered that Isabel's memories of Leos and Nicole be erased after the interrogation.

The result was the current Isabel. Memories of their father remained, but she had completely forgotten Leos and Nicole.

'But one's nature does not change.'

Even if a person's memory is incomplete, when confronted with 'you have committed such a wrong,' they would unconsciously censor themselves.

But Isabel... lacked that function.

"Don't you remember me?"

Nicole leaned towards Isabel.

"I don't know. Call Father. How should I recognize a fool like you?"

Isabel looked at Nicole with a contemptuous expression.

"I don't know who you are. Yet strangely, I find you so repulsive."

There exists a Glassworm, also known as the demon's worm, a poisonous insect.

This insect acts as a powerful tool that can manipulate and freely control a person's mind.

The person who raises a Glassworm can turn its host into their puppet.

The host believes only in the words of their master, even their likes and dislikes follow the will of the master.

If there are 'emotions' contrary to the master's will, they fabricate false emotions.

They come to hate someone they love more than their master and create false memories themselves.

They manipulate themselves with memories of abuse and pain that don't exist, turning them into different events.

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When she first saw Leos, something felt familiar. His expression was like that of someone lost. He looked as if he had crumbled.

'He was just like me in my past life.'

Nicole could understand why she had been irrationally obedient and obsessed with Isabel.

It was all because Isabel had implanted that worm in her.

Nicole had no memories of her past life because the Glassworm manipulated and erased useless memories.

"You made me that way. So that I would hate Raul."

"Ugh, ack!"

Nicole grabbed Isabel by the collar and choked her neck.

"You've ruined my life twice and destroyed our family... And now, you've done the same thing in this life too. You ruined Leos!"

"Le, Leos?"

Isabel, pushed against the wall by Nicole, fumbled at her throat and gasped.

"Who is this man Leos? Father? Someone, please come and save me, Leos!"

Isabel's face turned pale as she cried out in panic.

Nicole mercilessly slapped her cheek.

"You ruined my past life. And now, I will ruin you."

"Aaagh!"

Isabel's body collapsed.

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"Are you alright?"

Bluea looked at Leos restlessly. Leos had been losing weight day by day since he was imprisoned here.

Bluea's mistress had instructed her never to act emotionally.

She said it was okay to be kind to Leos, but not to cross the line beyond that.

However, Bluea, being soft-hearted by nature, had been providing Leos with things he needed and even kept him company.

“My head hurts so much.”

Leos said.

“Were there many flames outside today as well?”

Since Leos was locked in an interrogation room, it naturally had no windows.

The room was not small, and when the iron door was opened, there were bars like a prison cell.

Bluea visited him everyday and passed food through the bars. And there were no windows on the walls beyond the bars, not even in the small restroom.

But there was one strange thing. On days when Leos complained of severe headaches, flames would always rise mysteriously within the thick fog of the capital.

“Please. I beg you. Let me out of these bars just once to see a window.”

Leos stared at Bluea with a pale face.

Bluea did not know that Isabel was shouting Leos's name in the underground interrogation room right now. The underground door was closed and soundproofed so well that nothing could be heard.

She only knew that since yesterday, Leos had been suffering from severe claustrophobia.

After pondering, Bluea bit her lip.

“Then, just for a moment... just for a moment...”

Bluea said. And then she personally opened the iron bars for Leos.

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At that moment, Isabel was screaming as if she was going mad, searching for Leos.

The interrogation room was perfectly soundproofed on all sides, so neither Leos nor Bluea could hear anything.

'That person. My master is looking for me.'

However, the Glassworm implanted in Leos's body reacted to Isabel's cries.

Leos ascended the stairs connecting the mezzanine and the first floor like a ghost.

It was in the opposite direction of the basement where Isabel was confined.

Yet, Leos headed to the ground floor as if he held some certainty.

As if obeying destiny. As if feeling a transcendent connection to a loved one.

Then, at last, he reached the window.

Leos looked up at the window.

'Isabel is looking for me. I don't know why, but I can feel it. My master, my only love. What can I do for her now?'

Slowly questioning and answering himself, Leos gazed at the flames floating beyond the small window.

At that moment, Leos realized how he could manipulate the weather.

And that those flames were like clouds, thus belonging to the weather.

Leos moved his hand as if entranced.

How many seconds had passed like that?

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

Bluea, who had been alternating her gaze between him and the window, asked in a frightened voice as if she had realized something.

Her eyes were wide, and her arms and legs were trembling. It was an expression of visceral fear.

Leos was doing something now. It was a judgment based on survival instinct. Bluea didn't know why she could feel it either.

“Could it be... Are you, the young master, moving that?”

The flames were getting closer. Beyond the window, a little closer—

“What are you doing right now!”

Bluea grabbed Leos. Only then did Leos turn to look at Bluea.

“I don't know either.”

Leos couldn't explain why he was doing this either. There was only one thought in his mind.

Isabel's life is fading away.

The Glassworm inside Leos responded blindly to this. Something had to be done. Anything...

The ability he had recently become aware of was only enough to bring a small rain. But within him, there was a greater power.

A waterfall of emotions swept over Leos.

"Where is Isabel? My person, where is Isabel...?"

Bluea turned pale.

"You shouldn't be here. We need to go inside quickly...."

Bluea, who was dragging Leos, stopped in her tracks.

The flames had come closer, as if to pierce through the window.

Since this was a safe house, the windows were small and placed high up. The gathering flames at that spot made it seem as if the translucent spheres were living beings peering inside.

"Tell me where Isabel is. Quickly!"

Bluea trembled at Leos's urgency, and was simultaneously horrified.

"Why is it like this, what is this...."

The flames outside the window were heating up to a red hue, like the midday sun.

\*\*\*

“Tell me where Father is.”

Nicole grasped Isabel’s neck and said.

“Quickly, tell me now. If something happens to Father, I’ll kill you.”

“Ah ha, I don’t know why but it seems my Father’s whereabouts are important to you, huh? But what does that have to do with you, you filthy bitch!”

Even with her neck seized and slammed against the wall, Isabel chuckled and mocked Nicole.

“I do know where Father is, but why should I tell you—”

It was at that moment. The mansion shook violently once.

Nicole felt the shaking and lifted her head.

And then, a loud crash.

Something broke, and the plaster from the ceiling fell down.

“Ah, aaaaah!”

Isabel screamed as fragments struck her head and waist, blood staining her body. Fortunately, Nicole only inhaled dust and was not hit by the fragments.

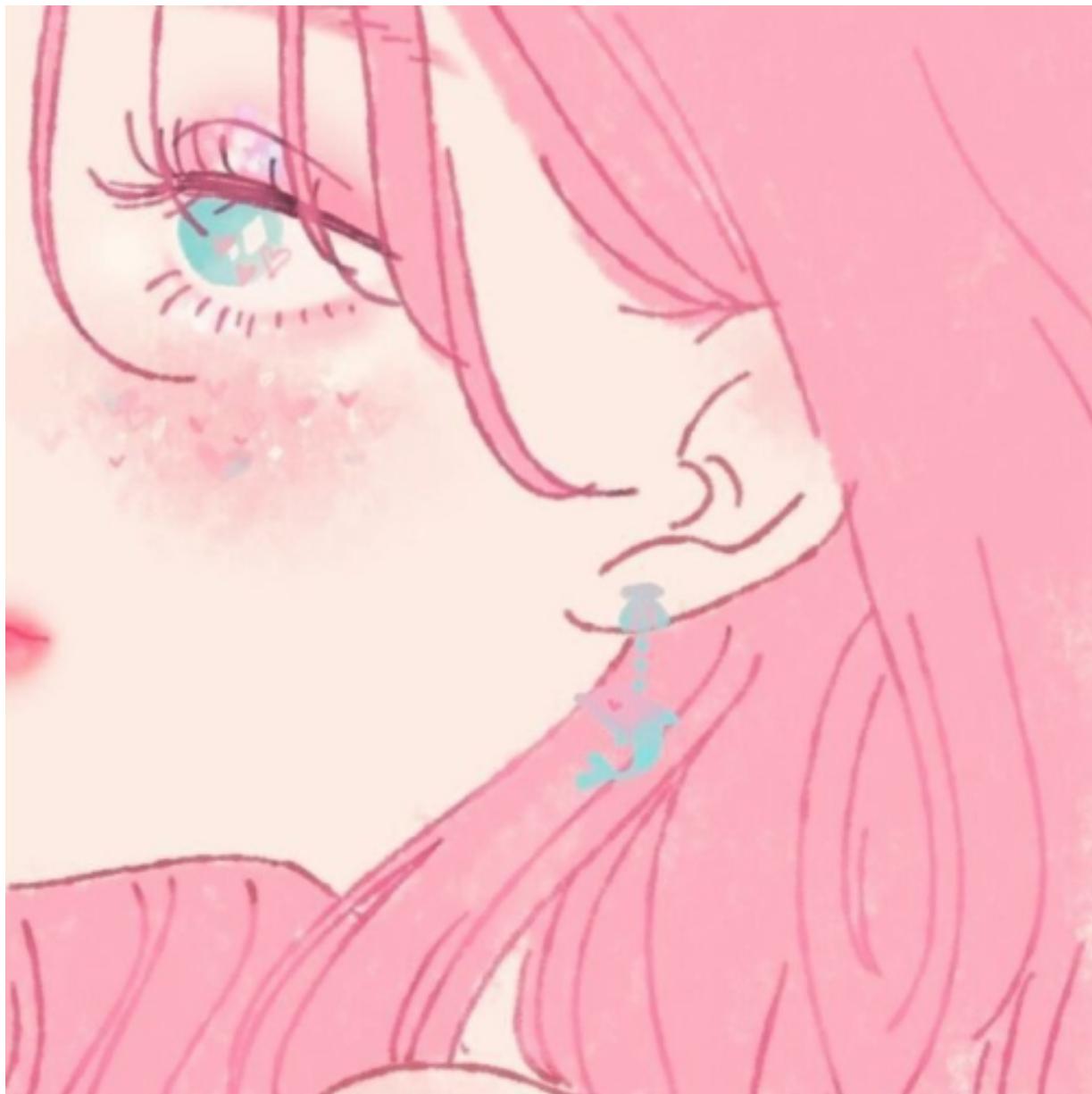
Suddenly, the door burst open and Estockk entered. Their eyes met for just a few seconds.

“I’ll drag this woman out right away, check what’s happening. No, get out!”

Nicole gave an order.

Leaving the mysterious explosion behind, Nicole quickly moved her body.

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# Chapter 137

Fortunately, the explosion wasn't large, and it only caused the ceiling of the underground interrogation room to collapse.

Nicole hurried outside to check the source of the explosion.

And what Nicole found was worse than imagined: two people, a man and a woman, covered in blood from the explosion.

It was Bluea and Leos.

Their bodies were sprawled across the stairs leading underground. Above them, the wall was pierced through.

'What caused the explosion?'

A bomb or similar device must have come through that wall. Nicole assessed this in less than a second. And Bluea had probably tried her best to bring Leos down to find Nicole but collapsed due to her injuries.

"Miss!"

Bluea called out to Nicole, her face pale as a ghost.

"What happened here?"

Nicole asked sharply.

Now was not the time to worry about Bluea's injuries. The fact that these two were outside of Leos's room was already a problem.

"The Flames have exploded. The Flames, oh, oh... they're following us."

Bluea muttered as if she had seen a ghost.

"Flame?"

Nicole thought for a moment that Bluea had gone mad. Why would a Flame suddenly appear? The Flame was just a clump of fog in the capital that no one cared about...

It was at that moment. Leos, held in Bluea's arms, suddenly opened his eyes.

"Where is this? I was with Isabel... just a moment ago..."

Leos spoke and then suddenly coughed violently.

"You moved it."

Bluea looked at Leos with fear and loathing.

"I opened the door for you, and you..."

"Stop it, Bluea. Now is not the time to argue. Get up quickly. The building is shaking."

Nicole intuitively realized that she had made some sort of mistake.

At the same time, an obvious fact suddenly came to mind. The Rodria family.

This young man named Leos is a survivor of Rodria. That means, like Isabel and Jay who have healing powers...

'This man must also be a person with abilities.'

And what did they say Leos did? He moved the Flame?

She has never heard of such an ability in her life.

"Come out right now!"

At that moment, Estockk shouted from outside the door.

"Because we've pulled out Isabel too."

Upon hearing that, Leos's pupils shrank again. And once again, beyond the pierced wall-

A Flame that seemed to resonate approached with a low hum, uniting into one. The round sphere was hard to describe.

Squeak, squeak.

Then a mouse scurried through the half-destroyed corridor.

Nicole's head turned. Despite the current chaotic situation, she couldn't help but fixate her gaze as if being drawn in.

'What is that?'

Then one of the Flames detached from the large sphere and flowed into the house. As Leos muttered something-suddenly that small sphere...

Swallowed the mouse.

And the mouse disappeared without a trace.

'What... did I just see?'

Nicole was so startled she wondered if she was hallucinating.

"Ah, it hurts- my head hurts."

Suddenly Leos screamed. It was as if a warning bell was going off in Nicole's head.

'What is this bizarre thing? I have to interrogate him and make him spit out the truth. Estockk, what have you done!'

Nicole blamed the innocent Estok.

Leos, who was complaining of a headache, vomited blood, then bowed his head deeply and fainted.

Nicole wanted to curse.

Now she and the injured Bluea would have to drag this heavy young man out themselves.

"If you don't want to faint too, get moving right now, Bluea."

Bluea swallowed back tears and stood up as instructed.

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The yard outside the safe house was the size of a palm, overgrown with weeds and devoid of any decorations.

Nicole managed to drag the injured Bluea and Leos outside. Estockk stood there with his hands in his jacket pockets.

Near Estockk's feet, Isabel appeared to be asleep again, tightly bound and lying down as if she were discarded trash. Next to her was a leather bag.

Estockk kicked the leather bag with his foot as if to say there was nothing to worry about.

'As if learned from someone, he's quite thorough indeed.' Nicole thought.

Nicole thought that the bag must be filled with things that could serve as crucial evidence, such as confession drugs or interrogation records.

A single syringe, one interrogation tool. The people of the Grand Duke's family would know immediately upon finding them that the Siths were behind this incident. Destroying evidence was a basic skill the Siths had to have.

"Will the house collapse?"

Nicole looked at the building that was shaking slightly.

"Whether it does or doesn't isn't the problem. With such an explosion, this house will now be tracked by everyone."

"I know."

Nicole took a breath. Estockk's words were precisely right. It was ruined.

This place would now be exposed.

It was possible that the Grand Duke's people might storm in first, or the Imperial Knights might come running.

Either way, it was the worst-case scenario.

"Let's do our best to escape."

Estockk said, just as the carriage Dagger was riding in entered.

Dagger was sitting on the driver's seat, his face covered with a hood and mask.

The boy pulled down the mask covering from his chin to his neck to reveal his face and said,

"Damn it. I don't know what's going on, but everyone get on quickly. Whether alive or dead, everyone!"

"I'll help."

The one who jumped out from beside Dagger was none other than Redia. They moved without any long conversations.

"You need Lady Grace's help, don't you?"

As everyone got on the carriage, Redia said,

"The Grand Duke's people will be swarming here soon. The Leafs must have already seen the explosion."

Nicole grabbed Redia, who nodded her head.

"If we handle things without consulting Lady Grace, we'll die by her hand. She has always said to call her in an emergency. You know her character."

Redia spoke quickly.

Nicole felt terribly sorry for involving Grace in such matters. But at the same time, Grace was the only person who could give her advice on such matters.

"We're going to run away now."

"And then?"

"Please come to the Golden Forest on the outskirts of the capital. You'll understand what I mean. There are abandoned cabins there, and I'll be in one of them."

The Golden Forest was a forest near the royal hunting grounds. The capital's people called it by that nickname because of its spectacular autumn foliage.

At the same time, it was one of the few hideouts Grace had mentioned where one could hide in an emergency.

"I'll see you soon. You'll probably go right away."

Redia quickly nodded her head.

\*\*\*

The carriage sped away. Dagger, being very quick-witted, anticipated being followed and took a complicated route through the woods.

'What a mess.'

Nicole thought as she looked at the state of those inside the carriage. Isabel was asleep as if dead, and blood kept flowing from her body. Nicole had only provided first aid.

Leos kept coughing up blood-tinged coughs. Bluea murmured continuously as she administered first aid to herself.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, miss..."

These were not easy tasks in a jolting carriage. So when the carriage stopped, Nicole even felt a sense of relief.

Who among them should live or die? No, the plan is...

‘Right. The plan for Isabel cannot be abandoned.’

Nicole got out of the carriage. They were at the edge of a dark forest.

“Why this forest all of a sudden? Do you want to stick your face in a wolf’s head? This is near the royal family’s hunting grounds.”

Dagger said, getting off the carriage.

“We’ve arranged to meet Lady Grace.”

Nicole spoke softly while quickly stopping the bleeding from a wound that Bluea had not managed to treat.

“She will bring people to help us. She might also bring the necessary items.”

“Help with what? To commemorate getting caught conducting illegal memory manipulation and confession drug experiments behind the Grand Duke’s back, are we getting help for a romantic group escape trip?”

Estockk laughed with a giggle. He still had a look of finding everything hilariously amusing. Then suddenly, Estockk grabbed Nicole’s hand and brought his face close to hers.

“What was that? What exploded?”

Nicole didn’t know what to say. She really couldn’t be sure of what she had seen herself.

The Flame exploded like a bomb and swallowed a mouse, making it disappear from the world. And it seemed like Leos was the one who did it.

It sounded like madness to anyone who heard it. But Nicole had seen it all clearly.

“It was the Flame. The Flame...”

Nicole finally confessed everything as if admitting to a fault. Estok did not move for a moment.

“Estockk?”

“So that was it...”

Estockk murmured softly.

“That was it. That’s why you all...”

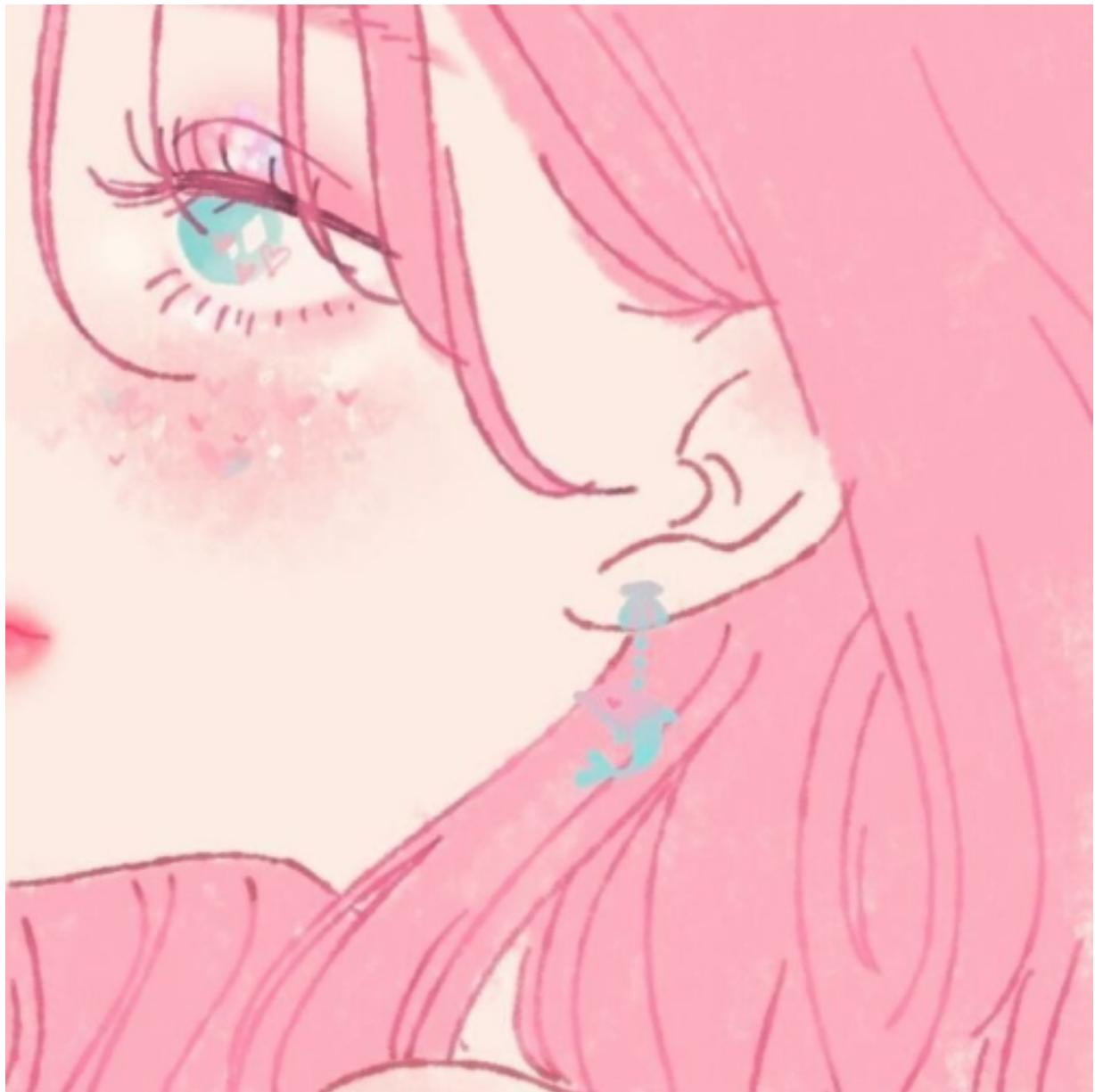
Estockk burst into laughter. At the ominously clear sound of his laughter, Nicole felt a wave of nausea.

“Ahaha, that’s really funny. Haha...”

Nicole decided to ignore Estockk. Then, the sound of a carriage was heard. Grace hurriedly got out of the carriage that arrived in the dark forest.

“Karen, what’s going on?”

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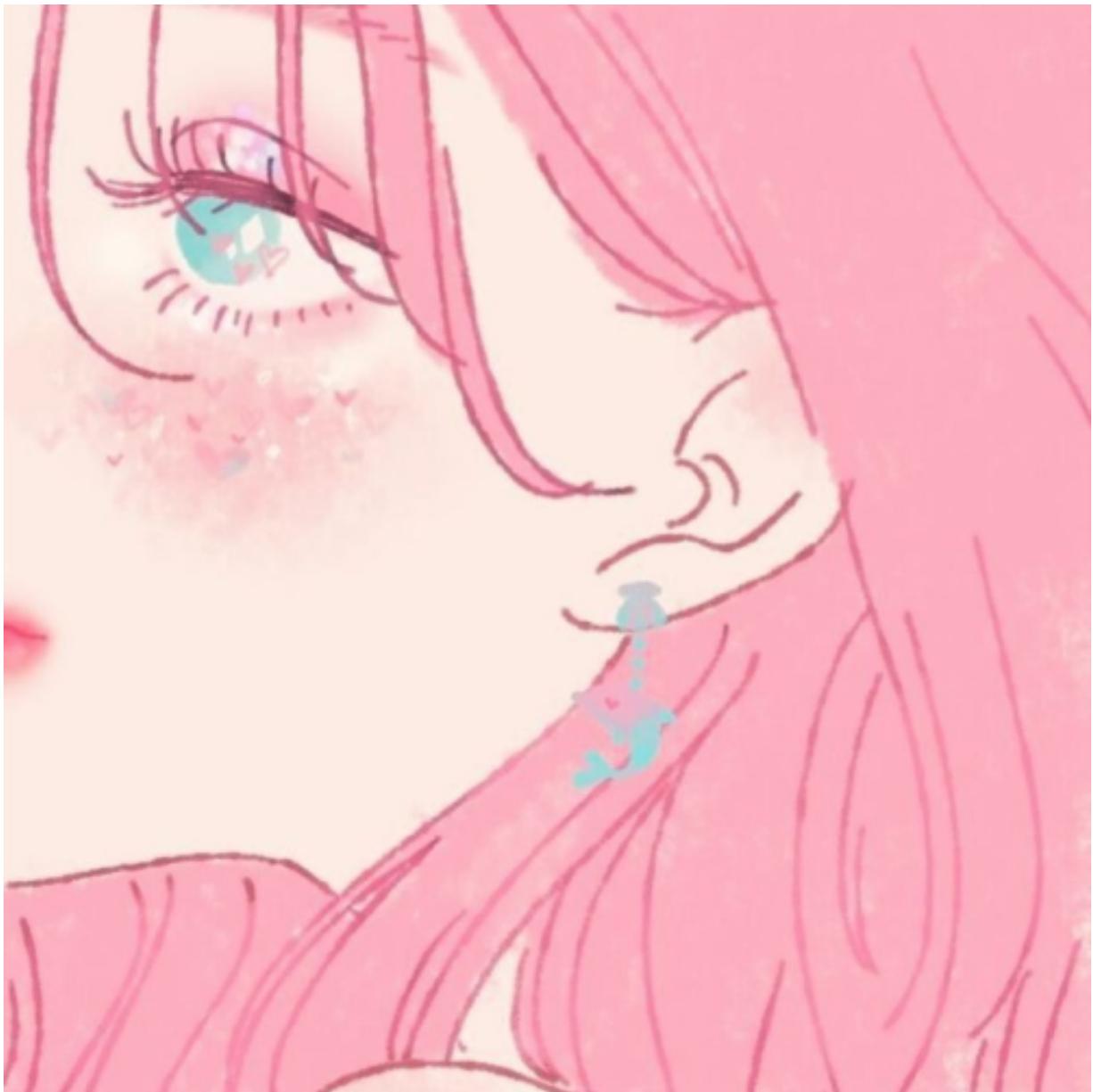


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# Chapter 138

Grace got off the carriage. Redia also got off, supporting Grace.

Grace calmly listened to Nicole's explanation.

"So, this young man, the heir to Rodria... He manipulated Flames to make living creatures disappear and caused explosions?"

"I know it sounds crazy. But Bluea also saw it."

Grace closed her mouth.

"Yes, I see..."

Both were thinking the same thing. It was an imagination fit for madmen.

{The seven great families that incurred the jealousy of the royal family were bound to be annihilated. The royal family does not wish for their retainers to possess abilities superior to their own... }

{Grace's deceased daughter, Sienna, died in the line of duty. There were some questionable aspects to her death... }

{The enemies of the royal family literally disappear, as if they never existed in the first place.}

"I couldn't find Siena's body."

“But it was said to be a death in service...”

“Everyone saw her at the moment of her death. Sienna fell from a high place during a secret mission. But her body was nowhere to be found.”

However, Sienna was seen falling from the high walls of the holy place.

“Then what about the Marquis and Marchioness Rodria?”

Nicole spoke softly.

“They fell off a cliff in a carriage accident. And no one could find the bodies. The carriage and belongings were there at the cliff. I did some investigation when I stayed at Grace’s mansion before.”

The bizarre theory began to take on substance.

If the royal family truly possessed the ability to control Flames.

If they did not want to share that bizarre ability with the Marquis of Rodria? Then the Marquis’ family must be doomed to extinction.

But such an ability...

“Who else could do something like this?”

“Even Raul can’t do this. He’s almost a god, but he doesn’t have this kind of power. Besides, he can’t fully utilize his abilities because he’s keeping the royal family in check.”

Nicole closed her eyes.

"Speculations bordering on delusion are premature right now. The most important thing at the moment is... how we should deal with them."

Nicole looked inside the carriage.

Isabel and Leos were still trapped inside, unconscious.

Only Bluea, who had been helped out by Redia, was sitting in the forest, coughing.

Estockk, catching Nicole's gaze, approached with a sly smile.

"So, how shall we deal with them? Who do we kill first?"

"What?"

"In the end, if we want to erase the evidence, they all have to die."

Estockk pointed to the inside of the carriage.

"Leos and Isabel as well. It would be best to dispose of the bodies cleanly. Well, the maid might live if she's lucky."

Bluea shrank back under Stockk's gaze and grabbed Redia's hand. Nicole remained silent.

"Even if you kill them, they will find the bodies. That alone would be a significant clue."

Nicole said softly.

"And are you so sure that we haven't been caught in anything on our way here? The explosion was an accident, but now that it has happened, the game is somewhat advanced. We need to think about making amends now."

Nicole spoke calmly and coolly. Estockk examined her expression with delight.

"Birds of a feather, it seems. You have the very same expression as our Grand Duke."

"Then what do you propose we do?"

Grace asked quietly.

"We need to create something for them to enjoy. We must divert their attention."

Nicole then spoke to Grace, who looked around,

Just as the sound of the royal family's hornpipe was heard. It was a flute used for the event.

It was the sound announcing the opening of the royal family's hunting contest, a nighttime event.

The hunting contest at this time was an event to commemorate the royal family's achievements in subjugating the demon race and claiming this land. The sound of the hornpipe meant that the proceedings, including speeches, would soon begin.

And Raul would probably be in there as well. Nicole easily conjured up that image.

"It's a hunting contest. The royal family's night has begun."

Dagger, who had been silent, opened his mouth heavily.

Before long, the surroundings had darkened. Dagger stood up and took out a lamp from the carriage to light up the area. Aside from a few lamps, the dark forest was empty.

“What do you think, Nicole?”

“We have what they are interested in right now. The two descendants of the family they destroyed.”

Nicole spoke softly. Grace’s mouth twisted.

“Yes. The two people who could insult the royal family. They are the symbols of their own sins.”

“And they are criminals. At least Isabel is.”

Redia and Bluea could not understand what was being said and looked at each other. However, Nicole and Grace were already able to understand each other’s intentions with just a few words of conversation.

“Estockk?”

Nicole called out to Estockk.

“How much of Isabel’s memory has disappeared?”

“If I wanted to, I could turn it blank with a few snaps of my fingers.”

“We need to find out about my father.”

“Ah, that will take at least a day. All experiments are harder to extract than to erase. Simply put, erasing memory is easy but making someone confess or manipulating it is hard.”

“How about this?”

Nicole gestured quietly to Estockk and said a few things.

“About the memory manipulation you mentioned last time. Alright. That’s easy. It will take about 20 minutes.

Fortunately, I've brought all the ingredients."

Estockk said with a snicker.

"Do it right away, please."

"You're planning something fun, aren't you? Exciting. I'll do it quickly!"

Estockk disappeared into the carriage.

"You intend to ruin the royal family's event. You've been thinking that since we came to this forest."

"Adding prey isn't ruining it. And... I must have my revenge."

Nicole had no intention of dirtying her hands by killing her sibling. Why should she bear such a sin?

Isabel was trash not even worth killing.

Isabel, who ruined my past life and has committed evil deeds in this one as well. Punishing her, the main culprit in a drug case that has yet to be caught.

The best thing was... to hand Isabel over to the royal family.

"Nothing should take precedence over revenge."

Grace smiled as if she was truly happy.

"Thank you, Nicole. Since Sienna died, there has never been such vitality in my life. To think that I could insult the royal family. At this point, when it's certain that they killed my daughter, really, truly."

\*\*\*

“Why can’t you still do it? Try to be like your younger sister.”

The Emperor’s name was Nersus. He had a pale, waxen face that made his age difficult to guess.

Sometimes, when he kept his mouth shut, he was said to resemble a corpse lying in a coffin—though of course, no one dared say that to his face.

His only beloved son, Martes, stood there sweating.

“But what if I break? If I use too much power, then...”

“Stop making excuses. I’m sick of your mental illness.”

Nersus sighed and shook his head. Today was a day when the Flames were particularly intense.

The royal family’s events were always held on days when the Flames were abundant.

No one cared what the Flames were. But this was the royal family’s hidden power, the great force that had enabled them to take over this country.

And it was a secretive power that only the royal family should possess.

“On days as filled with flames as this, you should be able to manipulate even a bit of the Flame. Go on, try it.”

“Mmph, mmph!”

In front of the Crown Prince lay a woman in white clothes, gagged and bound hand and foot.

Inside the tent, there were several Flames. This was unnatural. Flames do not enter indoors unless someone

forcibly pulls them in.

"They must be made to disappear, to vanish. We must remember the many sacrifices made for this power of ours."

Nerus said. Then the sound of a hornpipe was heard. It was time to start the event.

Martes approached the entrance of the tent and peered outside through a slightly opened gap.

Raul was there. The magnificent and beautiful man whose mere presence made people tremble. And around him, nobles gathered, talking about various things as if worshipping him.

"I'm not sure whose dignity this event is supposed to establish. It's a celebration for the Grand Duke's family, not the royal family. After all, the military authority of the Empire's capital is now all in the hands of the Grand Duke. I'll just wait for the day I'm broken and dead until that man puts a knife to our throats."

Watching this, Martes muttered gloomily.

Those suffering from Glass Disease are basically prone to hypersensitivity and depression. Nerus mocked him for his defeatist words.

"As long as we have this power, no one can escape our rule. Military power can be given up over and over again. When the hunting season comes again, the enemies of the royal family will disappear, and that child will die like his parents..."

Martes lifted his head. Raul, who seemed like the most terrifying being in the world. Only his father could call him a

child.

Then the sound of the hornpipe grew louder. The first hunt had begun. Martes returned inside the tent, trying to focus on his work.

“Eup, please, ugh...”

A woman looked at him desperately, letting out a suppressed moan as if begging to be saved. Martes looked down at her as if she were an insect. It was then.

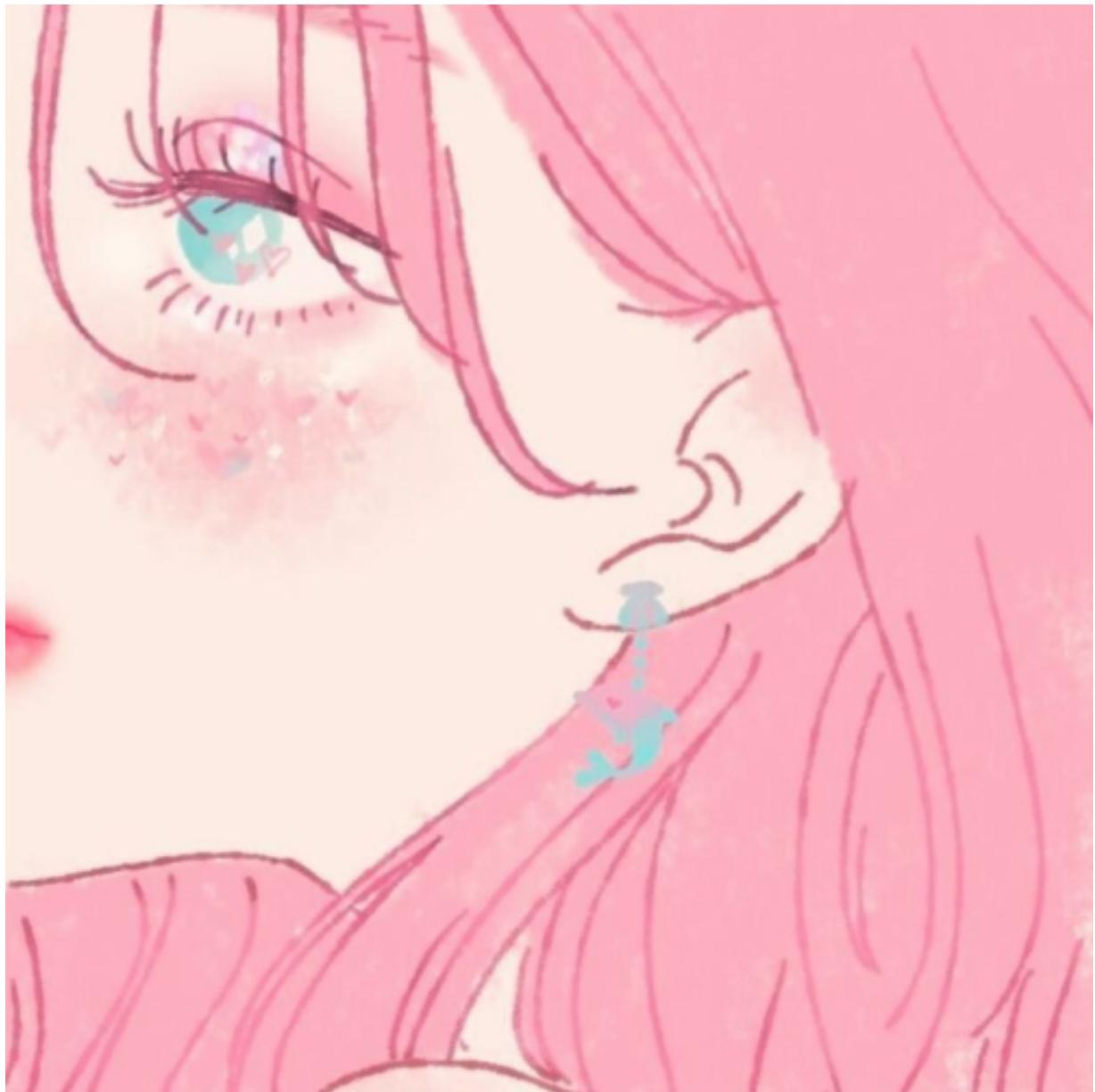
The loud murmuring started to be heard from outside. The shouting was growing louder and louder.

“What’s going on?”

Martes shouted. A servant hurried in from outside.

“There’s been a problem.”

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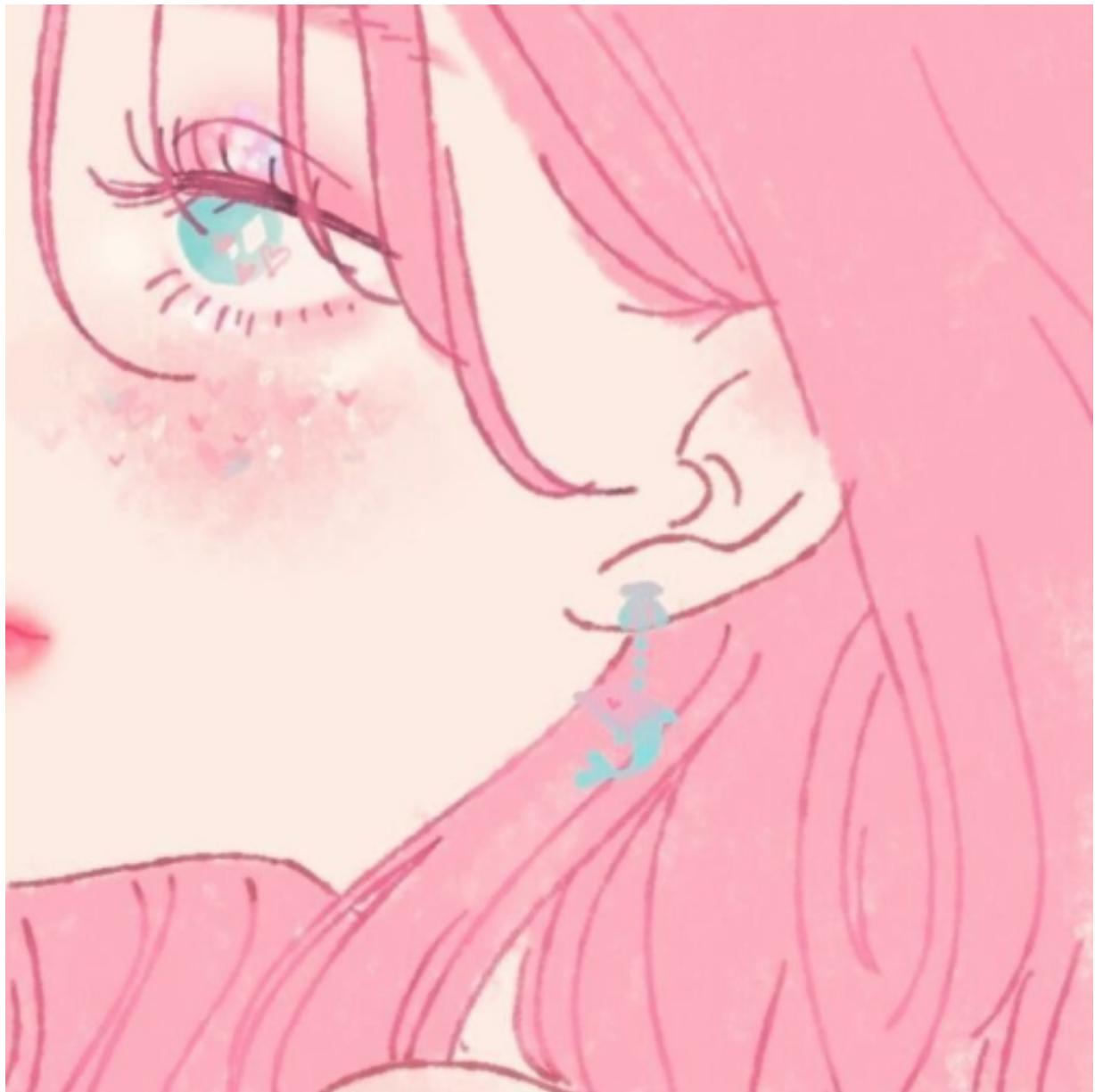


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# Chapter 139

*Remember, Nicole. One must be wary of the royal family. If they see a weakness, no matter how big or small, a price must be paid... The Grand Duke's family was untouchable, but the other seven noble families all had to endure years of humiliation, simply because they had abilities like them...*

Nicole remembered the time she spent at Grace's mansion. When she was educated about the seven great families of the Empire, that's what Grace said. There was a chilling hatred in Grace's eyes as she spoke.

'After all, the root cause of the complications in my life is the royal family.'

Nicole was a survivor of the exterminated YvesChapel family. And it was the royal family who had framed and killed them, simply because they possessed the superior ability of healing.

Nicole was the child of farmers hiding in the mountains. Therefore, she had never thought of herself as a noble. The fate that befell the YvesChapel family felt like someone else's business, not quite real to her.

But in her second life, she now realizes the fundamental resentment. The cause and karma that ruined her mother's life and tangled all threads even before she was born. There are...

‘Things that must be settled.’

\* \* \*

*Boom, bang!*

The first thing people noticed was the fireworks display. With a clamorous noise, fireworks embroidered the sky. The royal family, as well as all sorts of dignitaries, attended today's hunting festival.

The first hornpipe.

The long opening ceremony.

And after the standing reception ended, the hornpipe sounded once again. It was just before the first hunt began. That was when the fireworks exploded. Knights immediately rushed to where the fireworks had erupted.

What the knights found was a shocking sight.

(We know what has been done by the royal family. The eyes of the traitors are not closed.)

The eyes of YvesChapel and Rodria do not close, no matter how many people disappear into the clouds in vain.

Bright lights illuminated between the trees. Beneath them, a long flag was tied horizontally to two trees as pillars.

The flag was engraved with large letters. The knights were frozen, unable to move. The people who arrived behind them began to read the words and started murmuring one by one.

“YvesChapel? Rodria? That long-gone family?”

Whispers spread like wildfire among the people. Raul furrowed his brows quietly among them. Why?

“Search thoroughly! Find the culprit!”

The knights who came to their senses late searched the surroundings and found a woman sleeping peacefully at a distance.

The woman was asleep on the ground, covered with a cloth of the same material as the flag.

***Remember the evidence of treason.***

There was a paper written like this at her feet.

“That woman is the culprit. Get her up immediately.”

One of the knights shouted.

At the sound of calling fellow knights, the nobles could not contain their curiosity and flocked to the scene. It was literally chaos.

\*\*\*

Isabel slowly opened her eyes. Her head was foggy.

‘My head hurts. What am I doing and where?’

Isabel thought, and she struggled to clear her blurry mind.

*My mother’s name is Freya. And my father is... I couldn’t remember my father’s name. And I had siblings. One younger brother. One older sister, but strangely, I couldn’t remember their names either.*

‘It hurts so much!’

Isabel felt severe pain.

At the same time, she recalled a dream from her childhood. Enchanting balls. Nobles, wonderful people.

*I'm not someone to rot and die in the countryside. Just give me a chance and I'll show myself to the people.*

Tiptoeing around, she must show how special she is. It's not just about beauty. She has a special ability as well. She has...

The growing pain interrupted her sweet dream.

"The pain is unbearable!"

Isabel opened her eyes and looked down at her abdomen. There was a large wound. For some reason, her body was full of bruises here and there, and her face also felt a stinging pain.

Scars cannot be allowed. She must heal quickly. She has the ability to do so.

Isabel hurriedly summoned her healing power. A faint light emanated from her hands.

Isabel immediately touched her face, then used her healing power on her abdomen to treat the wound.

Even that much improved Isabel's condition significantly. The small bruises diminished, and the pain from the large wound in her abdomen lessened.

Then, Isabel became aware of a chilling gaze. When she looked up, a group of people were looking down at her.

They looked just like knights, all dressed in identical uniforms.

“Indeed, it must be the bloodline of YvesChapel!”

“The witch of YvesChapel has used her healing power!”

“The wound is healing by itself...”

The knights exclaimed nearly out of breath as they stepped aside.

And then a group of people approached.

Scarlet red, royal blue, dark green. They were all dressed luxuriously in silk clothes.

‘Ah, could this be.....’

Isabel tried to grasp the situation. She didn’t know the details. Unfortunately, she was stranded in a place visible from within this forest.

‘Surely, these people have come to rescue a pretty and fragile child like me from danger.’

And seeing their flamboyant attire, they all seemed to be nobles. Joy filled Isabel’s mind. Finally, her chance had come.

Among them, a man dressed in the most splendid clothes approached. A man draped in a red cape and adorned all over with gold threads.

Although his complexion was waxen, she had never seen anyone dressed so magnificently. Unconsciously, Isabel beamed a broad smile at him.

"Did this girl really exhibit healing powers?"

The man with the waxen face said.

"Your Majesty the Emperor."

People bowed to him. But Isabel, still not in her right mind, failed to hear those words.

"Certainly so. As soon as her healing power manifested, her wounds healed slightly and the bruises disappeared."

One of the knights said.

"Yes- that's right. I... I have a power."

Isabel said excitedly, not knowing why she was so thrilled.

The waxen-faced man's expression turned grim. His look was so ghastly that Isabel finally closed her mouth.

"Treason! Seize her at once!"

He exclaimed.

Only then did Isabel snap out of her daydream, due to the firm grip of the knights surrounding her.

"Wait, what's gone wrong here! Just a moment. I haven't done anything bad, ah, don't touch me!"

\*\*\*

"Trash from YvesChapel disrupting an important royal event. Interrogate thoroughly to uncover the intentions. If she has healing power, she must certainly be YvesChapel's descendant. Ensure to personally interrogate her."

The Emperor, Nerus, sneered coldly. And then he commanded the captain of the knights.

'What is this all about?'

Princess Sylvia, standing behind Raul, quietly furrowed her delicate brow.

Nerus passed by them, glancing briefly at Raul's face. However, he failed to notice Sylvia's presence, a common occurrence.

Perhaps Nerus was worried that Raul might take YvesChapel's daughter for himself.

The living eldest daughter of YvesChapel was Raul's betrothed, under the condition that she could bear a 'legitimate heir.'

Only under the premise that she was neither a criminal nor a madwoman.

And only under the premise that she would not fall into the hands of the royal family.

*'The betrothed...,'*

*'If that's the case...,'*

such murmurs came from the nobles' quiet gossip, all looking at Raul.

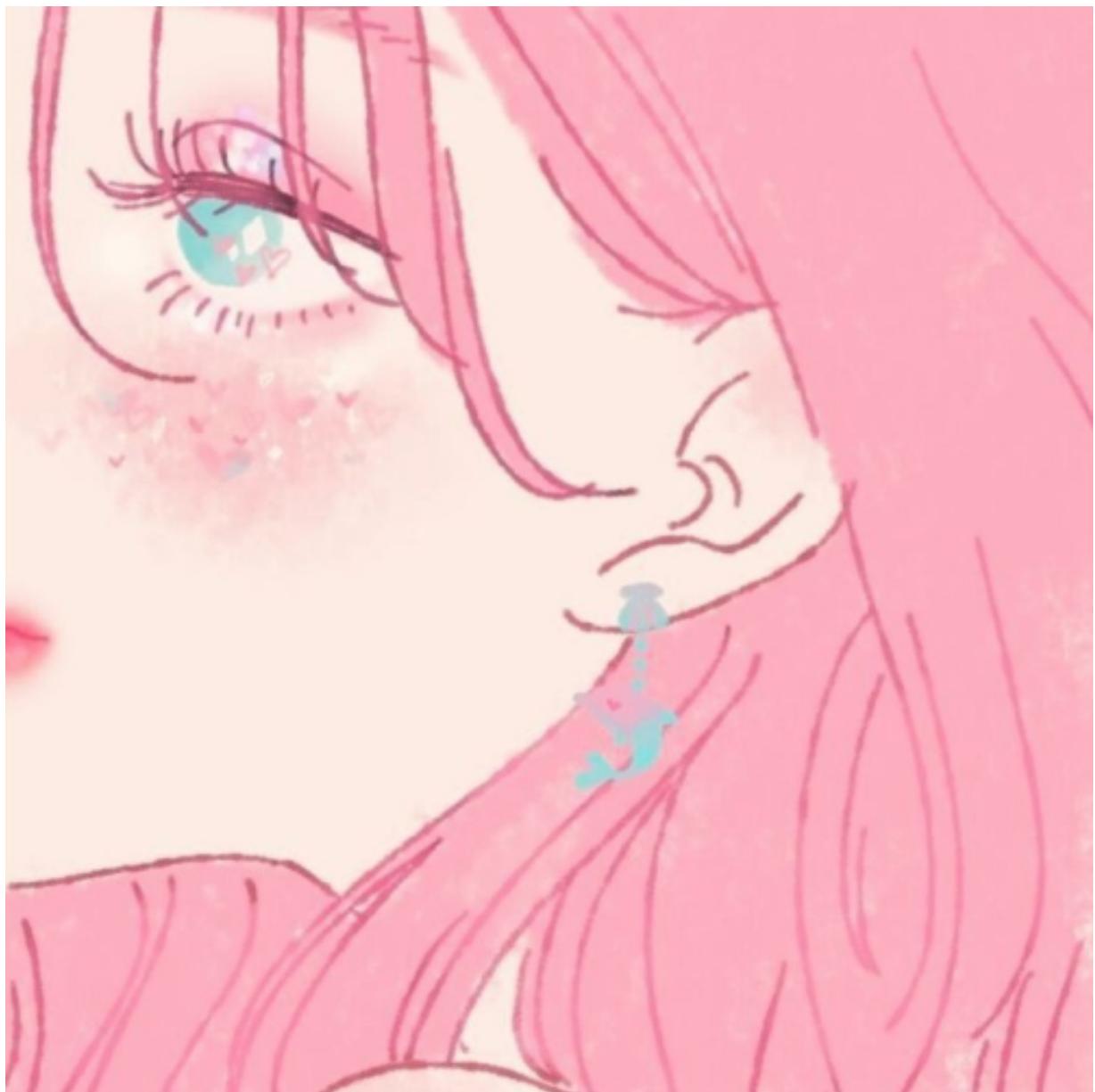
Every high noble in the capital knew of the legendary betrothal between YvesChapel and the Grand Ducal family.

'Is that betrothal really being revived? No way. Just like that damned prophecy?'

Sylvia pressed her palm tightly with her fingernails in silence but did not show any signs of nervousness. Revealing emotions is not a virtue of the royal family.

Instead, she feigned a languid and indifferent expression.

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# Chapter 140

“That woman... She’s the surviving daughter of the YvesChapel family, you say? A lineage that has always produced beauties with mystical healing powers? She doesn’t look the part at all.”

“Upon closer inspection, she might actually be quite beautiful.”

“Just try to lay a hand on me! Ahh, don’t touch me!”

However, the blonde woman who was struggling and screaming viciously to shake off the knights trying to capture her... simply seemed like some kind of beast.

Her eyes were bloodshot, and her hair was completely disheveled.

Sylvia glanced at Raul while she spoke.

For Sylvia, trying to attract Raul’s attention seemed like a kind of inertia.

She had grown up hearing that she must marry Raul without fail. That was the sole reason for her birth, to bear the next Emperor in place of her lacking kin.

In fact, sometimes Sylvia felt like a great rock or a dragon from mythology to him.

“No matter how you look at it, she seems like a madwoman.”

Raul opened his mouth in response to Sylvia’s words.

“Indeed. Wearing a silk dress no less. It seems she attempted to assassinate high officials using festival fireworks. Plus, she’s agitated as if on drugs, roaring like a wild beast. Oh, indeed, traitors are truly terrifying beings.”

He said it in an indifferent tone.

Sylvia was somewhat impressed. She had never heard such a lengthy speech from Raul before.

But Raul was not kindly responding to Sylvia’s words.

It was almost as if he didn’t notice Sylvia was there at all, almost talking to himself. Sylvia was smart enough to realize that.

Then Raul strode towards the woman of YvesChapel. As people saw Raul, they made way as if it were a lie.

“Grand Duke, please wait.”

Sylvia followed after Raul.

“You’re the heir of YvesChapel?”

Raul bent down. The flailing woman caught sight of Raul and gradually ceased her struggles.

The eyes of the beast-like woman grew dazed.

When Raul gestured, the hesitating knights removed her gag.

“There’s no proof that she’s one of YvesChapel’s people, even if she exhibited healing powers.”

Sylvia spoke, clinging close behind Raul.

“Healing powers manifest only in YvesChapel’s people. Although it’s been confirmed that the survivors of YvesChapel perished in a fire, there might be a daughter or two who were hidden away.”

Raul said.

“You, what is your name?”

Sylvia asked the woman of YvesChapel in a cold tone.

The woman blinked and then looked not at Sylvia but at Raul. With sweet eyes that seemed to plead for rescue, she spoke to him.

“I am Isabel.”

“Your family name? Is it YvesChapel?”

“What is YvesChapel?”

A cold smirk formed on Sylvia’s lips, her way of hiding her confusion. It was clear that the survivor of YvesChapel was either a madwoman or an idiot.

At the same time, Sylvia realized that Isabel was an incredible beauty.

“YvesChapel is a noble family that has been wiped out. And healing power is an ability that manifests only in the people of the YvesChapel family. If you have healing power, then you must be one of YvesChapel’s. Of course, your current state doesn’t look noble at all.”

Isabel blinked her eyes again and swallowed hard.

"YvesChapel? Yes, I am indeed a noble. That's right. I've always thought of myself as a noble since I possess healing powers."

"You have healing powers..."

Raul muttered softly.

As Raul reacted to Isabel's words, Sylvia grew inwardly anxious.

"If you're truly of the YvesChapel family, how can you not know your own surname?"

"Call someone I know. I am acquainted with the high nobility. Duchess Lisbeth."

"So you know the Duchess"

Sylvia said in dismay.

Duchess Lisbeth. It was natural for a wildfire-like rage to flare up at the name thrown like a Molotov cocktail.

No one was unaware of why Duchess Lisbeth had died. She met an ugly end at the hands of organized criminals while trying to fund her politics through drug trafficking.

"I can't remember how I know, but I am a very important person to that woman. She was my patron and promised to make me a true noble, no, I worked for her. I don't remember exactly."

"Work?"

Raul's brow furrowed.

“Did you make drugs for Duchess Lisbeth?”

“Yes! I remember now. That’s me. I can make medicine and I have medical knowledge. I was well educated.”

“That explains a lot. I wondered where Duchess Lisbeth got the new hallucinogenic drug from. Since the YvesChapel family is also known for their famous pharmacists, the knowledge hidden within that household would be enough to create a new hallucinogen.”

Raul spoke in a low voice.

Sylvia then realized, if those words were true, the woman named Isabel was a criminal.

If Raul said so, it was so. The Grand Duke did not speak lightly. And even if she were not a criminal...

‘This woman cannot become the Grand Duke’s fiancée.’

Chills ran down Sylvia’s back and she broke out in cold sweat as a shiver overcame her.

But Sylvia would never show anything. That was how the royal family lived, and how Sylvia survived.

“Take her and verify whether the healing power is real.”

Raul gestured to the imperial knights. He had a completely disinterested expression.

“That means...”

Sylvia asked softly.

“Arrest the traitor and deal with her according to the law. At least she will die as a noble.”

Raul then had the expression of someone who had just noticed Sylvia.

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

Sylvia knows the way men like Raul think. To such men, there are only two kinds of cards: those that are useful and those that are not.

Isabel has just been categorized as a useless card at this moment. This meant that the woman had now stepped onto the path to hell.

“Wait, weren’t you trying to save me? I know you. Ah, beautiful person. Please help me!”

As Raul turned his back, Isabel began to scream wildly.

The knights, who had been holding back while watching Raul, now mercilessly beat and bound Isabel.

Watching this, Sylvia frowned slightly and quickly turned away.

If Isabel truly is a descendant of YvesChapel, she must have fallen into a very long and painful hell.

Sylvia thought so and bit her lip once.

\*\*\*

Around the time when there was a disturbance at the royal family’s residence.

Nicole emerged from the forest much later. With the great commotion, there would be no one to capture her.

She looked at Grace, who was beside her.

“Whether they arrest Isabel or not, that’s the woman’s fate.”

Grace said in a low voice.

Nicole left a message at the royal family’s residence. It was all Grace’s idea.

And Estock finally erased Isabel’s memory.

Leaving behind only a few fragmented facts.

Such as the fact that she lived in a cabin, her mother’s name, and that she worked for Duchess Lisbeth.

Then, after inflicting wounds on her body, the awakened Isabel would use her healing powers.

This task was not difficult. Nicole had Estock, Dagger, and even Redia, who were perhaps the highest-level agents throughout the entire empire.

Moreover, there was Grace.

Grace roughly understood the situation after hearing Redia’s brief explanation and the message to meet at the edge of the royal hunting ground forest.

And Nicole quickly figured out what she needed now.

“I have no intention of killing Isabel with my own hands.”

Because she remembered the short remark Nicole had made before.

During the royal family’s tedious opening ceremony, Grace hastily sent Redia to fetch cloth, paint, and fireworks. They were cute tools, but what they had done was not cute at all.

“I carried out the memory erasure as you commanded. And I strongly suggested that she use her healing power as soon as she woke up. She will probably use it in front of people.”

Estock, sitting opposite, said this. Nicole nodded her head.

As he said, Isabel would use her healing power as soon as she saw her own wounds, and she would soon catch people’s attention.

Unlike Jay, when Isabel used her healing power, it produced a noticeable light. However, Isabel’s healing effect was much less effective than Jay’s.

“I know. But even without hypnosis using a confession agent, Isabel would have used her healing power immediately. She couldn’t stand having scars on her body, so she used her healing power impulsively on small wounds even when she was young.”

Nicole muttered indifferently. And she found it curious that she could talk about Isabel to these people without any trouble.

Hearing this, Estock shrugged his shoulders.

“At least Isabel achieved her dream. She became the only survivor and direct heir of YvesChapel. She must have regained her high noble status.”

Nicole said softly.

“That high noble status comes in a gift box with a tag labeled ‘traitor’ attached to it.”

“An inseparable pair of gifts. Like a buy-one-get-one-free deal.”

Nicole murmured. Estock chuckled as if he found the joke funny.

"Grace, do you think Isabel will be tortured?"

Nicole spoke after a moment.

"No. Physical torture is not the royal family's specialty. Why resort to torture when we have truth serums? Besides, torturing a lunatic would yield nothing. So..."

"Execution, then. A fitting outcome."

Nicole smoothed the hem of her skirt. Grace tightly grasped Nicole's hand.

"Do not be afraid, Karen. I am by your side. Even in death, I will protect you. I won't let you die like my daughter."

Grace whispered softly. Nicole's eyes seemed to redden.

"In the end, we couldn't make her confess the whereabouts of my father."

"I'm sorry for that. I admit there are limits to my abilities."

Estock said. Nicole couldn't blame Estock. On the contrary, she had to be thankful for his help thus far, even if his motives were not normal.

"Still, it's a relief to know that my father is safe. I believe he is hiding well. He knows many things, so he must be living well among the people."

Nicole spoke softly, and then she opened the window to look at the carriage ahead.

Redia, covering her face, was driving the carriage, which Leos and Bluea were riding in. Dagger was currently driving this carriage.

"Let's go to our house first. It's the safest place from Raul."

Grace said. Nicole quietly nodded her head.

"Young lady."

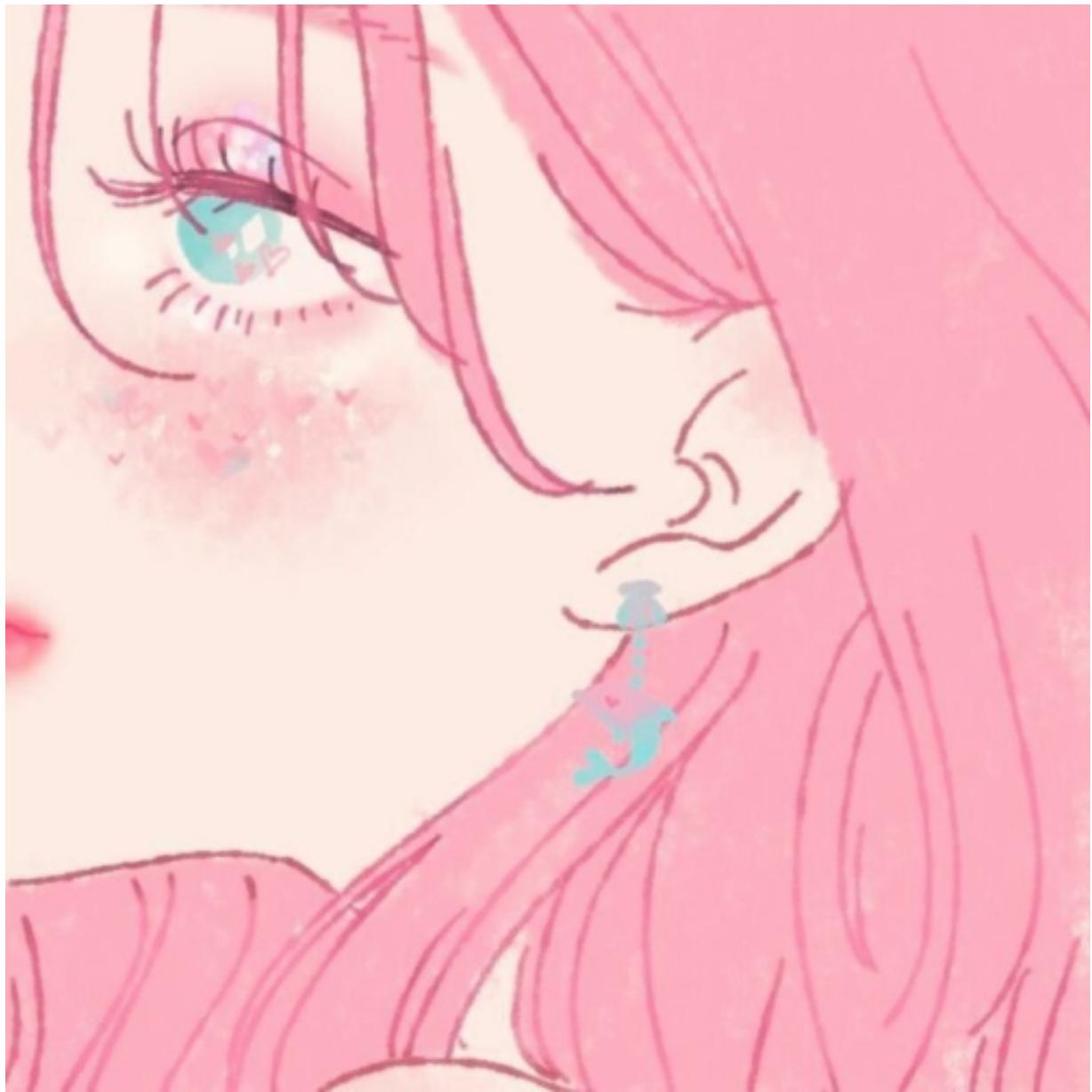
At that moment, Estock quietly called out to Nicole.

"Yes?"

"...There's a bit of a problem."

Nicole's heart fluttered ominously.

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# Chapter 141

Estock whispered in a low voice.

"Isabel, there was something strange when interrogating that woman. No matter how much we questioned her, she wouldn't reveal the location where she hid her father."

"Isabel hates me. Could it be that she's resisting out of spite?"

"Hmm... That might be the case, or it might not."

"What exactly do you mean?"

"It's as if someone has hidden her memories, so she can't divulge the location of her father."

"How could that be possible....."

Nicole stopped herself from saying it was impossible. Estock had driven Isabel mad with just a truth serum. Nothing was impossible.

"Someone has pre-implanted a memory suggestion, 'Never reveal any names, places, or people.' Do you know who uses this technique?"

Nicole felt a bit queasy.

"Whose technique is it?"

“The Great Temple.”

Nicole fell silent. Who would do such a thing? The person who had taken her father?

‘No, she said Father was safe, that he was well in his confession. He couldn’t have lied under the truth serum.’

Could it be Father himself? Nicole felt a slight confusion. But now was not the time to delve into this.

“Understood. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Nicole spoke softly. Estock nodded and handed over a bag containing the statements.

“Call me again if you have such interesting work next time. And get rid of everything in this bag. Thorough destruction of evidence is the basic morality in the spy business.”

“I don’t know if there will be anything in the future that can be as interesting as this, but I’ll try.”

Nicole said calmly. Estock grinned.

“Make sure to kill or imprison the boy named Leos.”

Dagger took Nicole’s hand and whispered.

“Noona, it must be done. I know you have a tender heart.”

“For now, I’ll do my best to save him. According to his statements, Leos is not guilty.”

Nicole spoke softly.

Dagger advised her to make a firm decision if things got dangerous and then left.

Redia decided to go to Nicole's house just in case and guard the place.

"And Redia, if it seems like our house is going to be searched..."

"Yes. You told me to block it, even if it means blowing up the basement. Don't worry. I'll take good care of the house."

Nicole nodded her head.

After the three left, Nicole entered her room at Grace's house to change her clothes.

Her clothes were stained with soot and tattered. After barely managing to change and wash herself, Nicole went to see Bluea.

Grace's house was also built in an ancient style, and her family was originally famous for magical artifacts, the Sotia lineage.

The mansion was very compact and elegant, with many hidden features.

One of them was an underground space that only the owner could thoroughly open. Only Grace and her loyal subordinates could enter this place.

"I did something stupid by opening the prison door, I am really sorry."

Bluea, sitting in front of Nicole, hung her head with a tearful face as she confessed her wrongdoing immediately.

Bluea was lucky. She was injured, but it was said that her life was not in danger. After receiving treatment from the doctor

called by Grace, her complexion had much improved.

"You don't need to apologize. You're already hurt and have paid the price yourself. Haven't you learned what happens when you act on emotions this time?"

Nicole did not reprimand Bluea.

"Just remember your responsibility. You're also to blame for Leos getting hurt."

Bluea seemed already greatly shocked. Nicole knew that not scolding sometimes made a person reflect more. Bluea apologized several more times as if asking for punishment instead.

"You're too lenient. In my heyday, I would have beheaded someone who committed such an act with a magic gun in an instant."

Grace sneered. Bluea began to tremble, shivering all over.

"I'm worried that you might actually do it, so I'll stop here. Once by me, once by Grace. Bluea only has one life to die twice."

Grace faintly smiled at those words. She was holding a glass filled with alcohol in her hand. She emptied the glass in one go and placed it on the table.

"I'll spare you for Karen's sake."

"Thank you, Master."

Bluea bowed her head once again.

They were now sitting in a vast underground space in Grace's mansion.

The space was modestly decorated, but it had one large living room and three rooms.

A person came out from the room on the right side of the living room. It was Grace's personal physician. Nicole approached Grace and whispered a question.

"The personal physician is..."

"He's tight-lipped, so don't worry. The servants working for me would not speak even in death."

Nicole nodded. The personal physician had been examining Leos and was just coming out.

"It seems difficult for him to survive the night."

Nicole frowned at those words.

"Is Leos's injury that severe? It seemed like he was caught in the aftermath of an explosion, but I thought it was just burns..."

"His internal injuries are severe. His internal organs are all damaged. The cause is unknown. It's separate from the burns."

"....."

Nicole turned to look at Grace. As expected, she seemed to know something.

"I've heard that when people from a family of ability users exert their power beyond the allowed limit, their bodies break down internally and they die. That's why these family members learn to always preserve their own bodies, not to

be swept away by emotions... as if treating themselves like treasures."

"So, Leos's internal injuries are due to overuse of his power?"

"In other words, it's also called a rampage."

Nicole sighed. Seeing the death of an innocent person... was not a pleasant feeling. Indeed, there was room for debate about whether Leos was guilty or not.

It was true that he killed his family after falling for Isabel's seduction. But he was being manipulated by a Glassworm.

"If he had been treated promptly without delay, there might have been hope."

"That's not the case. There is no treatment for this kind of situation. It was his destiny to end up this way."

Grace said firmly. Nicole was disheartened but accepted it.

"Are you going to stay by his deathbed?"

"Yes. He may not be my brother, but he is someone who was harmed by my sibling. I should stay by his side as much as possible."

Nicole let out a small sigh. In the end, there was another victim of Isabel in this life, and even a new one at that.

"Grace, I have a request. Please send a well-disinfected glass bottle. It must be completely airtight. And prepare it so the entrance can be sealed with beeswax."

Grace readily nodded her head.

"Understood, I will prepare it soon."

As all were tools available in the mansion, it would not be difficult.

And then Nicole entered the room where Leos was waiting.

Leos was lying in bed with a frail face.

Dried blood was around Leos's mouth. The fact that it remained even after the doctor's visit meant he had just vomited.

Nicole picked up a towel from the table and wiped his cheek.

Soon the door opened, and Grace's maid brought in the item Nicole had requested and set it on the table.

Leos looked at Nicole with dimming eyes.

"I'm dying, aren't I?"

".....Maybe. I'm sorry. I didn't know this would happen..."

"It hurts."

"Do you still think of Isabel?"

"Yes, I love her. She is my everything. I know I should reject it, but just....."

Leos gazed into the void with transparent eyes. Nicole's heart ached. It was like seeing herself from a past life.

"Isabel is in pain. I am in pain too..... It's strange. I can feel her."

“It’s because of the Glassworm inside you.”

Nicole said.

“You are being dominated by it, to regard Isabel as your love and master.”

“But how can it be fake? The heart exists, doesn’t it? The heart can’t just disappear.....”

Nicole felt a little sad at those words. At the same time, Raul came to mind.

Nicole deeply loved Raul. That feeling would not disappear. Even if she were to be ousted from her mistress position someday. Even if she became unable to even approach him.

“That feeling alone is not a sin. And you, you have not committed a sin.”

“But I killed my parents. They said those people stole me because they coveted the Rodria family’s secret funds..... But they also raised me.”

“Not all things in the world are fragmentary. That’s why we live with prejudices, endlessly.”

Nicole said softly.

“And then one makes wild guesses, becomes stubborn, even arrogant. These are all sins everyone commits. That’s all there is to it. You will be forgiven.”

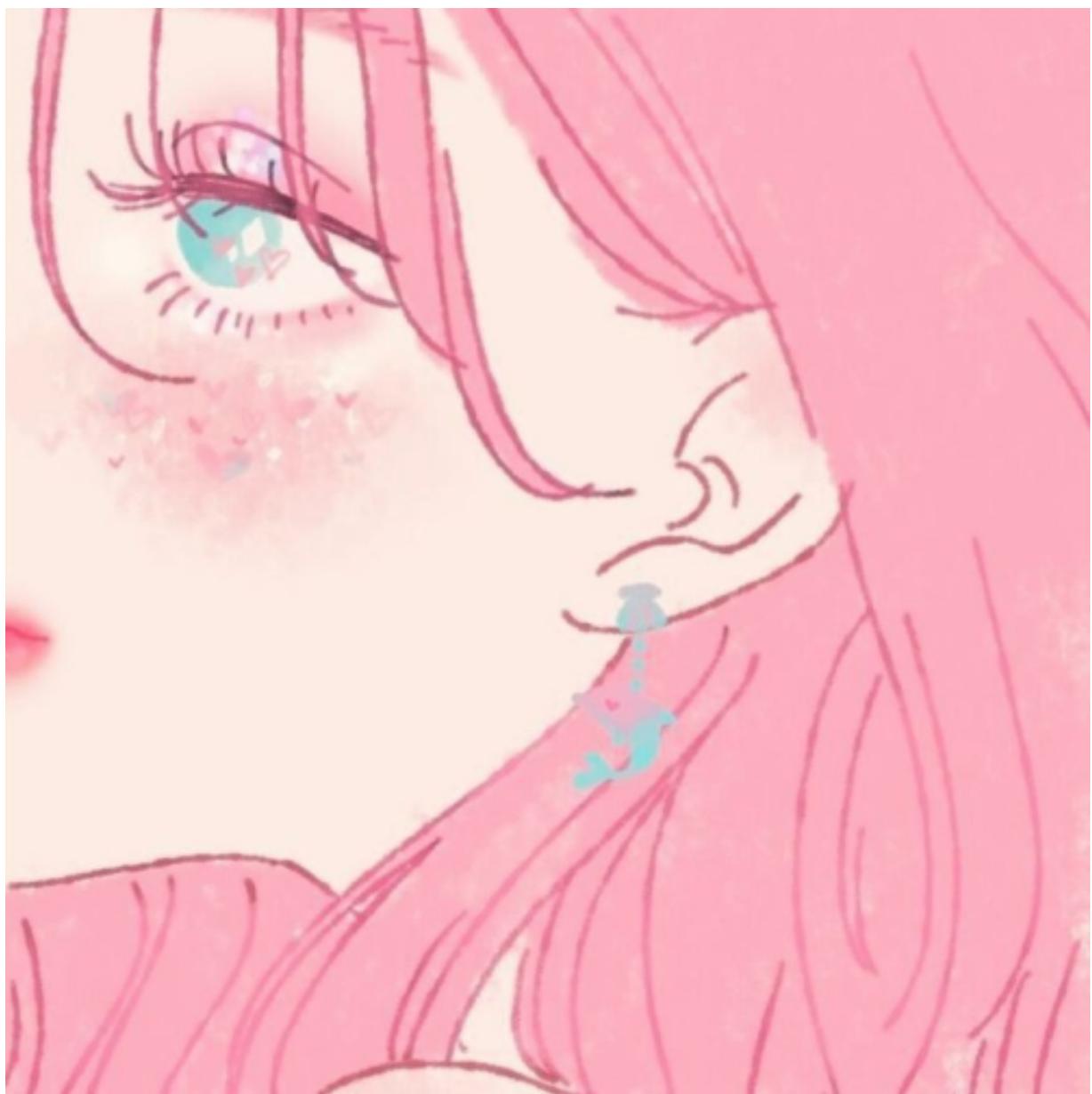
Leos looked at Nicole.

*Cough, cough.* He coughed for the last time. Blood spattered around his mouth. Then, clutching his chest as if in pain, he slowly closed his eyes.

Nicole tightly held his hand and sincerely prayed for the young man. Eventually, Leos's breathing completely stopped. Nicole checked for his last breath.

At that moment, the eyes of Leos's corpse opened, and something burst forth from his mouth.

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# Chapter 142

Although it was invisible to the eye, Nicole was certain she could sense it.

The wind clearly stirred, and she felt the rapid flapping of wings in the air, like that of a hummingbird. Nicole grasped it with her hand.

“Ah, it hurts!”

Nicole let out a small cry. It moved within her palm. It was indeed a Glassworm.

Nicole swiftly placed it into a glass bottle and sealed the lid tightly. She then lit the candle on the table and shone it through the glass bottle.

*Fluttering-fluttering-*

The entirely transparent Glassworm faintly revealed itself in the candlelight.

‘Mother taught me. For gaseous or liquid transparent poisonous insects, if you seal them in a clean glass bottle and shine a candle on it, their bodies will slightly become visible.’

Nicole could only vaguely remember what her mother had taught her.

But indeed, the Glassworm existed, and her mother's words were all true.

Nicole took a breath. What was done could not be undone, and Leos was dead.

\*\*\*

"Do not worry about the young man named Leos. We will conduct a simple funeral and quickly cremate him. Although making a grave is too much, at least we can scatter his ashes by the river."

Grace quietly consoled Nicole as she came out of the room, patting her shoulder. At dawn, Leos would be taken to the public crematorium along with the bodies of the unclaimed.

"Thank you, Grace. For everything..."

Nicole said softly.

"Now go home."

Grace said.

"You have already attracted enough attention. Raul will know you are here."

"...Yes."

"You will be suspected by Raul."

"Perhaps."

It was revealed that Isabel, who was caught by the royal family, was involved in the affairs of Duchess Lisbeth. And the only agent dispatched from the Grand Duke's family to work on Duchess Lisbeth's matter was Nicole.

Anyone who is not a fool would understand that correlation.

Raul will suspect that Nicole is involved in this matter.

"Since all the incidents I'm involved with have become quite significant, he will see me as a complete troublemaker," she said.

"Fortunately, you weren't the one leading this, were you?"

"Grace, what are you talking about? I did this."

Nicole frowned at Grace's attempt to take the blame for everything.

"No. I did it. I am a worthless mother who lost her daughter. Lacking the ability to rebel against the royal family, I caused them trouble and ruined the event," she declared.

Grace's lips relaxed slightly as she took another drink.

"To think I would see such a sight in my lifetime."

Nicole just found out from a report she heard.

The royal family's hunting festival was temporarily canceled because a traitor had been captured.

Furthermore, Nicole and her companions had written about the existence of Flame on the banner sent to the royal family.

The Emperor must have been on edge. It was said that he returned to the palace in a sudden rage, and now the entire imperial household is in an uproar.

(Capture the traitors! Seize all remnants of Rodria and YvesChapel! Leave not a single one!)

An untimely search for traitors was said to begin.

"Everyone will think the Emperor has gone senile. Where would they catch people from a ruined family, right? The subordinates must be bewildered too. Now the royal family must fight against an imaginary rebellion. How amusing that farce will be."

Grace laughed softly.

"Grace, this is no laughing matter. It may seem like a joke, but you could really get into serious trouble..."

"Do you think I don't know that?"

The smile faded from Grace's face. Nicole realized whom she was trying to teach.

"You have no idea how big of a deal this is to me. I grew up learning to obey the royal family since childhood. To someone like me, this is a great leap forward."

".....That's why even more so."

"Raul knows that there are only a few who could plan such a thing."

"....."

"I told you. Raul owes me a debt. If this gets out, let it be known that I led it. Say it was a vile woman trying to regain her dignity through petty pranks after losing her daughter. A pitiful act of rebellion committed by a walking corpse who doesn't know when she'll die."

"That can't happen."

"It is possible. You're not someone significant to Raul. But I am the teacher to whom he owes his life."

Nicole flinched at Grace's words. It was an utterly obvious fact that she was nothing special to Raul.

She knew Grace spoke strongly to persuade Nicole, but every time she realized this fact, Nicole was deeply hurt.

"And you owe me a debt too, don't you?"

"Raul would never believe it."

"At least it gives a justification not to harm you. One cannot punish a subordinate on suspicion alone. They might harass you, but they won't take your life."

Nicole put her hand down.

"Why that face? Thanks to meeting a good teacher, you've grabbed a lifeline."

".....I'm sorry. I'm always grateful."

Grace chuckled lightly.

"I'm someone that doesn't know when I will die, but thanks to you, my life has been extended. So, I'm just living as I please."

Nicole was proud of herself for not showing that she was hurt.

"Then I'll go back today. Be careful since we may not see each other for a while. And you shouldn't take all the blame by yourself."

Grace nodded nonchalantly.

“Nicole.”

“Yes?”

It had been a long time since she had called her Nicole instead of Karen. Nicole opened her eyes slightly in surprise.

“Raul is always late to everything. He learned to control his emotions too early, so he doesn’t know himself well. Look forward to the future. Not yet, no..... If he keeps a child like you by his side, eventually he will have to accept you into his heart, whenever that may be.”

“.....Thank you. It’s hard to be hopeful, but I will try to be someone who deserves to be treated well.”

Nicole was embarrassed as if her unrequited love had been discovered. In the end, that’s what she said.

Grace seemed pleased with the utterly composed answer, and Nicole was grateful for Grace’s affection and concern. Grace always worried about Nicole.

“Grace.”

Before she could reply, Nicole hugged her tightly. It was quite a courageous act for Nicole.

Grace looked surprised, but amidst the shock, a faint touch of emotion was visible.

Nicole politely bid farewell to Grace and then went home.

They probably wouldn’t see each other for a while, maybe longer than expected.

At that moment, Nicole sincerely wished for nothing but Grace’s safety.

\*\*\*

When Nicole returned home, she learned that Raul was looking for her.

〈Come to the Grand Duke's residence at once.〉

Nicole felt a sort of pain upon reading that short note, something akin to fatigue.

‘I always have to share love as if in opposition to this person, and think about various things.’

The exact feeling Nicole had at that moment was a faint sense of guilt.

Nicole wanted to open up to Raul and feel at ease, to acknowledge that she was his wife and that she had somehow fallen enough to devote her whole heart to him.

That she was the daughter of YvesChapel, and also about the emotions she felt every time she was embraced.....

She wanted to show her true feelings to the one she loved and did not want to deceive him. She had no desire to play games with power.

‘But you are not my savior.’

However, if Nicole were to reveal all her sincerity, Raul would spurn and abandon her. He did not need someone who would become a burden to him.

Even the sincerity of Nicole’s wholehearted devotion would be of no value to him. And above all..... Nicole had already deceived Raul.

He would not forgive her. Nicole could not even become his toy.

And today again, Nicole will be dragged before Raul to be interrogated.

She goes to him to be broken, and she does not want to become accustomed to it. Her body could endure the pain, but her heart was growing weaker.

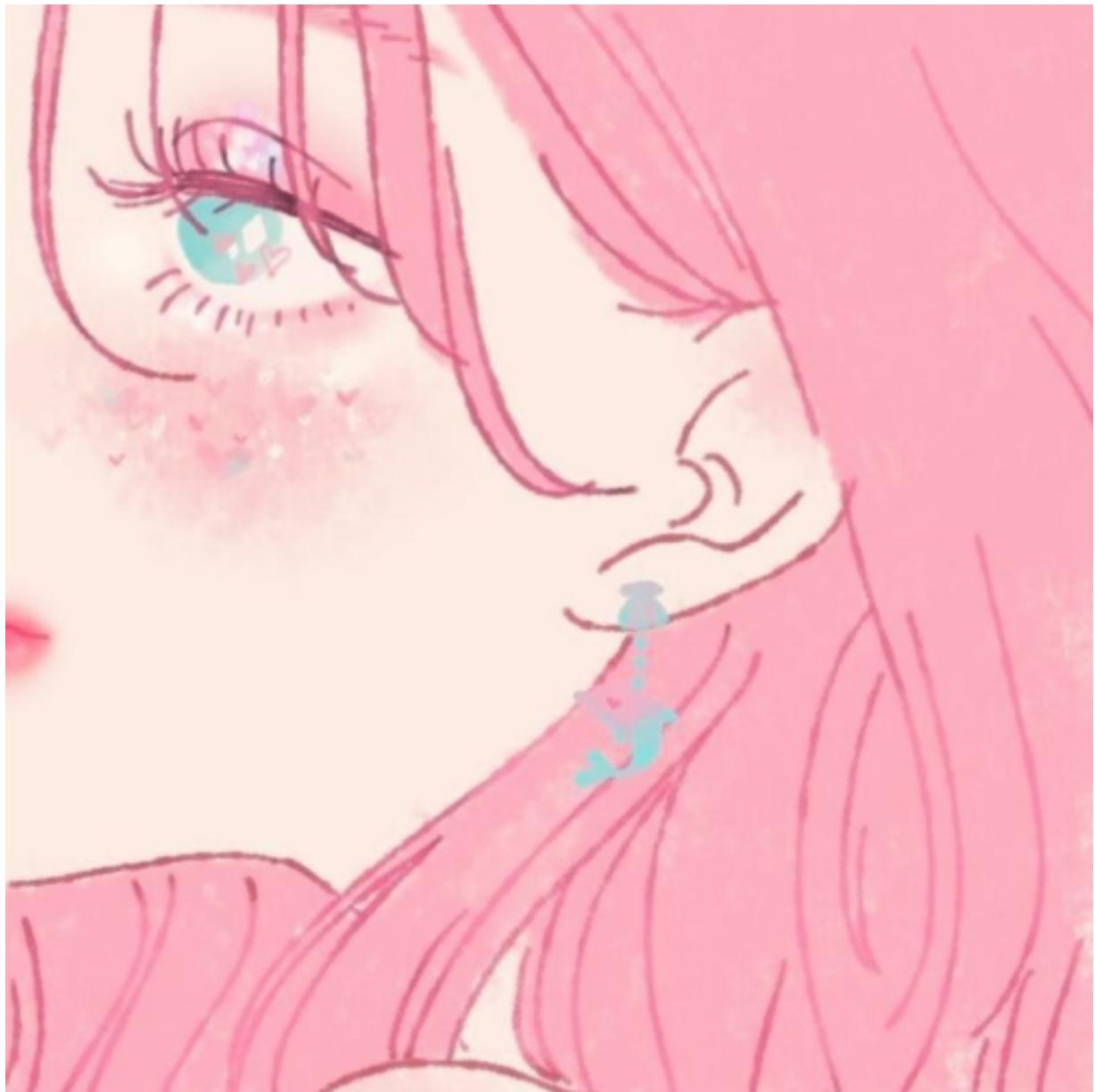
It was hard to resist the urge to show him everything, now that the shield was gone.

Could she not ask Raul to lay everything out and ask for help? Such thoughts made her feel utterly pathetic.

“Young lady? What should we do?”

“Send a message that I will come by evening. I need to rest a bit before facing him.”

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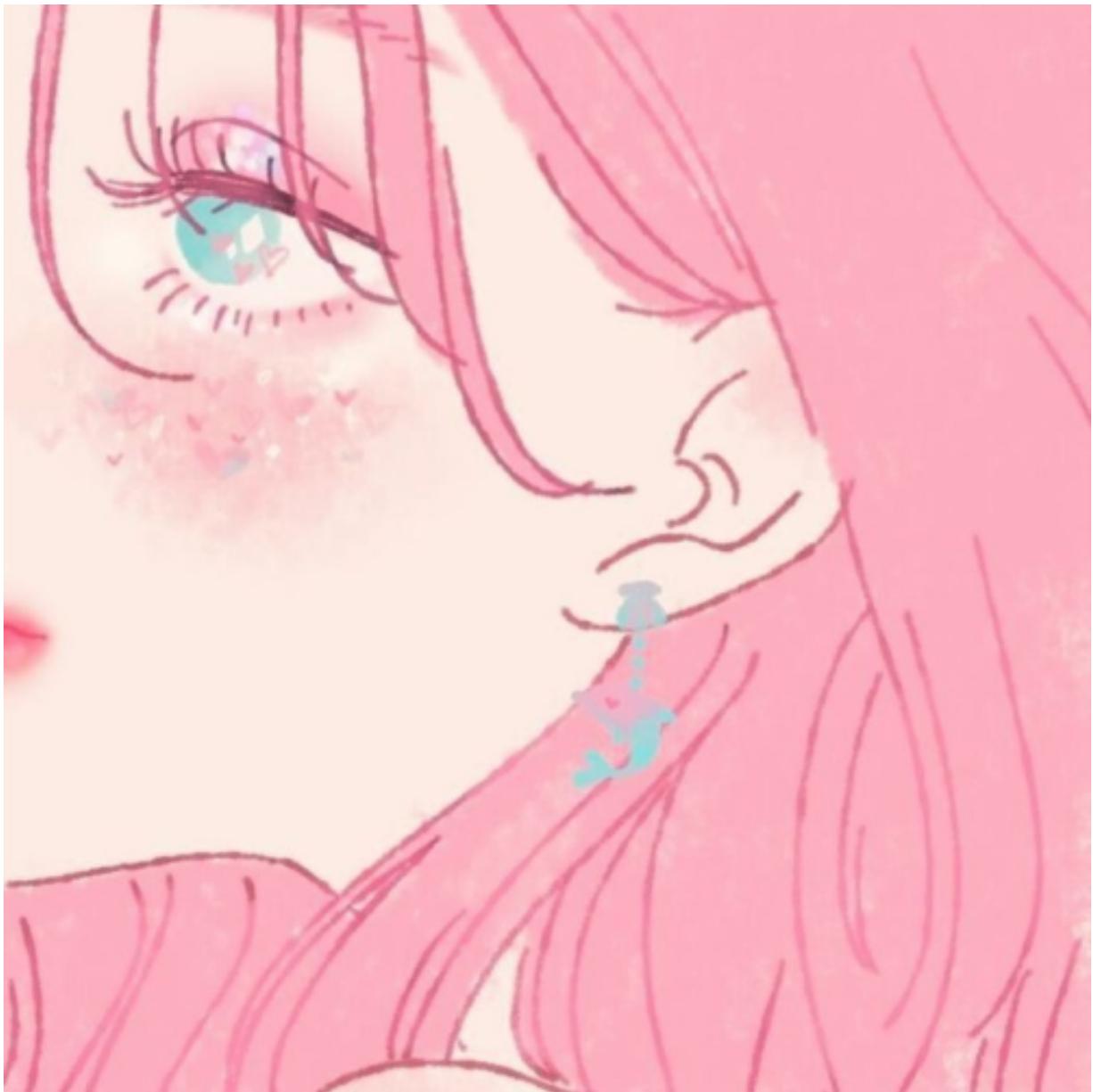


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# Chapter 143

“Please eat some food. You have gone without eating for too long.”

Redia, quick to notice, brought over the food she had prepared while waiting for Nicole. It was a soup boiled with vegetables and meat, and a sandwich made with tomatoes.

Nicole had no appetite but ate to regain her strength.

“Oh, I’ve placed a letter on the table. It’s from the Young Master.”

The only person Redia would call ‘young master’ was Nicole’s sibling, Jay, who now goes by the name Jen.

Nicole looked at Redia anew. Redia, being perceptive, had deliberately brought the letter with the meal, sensing Nicole’s fatigue.

The letters from Jay at the academy were the joy and hope of Nicole’s life.

“A new letter has arrived from my sibling.”

“Yes, it must be news of another excellent academic performance.”

A faint smile formed on Nicole’s lips. Grace’s judgment of character was not wrong.

Bluea disappointed Nicole today, but it wasn't a desperate betrayal. Grace planned to 're-educate' Bluea after watching until she recovered. Redia was excellent.

Nicole tore open the letter.

"It's bound to be good news, right?"

"Studying is not hard, he says. Father and mother have..."

They had put Jay through rigorous advanced studies. Nicole was about to say this but then closed her mouth.

Father and Mother had tried to teach Nicole and Isabel healing powers and various virtues of a lady.

Back then, she didn't know what he was learning, but now she does. And Jay learned theology and history along with healing education. Jay had the most study load among the siblings.

In fact, both fields were boring and not of Nicole's interest, so she didn't know at the time. Still, they (their Mother and Father) did not give up. Perhaps they believed that one day they would live a noble life in the sun.

Suddenly, thoughts of Father came to mind, bringing a pang to the heart.

"Miss?"

"It's nothing."

Nicole saw through the letter that the boy she thought of only as a young sibling was growing up.

The boy said he was doing well.

He was healthy and his relationships were fine. The letter briefly outlined the education he had recently received and how he was evaluated.

The handwriting in the letter had become more serious, and the superfluous chatter and the image of the sibling who used to admire his sister gradually disappeared. It was almost like reporting to a superior.

However, at the end, there were warm concerns about herself written. Without that, Nicole might have felt a little resentful towards her rapidly growing sibling.

“Just, it seems like my sibling is becoming more of an adult.”

“They say that’s how boys are. They feel embarrassed to share every little detail with their families. Maybe they see it as showing weakness.” (Redia)

Redia said, as if to comfort her.

“Is there no personal news?” (Redia)

“Just concerns about my health.” (Nicole)

Though she feels like she won’t be able to recover her health soon if she’s dragged away today and interrogated by Raul.

Nicole swallowed those words inwardly.

“There’s just one piece of idle talk. About a classmate he mentioned before. Was his name Aaron?”

“Um... The classmate with blond hair who is very lucky?”

“...Did he say that?”

"He said it indirectly. The exchange student who is arrogant, lacks social skills, does as he pleases, and wears expensive clothes."

"And he said he picks fights for no reason. During riding lessons, he foolishly followed him and nearly fell off his horse."

Nicole smiled with her eyes.

He added that in history class, only he and the boy in the letter received perfect scores on their essays.

Jay was also a member of their family. Except for Isabel, no one in their family expressed emotions richly. So while he did not openly speak ill of the student named Aaron, an inevitable coldness came from his words.

"To me, it seems like a rivalry... If competing leads to good results, it's not bad."

"Maybe they'll become friends soon. They say boys become close through fighting."

Seeing Nicole's mood improve, Redia heartily agreed. Nicole stroked Jay's letter several times.

In her past life, Nicole had focused so much on Isabel that she hadn't paid much attention to Jay. Her younger brother had not disappointed her in either of her lives.

'Anyway, I'll have to explain to Jay how Isabel was dealt with.'

Nicole thought. Soon, she would have to get permission from Raul to go meet Jay.

'But for now, it's uncertain. I'm not sure if I'll even survive today.'

\*\*\*

After finishing the simple meal, Nicole changed her clothes and washed herself.

Just before leaving the mansion, Nicole heard a brief message from Grace.

The news was that {the Emperor, greatly enraged, planned to execute the remnants of the traitors of YvesChapel after torturing them} .

Nicole became lost in thought. The Emperor had reacted more violently than expected.

If Isabel dies like this, she can no longer extract information directly from her.

The whereabouts of her father as well. The secrets of the Glassworm too.

Suddenly, she remembered the words Leos had said as he was dying.

{Isabel is suffering.}

'Could it be that Isabel was hurt at the moment Leos's condition rapidly worsened?'

The well-being of the Glassworm's host and its master might be connected. If one side suffers, the other might be harmed as well. It's a possibility of a kind of bond.

'I want to know more about the Glassworm.'

There was information Isabel had revealed in the interrogation records made by Estock, but that wasn't everything.

'If the Glassworm took away my memories from my past life, it might also be the key to restoring them.'

According to Isabel's confession, she obtained information about the Glassworm from a book.

'It's the book series of the YvesChapel family that contains knowledge of poisonous insects, plants, and pharmacology. It was said to be in book number 0... However, that book has already been lost.'

Nicole had managed to divert the entire series starting from book number 1. But Isabel was quicker. Book number 0 had ended up in her hands.

'It would be good if I could know the contents of that book.'

Nicole, who had been lost in thought while sitting in the armchair, slowly read the last statement she had received from Estock.

By the time she finished reading, it was already evening.

Nicole gave an order to Redia.

"Prepare the carriage, Redia. We're going to the Grand Duke's residence."

"When will you return?"

"It seems that's not for me to choose."

The thought that she might die in the worst-case scenario crossed her mind. She hurried a bit with her preparations to

leave.

\*\*\*

Nicole arrived at the Grand Duke's residence. As she entered through the back door, the butler greeted her without a word.

And then he led her to the place where Raul was waiting.

Today, she entered a place well known to Nicole. It was where guests occasionally came or where he spent his rare leisure time.

The room was half-dark with a fireplace. Around it were portraits of unnamed ancestors of the Grand Duke's family. The room was decorated majestically and in red tones. At the end of the wall, there were cabinets filled with precious liquors and a billiard table.

*Clack.*

Raul moved his cue. The billiard balls made a dull sound as they rolled across the green field.

Raul, who had been bent over, stood up and looked at Nicole with dark eyes. He then picked up a glass filled with brown liquor that was on the edge of the billiard table. He took a sip and set it down.

"Tell me, Karen. Does my teacher seem mad to you?"

"Yes?"

Nicole, tense, responded belatedly.

"Grace said that she was the one who had imprisoned Isabel, the mad woman, the survivor of the YvesChapel."

Nicole's heart sank. Grace had taken all the blame upon herself. Raul appeared calm, as usual, elegant and beautiful.

"I was looking for the culprit who made the drug for Duchess Lisbeth. And then that person showed up at the royal hunting grounds, well disguised as a hidden rebel?"

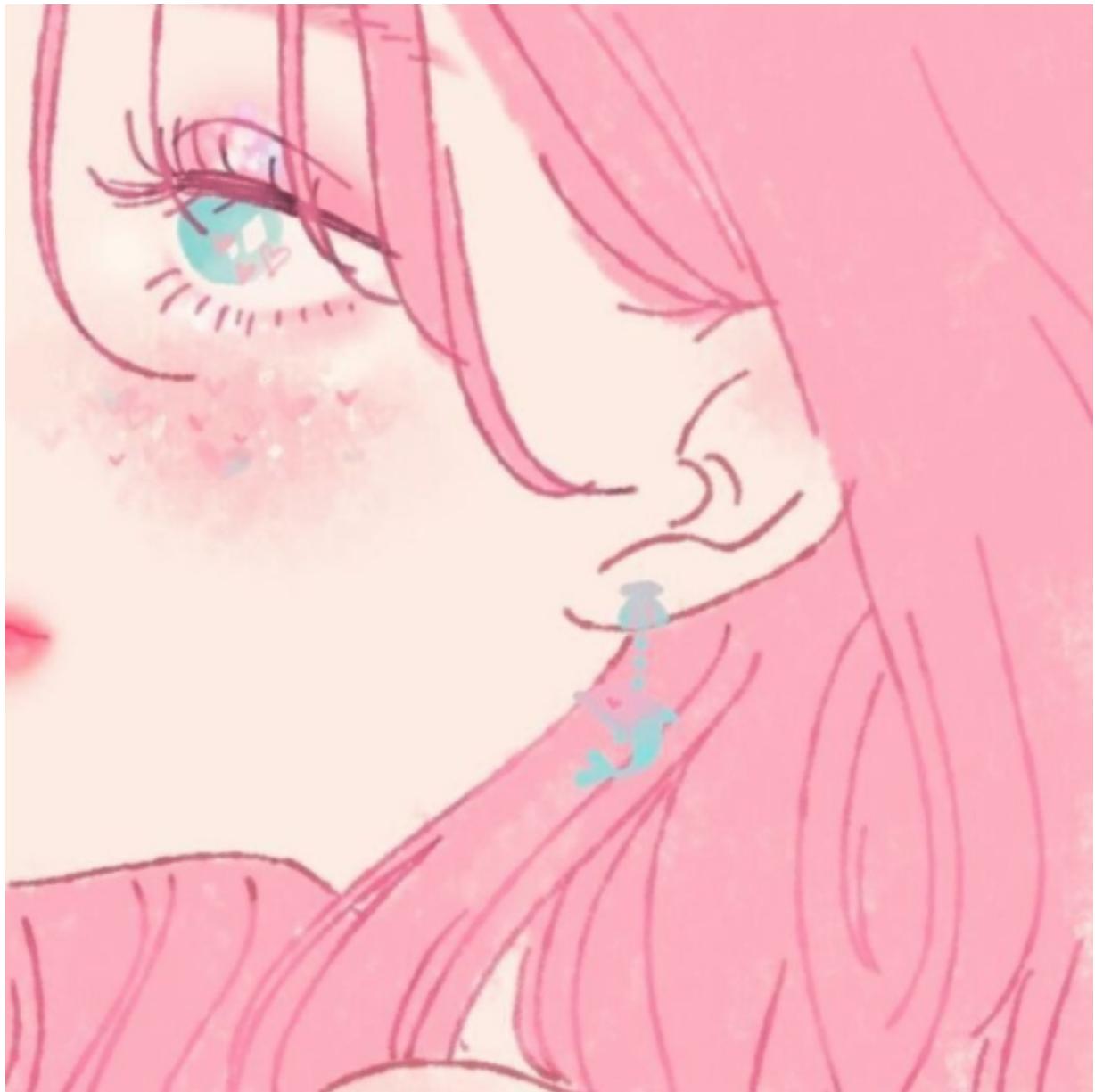
Raul smiled faintly.

"But Grace spoke up easily, claiming she had orchestrated the whole thing."

"If she said so, then it must be so."

A look of amusement deepened on Raul's face.

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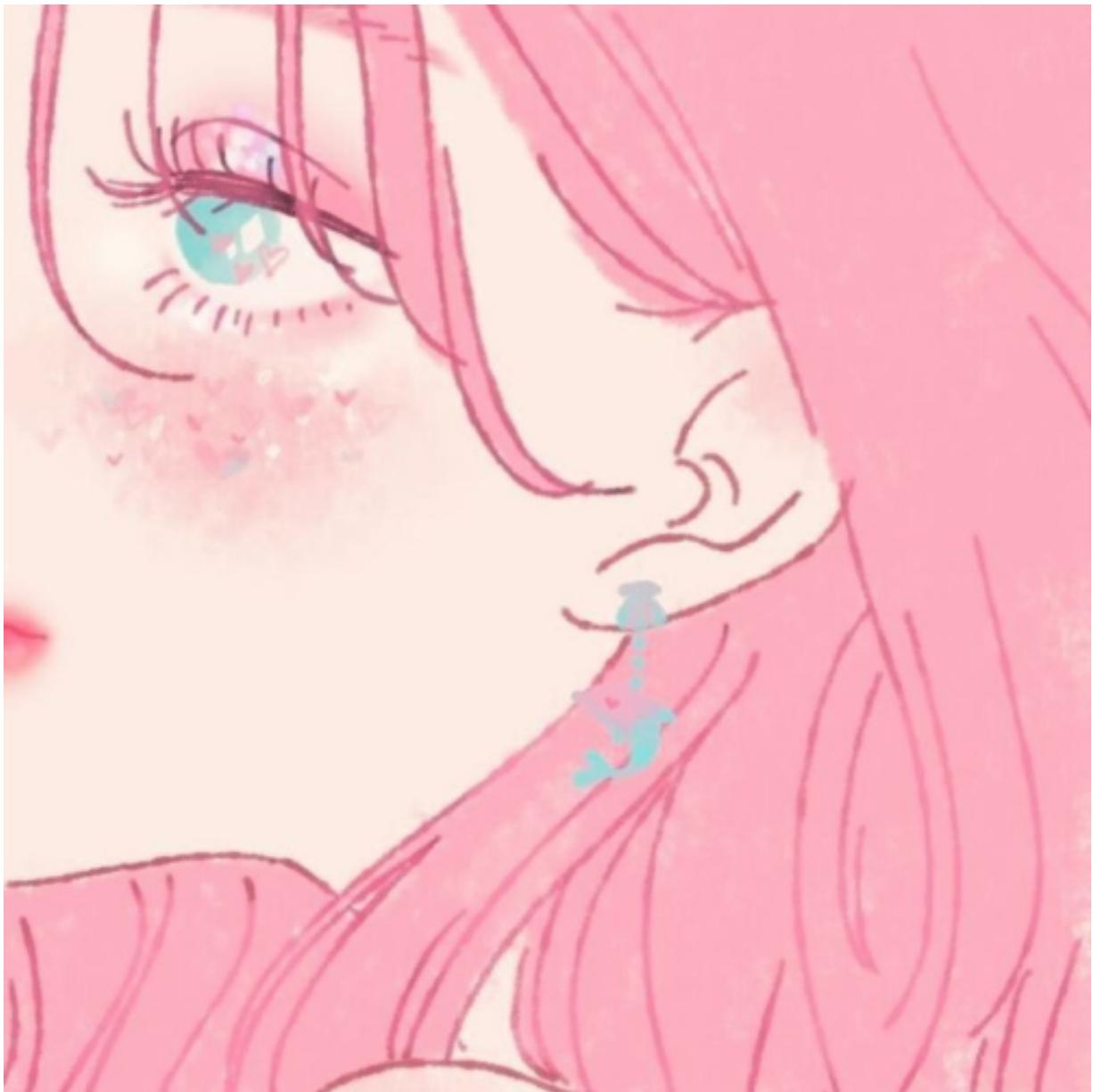


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# **Chapter 144 - R19**

Nicole lay down and looked up at Raul. Her eyes trembled slightly.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know?”

Raul tilted his head.

“Why did you omit the report about the woman named Isabel?”

“I didn’t know. Duchess Lisbeth had hidden the drug supplier. That girl was quietly making drugs in the back room. I couldn’t get that far.”

You’re lying.”

Raul said. Nicole bit her lip.

“Shall we interrogate the child Arula? Did she really not know either?”

Nicole flinched greatly at the mention of Aru’s name.

“Sometimes you’re too easy.”

Raul clicked his tongue. He still held a billiard cue in one hand.

“I think I know how to handle you now. No matter how much I whip you, you don’t obey. You don’t listen to threats of

death either. But for all that, you're still very cautious and fearful, so if I handle you roughly, you just become more wary."

Raul lightly gripped and moved the billiard cue, causing Nicole's chest to tense up.

He might swing it and hit her just like that.

"Shh. Bring your thighs together."

Raul said. Nicole did as she was told. She lay across the billiard table from her upper body to the end of her thighs. Due to the step at the end of the table, a small curve naturally formed as it trailed down Nicole's body. It was a perfect curve that her body drew.

Nicole closed her eyes.

"Did you think I was going to hit you?"

Raul said with a voice tinged with laughter.

"I told you, I won't hit you anymore."

He gestured towards the end of the billiard table.

"I like this day."

The billiard ball whirred into the air and settled at Raul's fingertips.

Raul is a person with abilities.

He is known to be the most flawless person with abilities in this world, known for having different abilities he can use on each day.

And today, it was psychokinesis. Raul particularly liked that ability.

And Nicole remembers. For some reason, Raul, when using his psychic powers, was more aggressive than usual.

“Put your hand under your chin.”

Thwack.

Raul lightly rolled a ball over Nicole’s body.

He leaned over and tapped the ball with the cue stick. The ball rolled along, tracing the curves of Nicole’s soft figure. The moment it touched under her chin, it stopped.

Nicole quickly placed her hand under her chin as Raul had commanded, knowing it would prevent the ball from hitting her. The strange sensation of the ball rolling and bouncing over her body made her tense yet excited. Later, it turned into fear.

“You can put it down now.”

Nicole looked at Raul and then slowly put the ball down.

“Is this a hint?”

Nicole wondered if it was a hint of violence or punishment.

“If you don’t want it to be Aru, how about I punish Dagger instead?”

Nicole’s eyes twitched.

“Why Dagger?”

"Could Dagger have been uninvolved in this? Do you think you could have snuck Isabel away on your own?"

Nicole clenched her teeth. Now Raul knew her weakness for certain.

"I will take the punishment. Please don't do that."

"I'm not going to punish you anymore."

"Then what will you do?"

Raul approached Nicole and bent down. Then he took her head in his hands and gently lifted her body up.

Raul held her like a lover and whispered.

"I will treat you just as I do now, like furniture for my use. I don't care whether people are around or not. I'll have you when I want to thrust, and hold you when I want to embrace. When I tire of that, I'll take another woman before your eyes and make you clean up afterwards. Or perhaps, I'll make you caress that woman. I'll tie you up in your underwear and make you watch me be with another woman all night long. And in the morning, you will please me with your mouth. After that, when I'm tired, I'll hold you again. It might be good to test how many times a day I can go. I'll use tools when I take you to see how much pleasure you can handle, to test how far you can go before you become an idiot. I'll thrust into you over and over again until I'm thoroughly tired of your body."

Nicole felt a tingling sensation running down her spine. Her breath heated up, and her fingertips quivered.

She held back the tears that threatened to warm her eyes. The most miserable part was that her lower half was

becoming wet with this mockery.

This man made her feel utterly debased.

Raul's gaze deepened as he felt Nicole's breathing grow ragged.

"At my card table, I'll gamble all night long and take you in between, and you will be in all my hobby rooms—sometimes tied up, sometimes on your knees."

Raul spoke tenderly and kissed Nicole's ear.

"Aren't you excited?"

"You might as well throw me away."

Nicole said. She wanted to hide the perverse excitement stained with fear.

"If I could do that, I would have done it long ago. But your master's body consistently desires you. I can't even stop it."

Raul chuckled lowly and then released Nicole's body. Nicole got up, not even daring to think about going under the table, and grabbed her shoulder.

Nicole looked at him with a frail gaze, blinking her eyes. But soon her pupils sharpened.

"If you threaten me, I'll act as you wish. But that wouldn't be true obedience. You wouldn't like anything fake, would you? You'd prefer a woman who offers sincerity, just like other men do."

Raul's smile turned cold.

“Don’t complicate our relationship. Right now, you give yourself to me in exchange for jewels and a mansion, but I can make you even more miserable.”

“...How so?”

“I could make you sell your body for a single meal, beg for it. I could even make you spend all day in a dark cellar.”

“Then you would be the first Grand Duke to starve his consort to death.”

Nicole felt ashamed at the cruel words and responded just as venomously.

Now she was certain. The madness of Nicole from her past life towards Raul was not entirely her own fault.

He made her frantic, stirred her emotions, made her sensitive. This was Raul’s way of playing the game.

*(The Grand Duke is a cold-blooded man who knows nothing of love.)*

Grace had said it. Nicole wanted to deny that advice for a long time, but on the other hand, she had to admit that Grace was right.

“Would it really be the first time?”

Raul sneered. Nicole averted her gaze from Raul.

Raul’s hand touched Nicole’s lips. His expression softened. His thumb gently traced her plump lips.

“Karen. Why do you choose the difficult path?”

“...”

Nicole took a breath. She had not developed an immunity to Raul's cruel tenderness.

"What do you expect from me?"

"Your master is not Grace, but me. I'll forgive you if you open up about everything. Who you are. Why do you engage in these eccentricities, all of it."

Nicole's eyes flickered ever so slightly as Raul gently caressed her shoulder.

"You knew the true identity of Isabel, didn't you? Why did you hide her from me?"

".....I....."

"I have given you many chances and mercy until now. I even turned a blind eye to some oddities."

"....."

"I no longer have great expectations. Just one thing is needed. I want honesty from you."

Honesty. That was the key that could ruin Nicole.

Raul would never forgive Nicole for deceiving him from the start.

Moreover, Grace's well-being was at stake. Grace had blatantly concealed Nicole's identity and laundered her status.

'Now Raul will no longer show leniency to Grace.'

With this incident, Grace had settled her 'past debt of life' with Raul. Now if Grace were to cross him, Raul could punish

her thoroughly as well.

"I am... honest with you. I have never betrayed you."

Nicole said softly.

"We both know that's a lie. Act truthfully, and you can continue to live as you are now: safe and comfortable under my protection. And there will be no other woman in the meantime."

Nicole almost screamed at the assurance that there would be no other woman.

That was what Nicole had desperately hoped for, if only that statement were... 'true.'

Nicole knew Raul. His words were as enchanting as a devil's whisper. The problem was, most often, there was a price to pay for such dealings.

It might have been better if Nicole had been even a little foolish. Then she would have knelt at Raul's feet tonight, begging for protection.

But this man doesn't operate that way. He gets excited by bait that appears to be caught in his own web but isn't.

Nicole barely restrained herself and shook her head.

"I really didn't know."

A faint smile appeared on Raul's lips. He caressed Nicole's cheek with the back of his hand.

"Okay."

"....."

“But we still have things to do, don’t we?”

“.....Yes.”

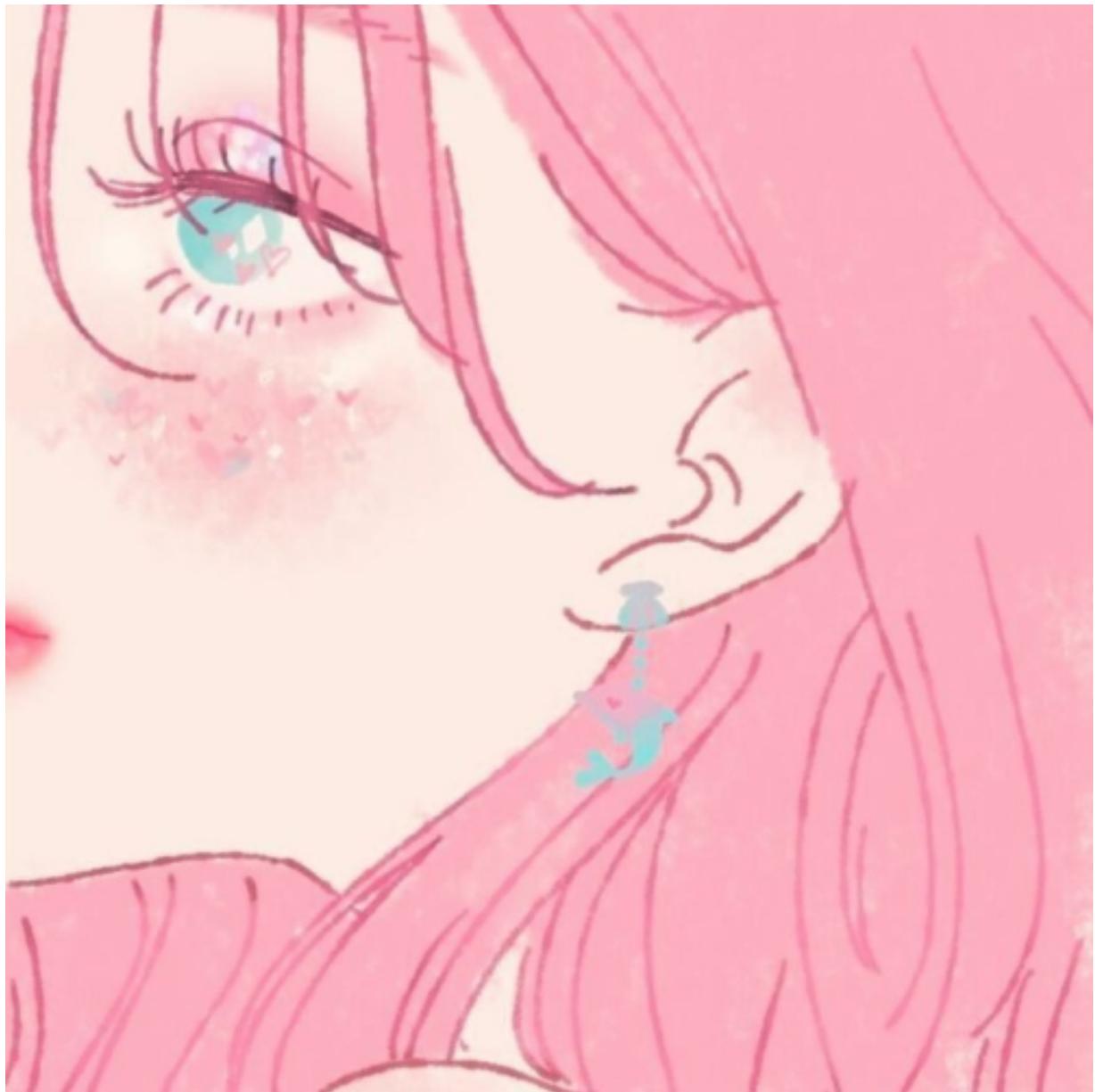
Raul tenderly kissed Nicole’s cheek. The more he did, the more she felt her whole body tremble.

“Shall we start the conversation again after I’ve calmed down a bit?”

“.....Yes.”

“Go to the bed.”

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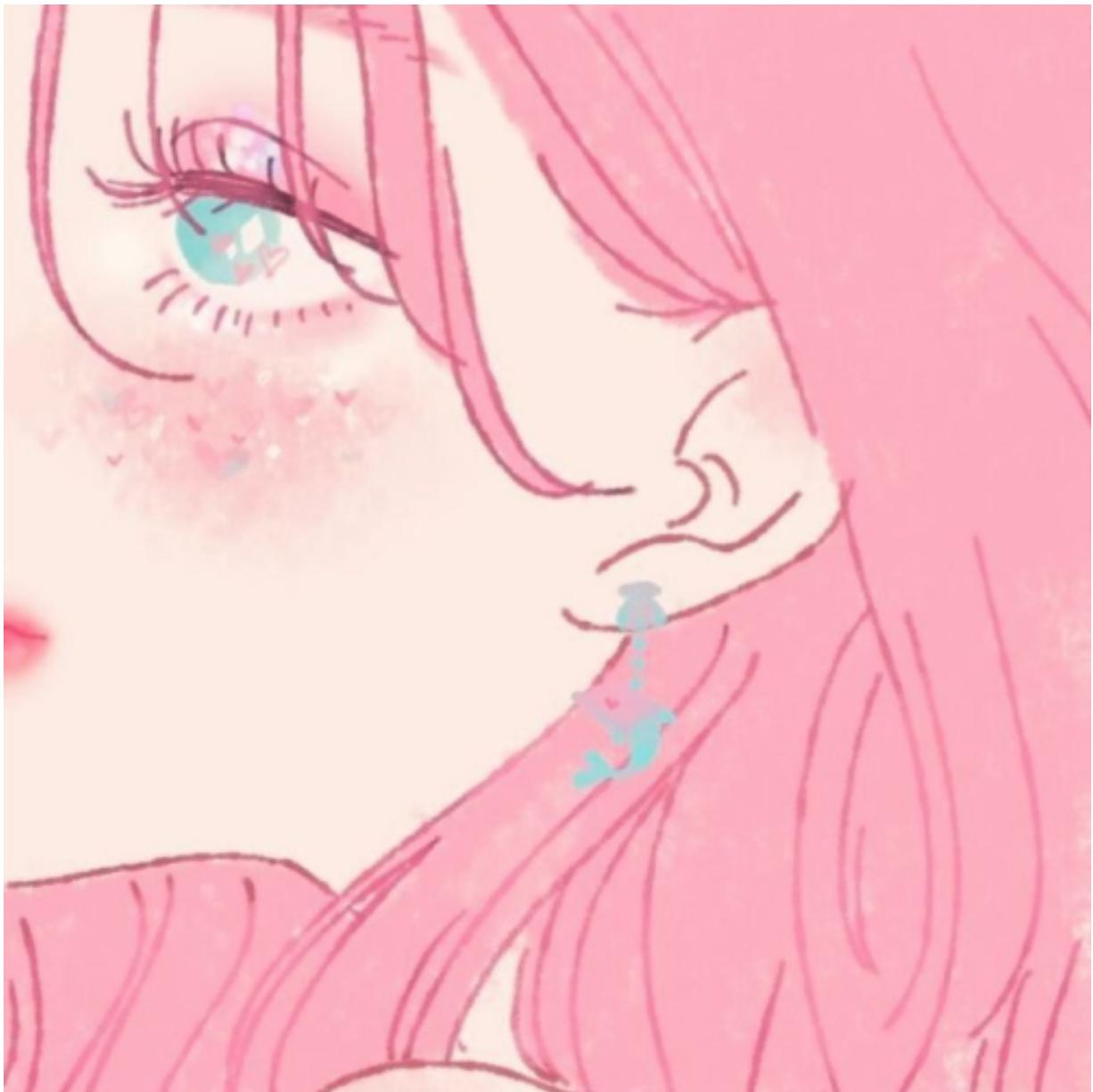


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# **Chapter 145 - R19**

The game room with the billiards table was right next to the staircase.

And after climbing the stairs twice, it was immediately Raul's bedroom.

Her steps became increasingly hurried. When Nicole arrived at Raul's bedroom, she was almost thrown halfway onto the bed. And the ripping off of clothes had now become a familiar routine.

Nicole naturally reached out to Raul's clothes.

She had to do whatever this man wanted, whether to calm him down or because she herself had become unable to refuse him.

"It's going to be a bit rough today."

Raul said, holding Nicole's jaw so she couldn't move. He adjusted the strength of his grip, but Nicole stiffened up and replied softly, "Yes."

"I'll give you an out. If you really can't stand it, say the safe word."

It was a word she had never heard before. Nicole's eyes widened.

"It means I'll stop if you say it. I don't want my partner to be exhausted."

"I understand."

Nicole understood the rule. It was a word like a warning message. It seemed to mean that he would stop if she said that word.

"The safe word is 'Grace'."

It was a bad hobby. Nicole decided not to call that name if possible and bit her lip.

\* \* \*

"Ah, ugh, ugh... uh..."

A squelching sound was heard. Nicole's head throbbed.

Smack!

Her buttocks received another palm baptism. Nicole, feeling her head spinning, lifted her buttocks a bit.

Squelch, squelch.

A firmly erect, long, and thick genital was thrusting in and out of Nicole.

Nicole's hands were tied with a silk tie, clutching the pillow tightly.

"Huh, uh..."

Once again smack, his palm landed on her buttocks. Her entire buttocks flesh quivered, reviving a tingling sensation. A spicy pain raced up her spine, along with an odd thrill.

Nicole's plump and pale buttocks already bore the flawless imprint of a man's hand.

Nicole couldn't see it herself, but she imagined it looked like a red and mottled maple leaf, shaped like a palm.

The man knew how to wield his wrist effectively, awakening Nicole's senses to the fullest while minimizing pain, making her skin swell.

While doing so, he was somewhat considerate towards Nicole. Each hit was thrilling, but not painful enough to make her cry out in serious agony.

"Ah, uh!"

Thump! As soon as his hand left her buttocks, his genitalia thrust in deeply.

Moving back and forth, scraping began again, making a sticky sound at the joining part.

Something hard rubbed against her mound, and clear love juices trickled out. With her clitoris standing erect, Nicole unconsciously rocked her hips, pressing down on that spot against the sheet to stimulate it.

"Hm, ah, eung..."

Her erect nipples scraped against the soft silk sheets. Nicole once again stubbornly put strength into her knees in an effort to lift her buttocks higher.

It was already their third union. Not only her buttocks but also the mound of their joining part seemed to be burning hot. A faint dizziness came over her head, and a dull sweetness lingered in her mouth.

"Put your elbows on the bed and lift your upper body up."

It was a precise instruction. Nicole lifted her trembling eyes and did as she was told. Raul's hand enveloped Nicole's small instep. His large grip easily made her sole face his fingers, clutching it tightly.

Raul then pressed Nicole's feet against her buttocks.

Her buttock flesh was pressed by her own feet. Nicole herself was unaware of such flexibility until now.

Nicole was flustered by the feeling of her muscles tugging. With her legs folded, she flailed. Raul almost seemed to be squeezing her entire toes. Now, the insides of her calves and thighs met, and between her vulva and spread thighs, a perfect triangle was formed.

"Ah, this position is....."

"Endure it. It will get better soon."

Thud, thud. Squeak, squeak.

Raul moved forward. Nicole held onto the sheets to brace against her body being pushed up constantly. If she seemed to escape even slightly, Raul would pull her back and make her assume the position again.

"Ungh, ha, ha, it's strange. Ah, no....."

Nicole spoke as Raul's genitalia became more vigorous. He rolled his hips once as if wringing them out. The thudding sound mixed with the sweat from the insides of her thighs and the fluids from their joining sprayed into the air. Nicole felt like stars were bursting before her eyes from the bubbling sensation in her belly.

But it was not yet time. It was not yet the climax. Raul's hip movements intensified once more.

"I'm going to cum, stop now, ah....."

That was the moment. From the insides of her thighs to her lower abdomen, a warm sensation spread. Nicole felt her body crumbling and shuddered all over.

"I told you. I like this ability."

Raul said. Her thighs lifted. The ankles stacked above her hips clung even tighter.

Nicole's lower body was now slightly levitating due to Raul's telekinetic power.

Thump, squish, squish!

In a flustered feeling, Nicole's moist opening tightly clenched Raul. It was simultaneously too erotic.

His ability was hot and heavy. Such a sensation was felt on her skin touched by his telekinesis. The muscle pain from her slightly twisted body was transformed into an erotic sensation, making her whole body throb.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah!"

Nicole screamed hysterically.

Thud. His large genital deeply embedded inside her shuddered once. Then Raul's released a relentless stream of semen within her.

Semen dripped down from Nicole's vulva.

Raul let go of Nicole. The bed rocked, and Nicole's body sprawled out.

"Haa, haa....."

Through her disheveled hair, she gasped for breath with only her buttocks slightly raised. She couldn't even think to fold her legs.

'I might die like this.'

Nicole barely turned to look at Raul through her tangled hair.

"Your body is very splendid. At least your body is honest."

Raul's hand slapped down on her plump labia with a smack.

"Ah!"

She almost shed tears. The sharp pain was brief, followed by a lingering pleasure that assaulted her body. This pleasure came with humiliation, making Nicole feel a sense of self-loathing.

Perhaps she really was a pervert.

Nicole huddled her neck and scrutinized him. Raul's face showed a satisfied gleam, and his earlier anger seemed to have dissipated.

"Now, are you satisfied?"

Nicole asked, her voice raspy as if her throat was raw. She was terribly thirsty and her whole body ached.

Nicole recalled her body, which had been ravaged by his rough caresses. He would take a nipple in his mouth and

bite down, or knead and chew her body painfully until it was red and swollen, now left with no place unmarked.

"Surely not, this is just the beginning."

Raul said with a glint in his eye. Nicole inwardly sighed.

'I shouldn't have spoken.'

Tonight seemed unlikely to end easily.

Or was it even night now? Or should she be thankful for surviving? Her mind grew increasingly confused.

"I can't move."

Nicole gasped for breath.

Raul pulled the strap holding her wrists, lifting her up as if handling prey.

"Please, just let me rest for a bit....."

"You're not receiving a reward right now."

Nicole's mouth twisted.

She looked at him with eyes full of disappointment.

Raul was right, but this man made her illogical.

"You're enjoying this too much, like someone who just wanted an excuse to torment me."

"I didn't intend to at first, but now that you mention it, it makes sense."

Raul said, and Nicole felt a rising pettiness towards him.

"If you really can't stand it, just say so. I taught you the safe word, didn't I?"

Nicole's shoulders flinched. If the safe word had been anything but Grace, she might have said it.

But Raul's words were never light. The moment she said the safe word, she would have to follow what Raul wanted.

What Raul wanted from Nicole now was a 'confession'. A confession about why she had spirited away Isabel's existence.

'Besides, I'm tired of surviving by selling out Grace's name.'

Nicole thought self-deprecatingly. She often used Grace's name to survive Raul's wrath.

"I like your stubbornness like this. It makes the interrogation enjoyable."

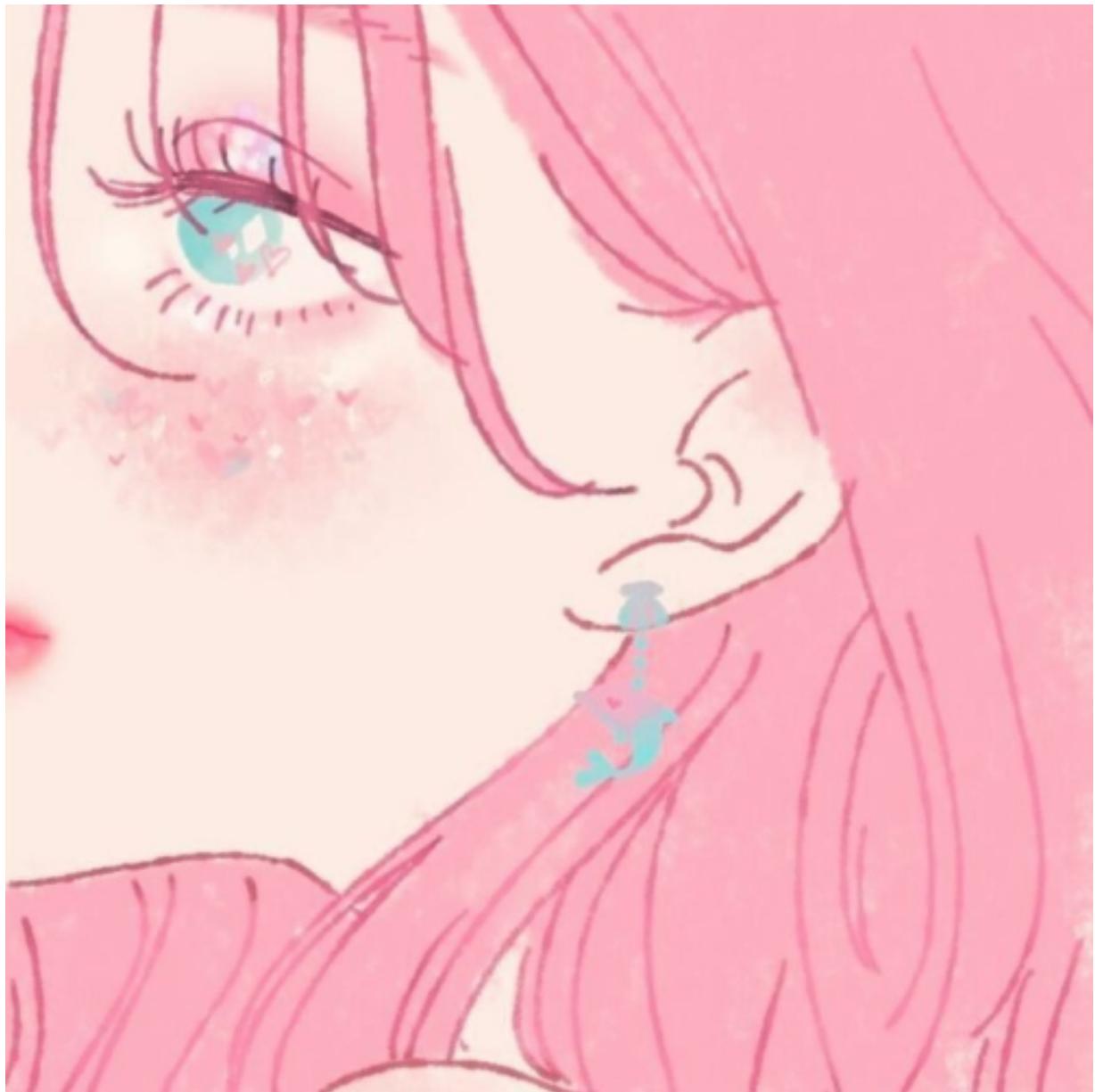
And then this man ends up saying the unpleasant truth. That this isn't a lover's sex but an interrogation process. A fact she obviously knew but.....

'Why does it always hurt?'

But at the same time, it's also a pleasure. Her head spinning and turning into a beast.

All of these are things only Raul can provide. If one were to define these emotions, they would be like Pandora's box. When that box is opened, it contains both hell and heaven at once.

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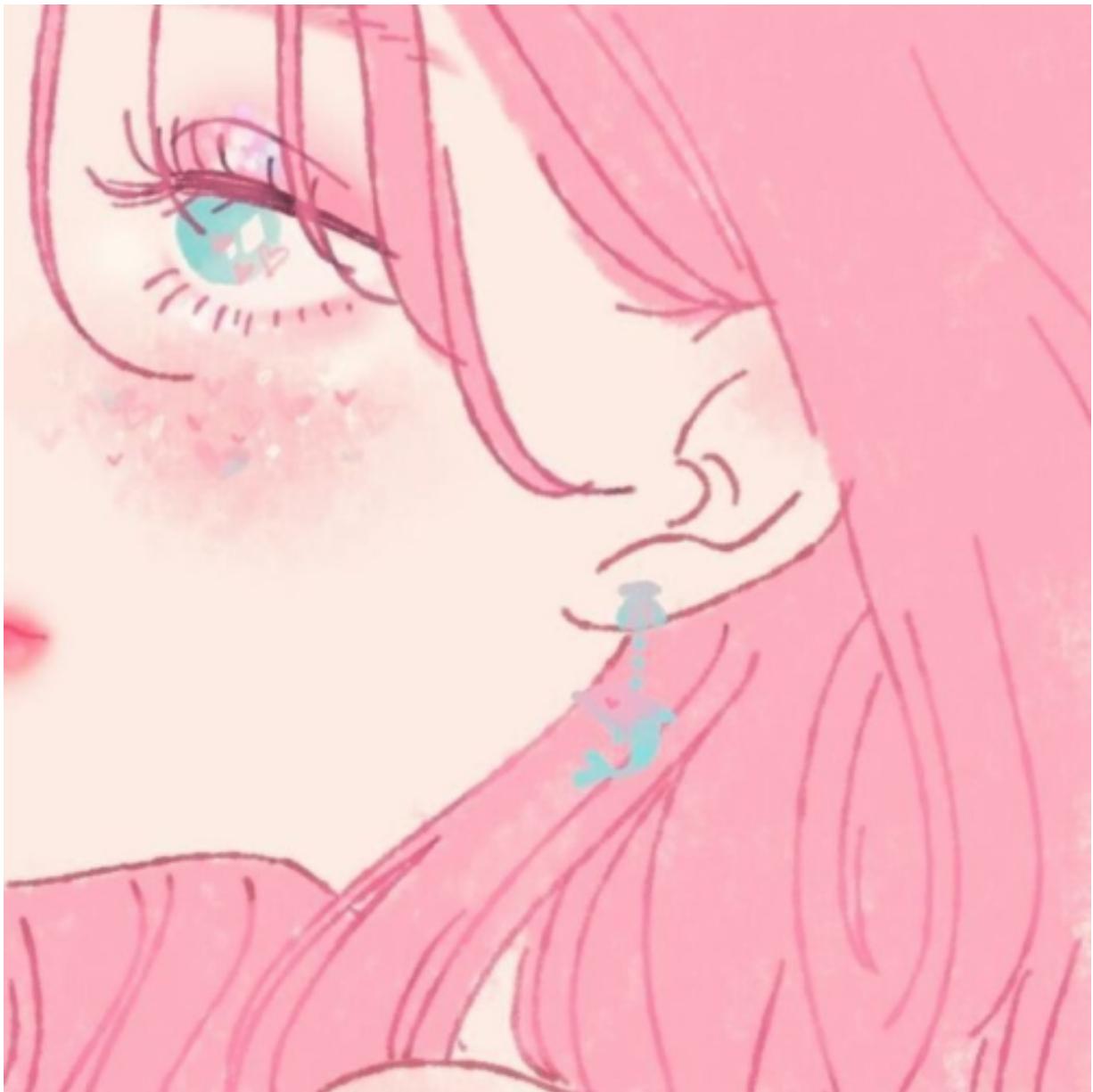


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# **Chapter 146 - R19**

Raul, pulling the strings, lifted Nicole from the bed and laid her down again.

At the head of the bed, on the upper part of the backrest frame, there was a delicate and solid ironwork decoration.

Raul tied the ends of the cloth that bound Nicole's hands above her on that frame. Nicole lay motionless on the bed, her arms raised as if being punished.

She was in a position that left her entire body exposed, unable to cover herself with her hands. Nicole blinked a few times, looking at him with a dazed expression.

"You know you have a perverted taste, right?"

"That must be why you and I get along so well."

Raul smiled with his eyes. His beauty was almost bewitching.

"I'll say it again, you can give up."

Nicole sighed in resignation and shook her head in refusal.

"Then enjoy this one too."

Raul said.

"What... are you going to do?"

He chuckled and then pulled out a silk box from the bedside.

"There were many items piled up in the Grand Duke's warehouse. I took a few out while organizing it this time."

The box opened to reveal a pink pearl necklace. The pearls were of a decent size and glowed softly even under the dim light of the bedroom.

"Why that..."

Nicole felt uneasy.

"I intended to give it to you. I had the maids clean and disinfect it very carefully."

Raul grabbed the end of the necklace and pulled.

"I didn't intend to give it to you this way, but you always inspire me."

When sexual desire is drawn to its peak. Or when that desire is unleashed without reserve. One knows the feeling: the belly empties, the mouth loosens, and words spill out without control.

Nicole knew that feeling. That was exactly her state now. She bit her lip hard, fearing she might say something unnecessary.

"Spread your legs more."

Nicole's thighs were spread wide open, highlighting the indented part on the inside of her thighs. And between her thick labia, her red and swollen vulva was exposed.

Her hole was still slightly open, with the messy love juices and semen dried up and sticking to it. Her clitoris stood

erect and swollen.

Raul slowly bent down and began to roll a pearl over Nicole's clitoris.

"Ah, ahh, gasp..."

Each light touch of the pearl brought an odd sensation. Nicole's lower abdomen contracted and then relaxed repeatedly. Nicole's pink tongue flickered slightly between her lips.

The pearl necklace wrapped around Nicole's entire vulva in a long embrace. Her thighs trembled with every pearl rolled up and down.

The shower of pearls over her skin, already sensitized from several acts of intercourse, was an overwhelming stimulation.

The pearls clinked as they collided with each other. The expensive pearls would be getting stained and dirtied with Nicole's love juices.

"Oh my, this is a relic of the Grand Duke's family in its own right; how can you cheapen and dirty it like this? You're increasing your share of responsibilities."

Slap!

Raul struck Nicole's labia over the pearl. The pearl fit precisely on top of her red vulva.

Wetness splashed from Nicole's vulva, and she gasped and panted, clenching her hole.

“Since you enjoy it so much, I can’t help but give you this expensive treasure generously.”

“Stop it, it’s strange. Ah...”

“Then say it. Properly.”

Safe word.

Nicole firmly closed her mouth.

“Ugh, uh...”

At that moment, Nicole’s buttocks lifted into the air. It was telekinesis. Nicole bit her lip.

“You... This is... shameful. You’re not supposed to use your powers like this. It’s a blessed privilege, but I, ah, ah... uh!”

“You have a prudish side like a high priest. It doesn’t suit you, Karen.”

Raul spoke indifferently. Nicole’s heart sank.

“Instead of preaching, pay attention to what your master is giving you.”

Raul flicked Nicole’s nose. He placed a pillow under Nicole’s hips. Her body folded, and Nicole could see her lower half.

The pearl began to roll over Nicole’s labia again. Raul slowly pressed the pearl into the space between Nicole’s labia.

“Haa, ah, ahh... uh...”

Click, click, rustle...

Nicole’s thighs were powerless.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you more.”

Raul seemed pleased. As he moved his hand, only the hook part at the end of the pearl necklace flew off. Then Raul leaned over and began to push the pearls into Nicole’s body one by one.

Nicole’s parted hole gulped down the pearls. Raul tapped her clitoris as if praising it for the greedy action.

“You swallow well.”

Nicole shook her head wildly. Her chest, neck, and even her lower body were all flushed pink.

The remaining end of the pearl shook like a tail between Nicole’s labia. Unintentionally shaking her hips, the pearl bumped against Nicole’s flesh. The stimulation was so intense that Nicole gasped out loud.

“Shh, relax.”

Raul laid Nicole’s hips back down on the bed.

“If you close your legs, you’ll be punished. Understand? It’s very simple. Just keep them spread so I can see well.”

Raul caressed Nicole’s cheek and looked into her eyes. Then he kissed her forehead and spoke tenderly.

“Answer.”

“...Yes, yes.”

Nicole barely nodded her head.

“Then shall we see what my abilities can do?”

“Y, yes?”

The next moment, the pearl necklace inside her began to vibrate.

“No, ah. Not like this... This is cowardly. Ah, aah, aah! Raul...!”

Nicole sobbed at the vibrations that wildly resonated against the walls inside her body.

Her mind was a mess, and her legs kept trying to curl up, but Nicole resisted the urge.

Inside her, each slight movement of the pearl necklace to either side caused fluids to dribble down and her erect nipples to quiver in the air. Nicole’s toes curled, and her hair sprawled wildly over the pillow.

“Yes, please. Ah, I think I’m going to become strange. No, it can’t be. It can’t be. Ah...”

“Shall I take it out?”

“Yes, please! Ah, ah, eek!”

Raul did exactly as she asked.

Drip, splash!

The pearl necklace gushed out as if spurting forth, the pearls cascading against Nicole’s inner walls and entrance as they emerged.

The pleasure striking her lower half made Nicole’s mouth open wide and her eyes lose their light.

She felt as if she would become an idiot. A stark white pleasure flickered within her body.

And from the twitching small hole of Nicole's lower region, clear water continued to trickle down as if being wrung out.

Nicole didn't know what to do with the tide-like waves.

"I, what have I... done... Ah. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Nicole murmured as she saw the clear water spreading on the sheets. She shook her head.

"I'm sorry..."

Raul watched Nicole's state as if savoring it, far from scolding her, he gently stroked her head.

"Very pretty. It's okay."

Nicole trembled, breathing in sobs as she burrowed into his embrace.

She couldn't tell if this was a nightmare or the height of pleasure. Boundaries blurred, she was falling apart more and more. Yet, this feeling swept away by pleasure was addictive, as if it had opened the door to another world.

"Uh, uh. Stop now. Ungh..."

Even after the pearl 'baptism' ended, Raul did not stop. He made Nicole sip water and wine in turns.

Then, holding Nicole from behind, he persistently fondled her clitoris and opening with his fingers.

With each cunning movement of the wriggling fingers inside her, Nicole was forced to surrender to the rampant

sensations. She was acutely aware of what it felt like to be unable to control her body. There was nothing left but sensation. Desire and longing became more intense, no matter how much they were satisfied.

“Just a moment, now. Stop...”

“I’ve only come three times. But it seems like you’ve almost come ten times.”

He said it as if it were amusing. At that moment, Nicole became aware of her own sensations.

She felt... empty. The pearl caresses were enough to drive her mind wild, but it wasn’t Raul. It was different from the sensation of his thick and large member penetrating her body.

“Ah, ung. Ah. Ah...”

Nicole gasped for breath and moved her waist slightly. Once she recognized the lack, her body’s senses waited entirely for Raul.

“Not that, the fingers... This...”

“Do you want this?”

Raul said. Nicole realized that pearls were scattered near her body. As she shifted, they touched her legs again.

“No, not that.”

“You have to say it with your mouth. Say what you want.”

Raul whispered.

Nicole felt as if her heart was choked up. She was in agony and wanted him so much.

“Uh, uh!”

A vibration-like sensation touched her lower half again. Psychic energy was moving.

“Uh-heuk, hugh... Stop...”

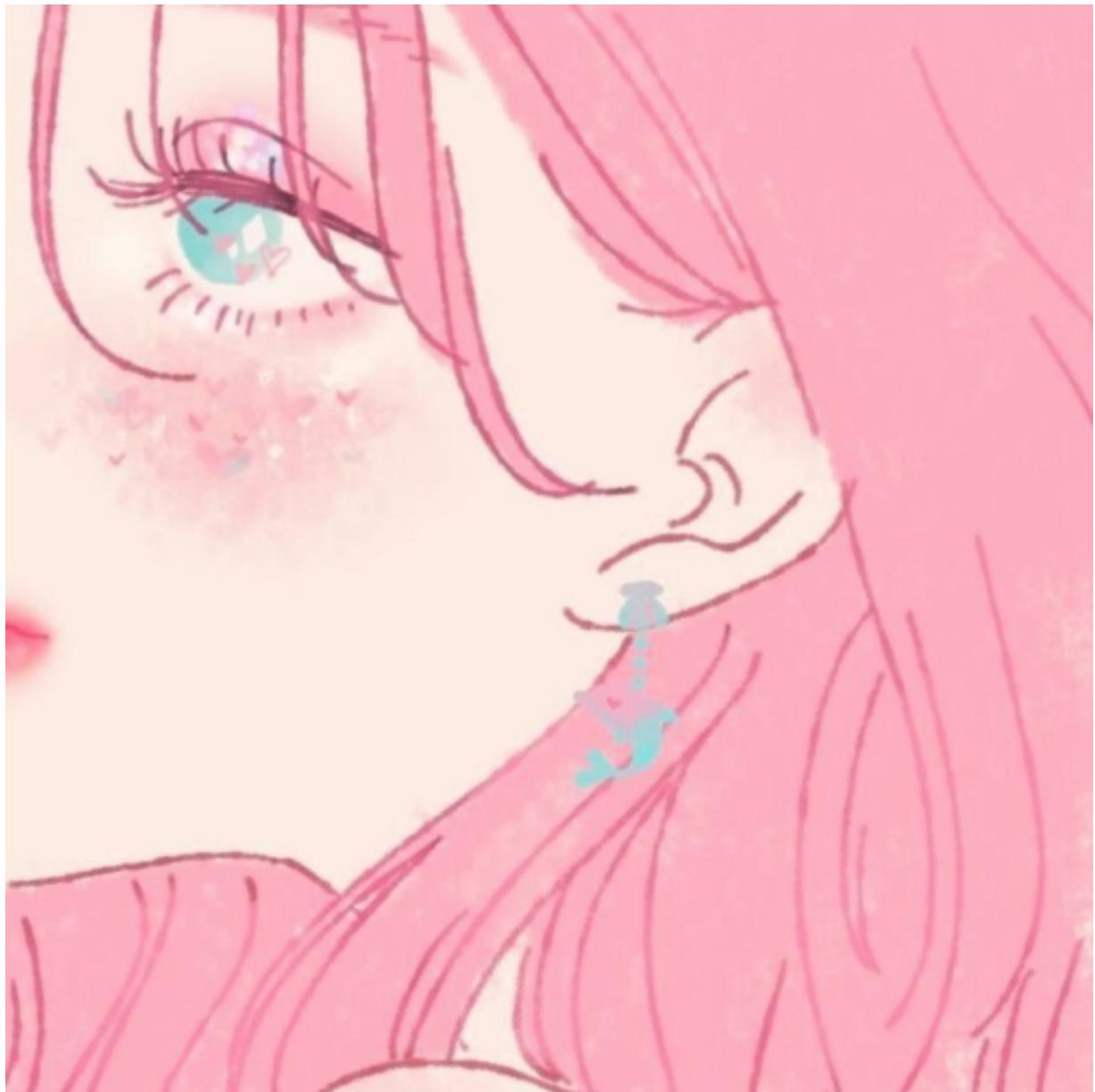
Nicole grasped Raul’s arm in surrender and spoke.

“I want you, Raul.”

It was a word of desire that seemed to boil up from within her stomach.

“Please, give yourself to me.”

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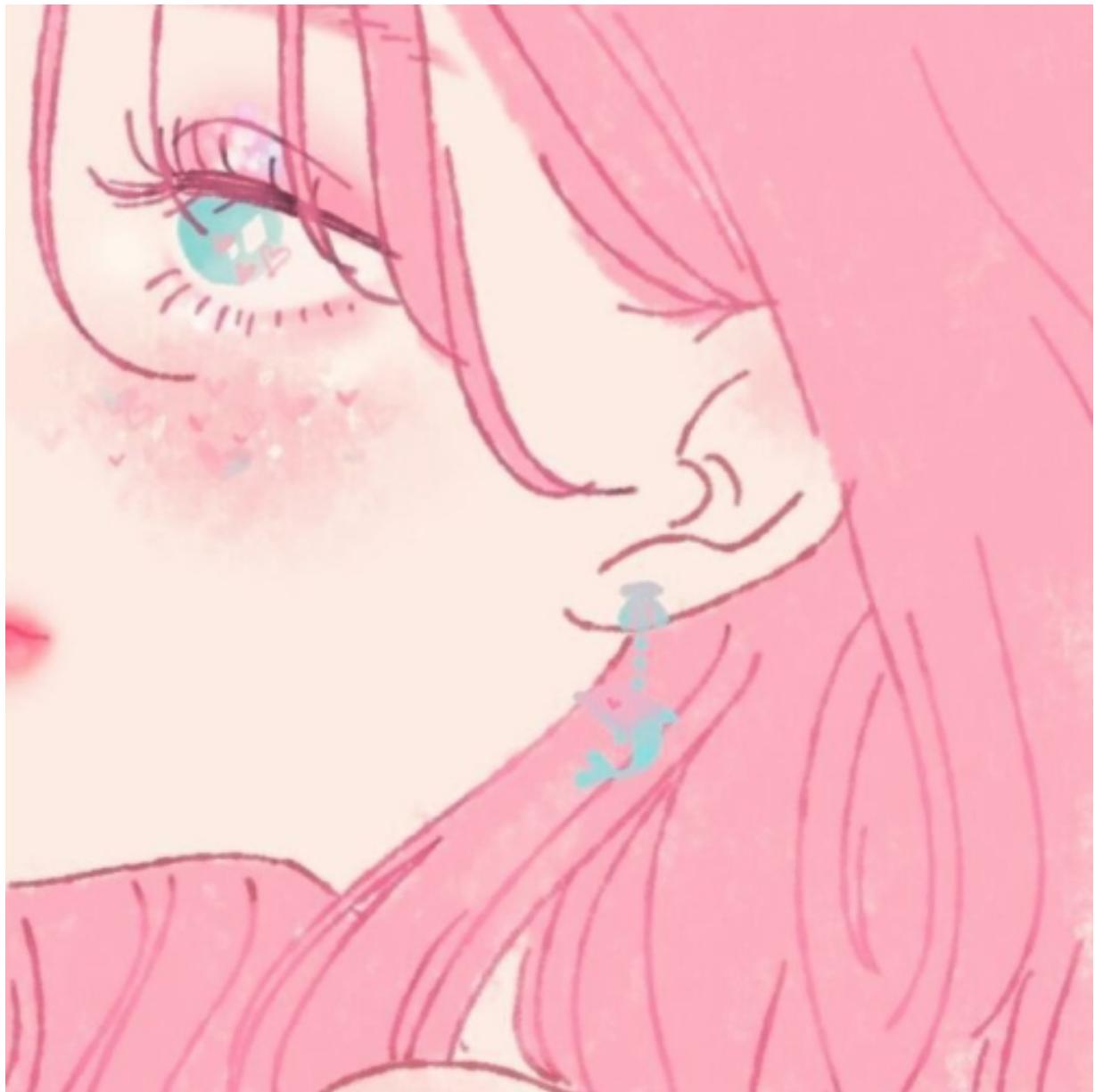


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# **Chapter 147 - R19**

She had become impatient before she knew it.

“Hurry up. Inside... Come into me.”

Raul untied the string in his hand. His movements became gradually more urgent.

Nicole turned her head to look at Raul’s face. His eyes had relaxed considerably. He looked like a satisfied predator.

Strangely enough... He seemed happy. Was pleasure that important to him?

Did he enjoy the satisfaction of tormenting her? Tangled thoughts rose aimlessly in her confused mind.

Her lower body was hot. It tickled. It felt like burning. She was so anxious that saliva pooled under her tongue.

“You may do as you please.”

Raul said.

After their third intercourse, Raul was only wearing his pants. Nicole hurriedly reached for his pants, and out sprang his incredibly erect member, like a baton with a thud.

“Come on, take it all off. You too.”

Nicole said softly, her earlobes flushed red. Raul obediently did as he was told.

And Nicole clumsily climbed on top of Raul.

Nicole hesitated for a moment at the last second. Raul whispered soothingly.

"Just sit like that. Try putting it in. You can do it."

His words gave Nicole courage. She aligned Raul's member with her soaking, twitching opening and began to slowly sit down.

His long and member one pierced her body, fluttering as it slowly disappeared, leaving only the veined column behind.

"Uh, ah... Haah..."

Raul's lips caressed Nicole's chest. As she sat down completely, those lips reached her nape.

His filling member was a burden even to her sufficiently opened body.

At the same time, Nicole released flowing love juices just from that alone. She felt the climax the moment it was inserted. Nicole didn't know what to do, but her body knew.

More, I can feel more. I remember greater pleasure, her lower half seemed to impatiently signal to her.

"Move."

Raul said as he finely lifted his waist. Then, he firmly grabbed Nicole's hips, gently patted them, and encouraged her.

Nicole lost her reason and started to vigorously shake her hips up and down.

“Ah, uh, haah, ah!”

Like she was in heat. Animalistic sounds were vomited from her throat. Once she started moving on her own, she couldn't stop her pelvis.

She moved her pelvis back and forth so vigorously that the sound of flesh colliding rang out. Her sweat-soaked skin moved obscenely in mid-air. Her breasts shook wildly, drawing afterimages with her pointed nipples.

“Ah, Raul, Raul.”

Nicole called out Raul's name without stopping her hips. Her vision felt like it was flickering.

With this pleasure, she needs nothing else.

At that moment, Nicole thought foolishly. Until now, she had to constantly think about survival. To protect her younger sibling and find her father. And she had to stay alive... to catch Raul's eye.

But right now, everything else has lost its meaning.

Raul and herself. Pleasure. That was all that filled her up.

“You are perfect.”

Raul said as he embraced Nicole.

“Your body is the best, damn it. I should have killed you several times, but I never could. You are so beautiful. I can't stop myself. From holding you. Once having tasted this pleasure, I will want you until the day I die.”

When Raul said that, Nicole thought her heart had stopped for a moment because that was exactly what she was thinking in her head.

She felt a sense of fullness simultaneously. Raul was satisfied with her. And she was perfectly satisfied with Raul. They were a pair. At least their bodies desired each other. A strange sense of elation wrapped around her, feeling acknowledged.

Soon, she would realize that such feelings were not normal. She would also realize that Raul's words were nonsense blurred by pleasure.

But this moment was incomparably good. Nicole was purring like a cat that had its fill.

"Uh, mmm. Ah... So, so good, uh, ugh... Mmm, ah..."

Nicole exhaled a breath heated to its utmost. And she grabbed Raul's hair. His soft and plentiful black hair twisted under her hands.

Raul looked up at Nicole as if he would devour her. Thump, thump, the movement of Nicole bouncing her waist on top of him became even more lewd and rough.

Nicole was recklessly digging her nails into Raul's shoulders. She felt like she would crumble, unable to handle the pleasure coursing through her body.

It was too good. It was enough to think it would be fine to disappear into pleasure as it was, entrusting everything to it.

"Mmm, huh, ah. Aah..."

This climax was even greater. Nicole surrendered her entire body to the sensation and threw back her chin.

"Uh, mmm... Aaaah!"

Thud, thud. Smack, smack. Loud sounds like being whipped rang out, and Nicole gasped for breath.

Her lower abdomen contracted and all the muscles in her body celebrated the pleasure.

It was the climax. Nicole threw her head back and trembled all over, clinging to him. Sticky sweat enveloped her body, and once again, a gush of love juice flowed to the floor.

\*\*\*

...Of course, the frenzied sex with her on top of him position was not the peak of that day. Raul did not let go of Nicole even after that.

She couldn't even remember how many times it had happened.

Completely drained of all energy, unable to twitch even a finger. Her whole body felt like wet cotton, and her lower half felt hollowed out.

It was the first time she had found herself in such a state. Nicole, having fainted, slowly opened her eyes. The sunlight filtering through the curtains tickled her eyelashes.

The broad back that came into her blurry vision was marked clearly with the nail scratches Nicole had left above his shoulder blades.

Without realizing it, Nicole reached out and touched them. Raul's shoulder flinched.

She startled at the reaction. Raul let out a low moan as he rose up and then turned his torso to look at Nicole.

The sheet slid down, revealing his body. It was the first time she had the chance to observe him slowly under bright light. His body was truly perfect, with a tightly sculpted frame as if made by a god.

Raul briefly surveyed the disheveled Nicole. Triggered by the silence, tension made Nicole wrap her hands in the blanket.

"Don't look at me with those eyes. I'll let it slide for the first day."

"The first day...?"

"I might want to put my genitals in your mouth again in the morning."

Pain throbbed in her lower half as if on cue, and Nicole's eyes widened with fear.

If he drained any more of her energy, she might truly die of exhaustion.

Raul tenderly brushed Nicole's hair aside and kissed her forehead, as if pleased.

"You are very capable in bed."

Nicole rolled her eyes. She needed to grasp the situation well.

'Could it be that he's calmed down just because of this? Because we had sex? Did he have such a side to him?'

Was she still being interrogated? Or was this the stage where murmurs come after sex? Had she satisfied him enough to make him lose his reason during the night?

Nicole rubbed her forehead.

"You're not too bad yourself."

"Is that so?"

Raul murmured languidly, as if amused.

"Yes. I had no idea that ability was meant for nighttime activities. Quite impressive."

"Seeing your mouth back to its sharpness, you seem fine."

Raul said.

"So, have you thought about speaking now?"

Of course, it wouldn't be easy with this man. Nicole clenched her teeth inwardly. It was indeed a loaded question.

"I told you I have nothing to say."

"That's fine too."

Raul said.

"It's also okay to spend every night like this until you want to come clean."

".....That....."

"You're relieved of your position, Karen. The name Portia will also be taken back."

Raul's tone was the sweetest Nicole had heard.

"Then what about my house?"

Her heart sank. Being pushed out of Sith meant losing not only her house but also her property, especially if it was in disgrace.

"A mistress needs a house, so that will be left alone."

"....."

"I can drive you crazy as much as I want. If you ever feel like being honest with me, just talk."

Raul said, flipping Nicole's hair.

"Who was it that went crazy with pleasure last night?"

She ended up giving a venomous response.

"Don't get excited already. It's just the beginning. I told you, you're too easy."

Raul laughed lowly.

"Do you want to see me go crazy? What are you planning to do?"

"Nothing."

Raul said.

"Congratulations. You've become nothing. It will stay that way in the future. And from now on, every move you make will be under my control. If you can't stand it, just say the safe word."

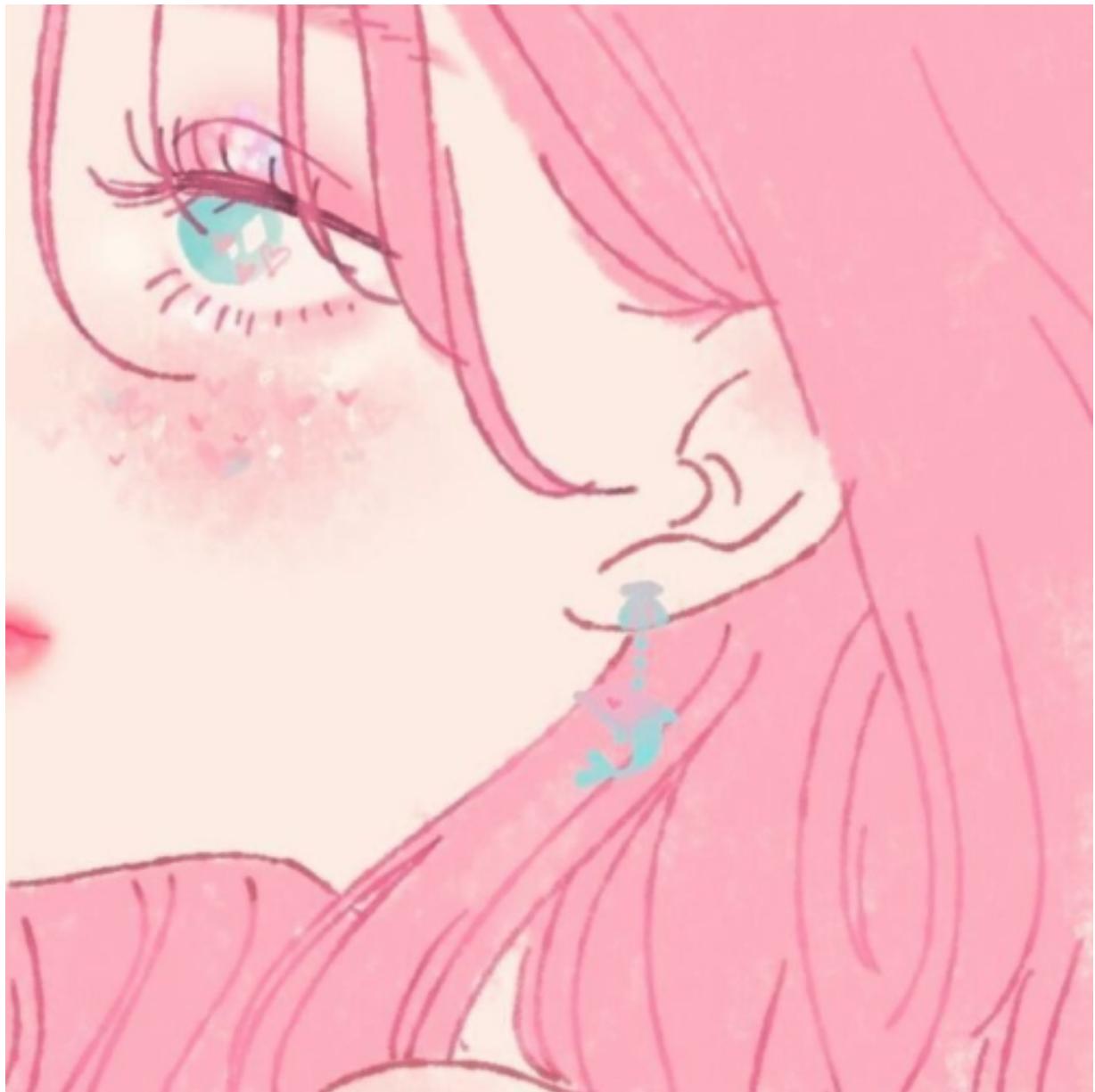
Nicole thought last night was somewhere between heaven and hell. She had momentarily forgotten, lost in pleasure.

This man could send her to hell at any time.

Damn it.

Nicole rarely cursed inwardly. Indeed, she was being punished.

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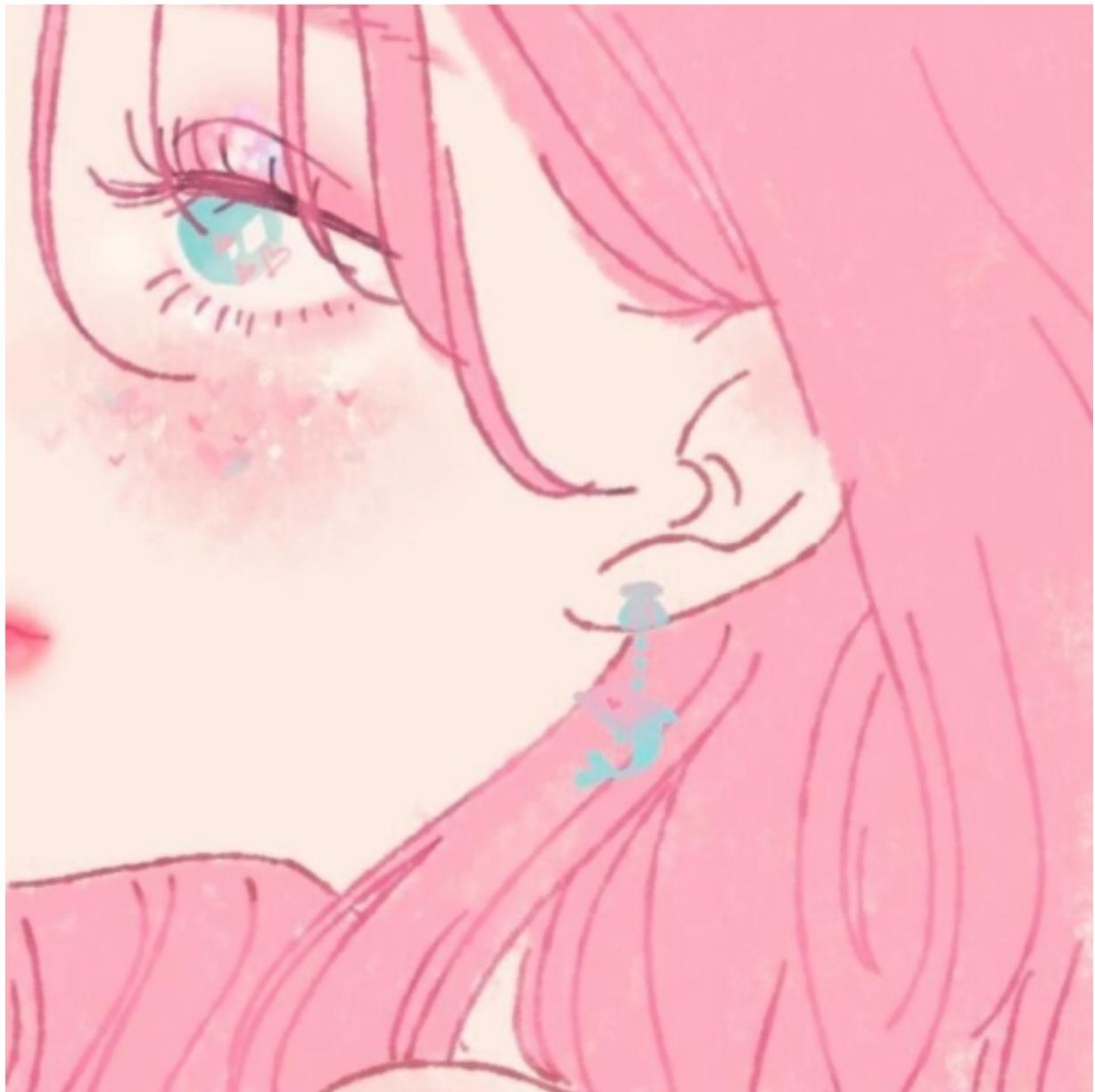


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# **Chapter 148**

“Uh-huh, sob, haah, ah, please. Stop!”

Nicole’s eyes were covered with a black lace blindfold. Her waist was full of mottled handprints and bite marks.

Delicate lace lingerie was draped over her chest, and nothing was beneath it. The pink, flushed nipples stood out on her modest, heaving breasts. She lay on her side, being thrust into by Raul from behind.

“Hoo, uh, euh! Ah, I, again, feel like I’m going to..... uh.....”  
And once again, a climax that seemed to bleach her mind.

\*\*\*

That was what happened last night.

Nicole listlessly poked at the plate in front of her with a fork. On the plate was a finely chopped, tender meat pie with hot vegetables and mashed potatoes served with sauce.

‘My whole body hurts.’ It had been seven days since she was confined in Raul’s room. Nicole found her mind shaking more earnestly than she thought.

Raul indulged in carnal desires as if he had longed to do so for a long time. She had tried taking his member in her mouth first thing in the morning, had been pressed against the bathroom floor crouching down, and of course, did it in the water too. On the table in the room, in front of the

bookshelf. Even at the door. Wherever she could stand on her two legs. She was thrust into to the point of shivering again and again.

'I need to go outside and take care of things. Research the glassworms, check if Grace is safe... And then go home and take care of the plants.'

Just the thought made her break out in a cold sweat of anxiety. The problem was that she found herself increasingly unable to think properly.

"Eat properly."

Raul entered the room. She felt so drained that she thought she might die, but Raul looked vibrant and healthy. Suddenly behind her, Raul helped Nicole grip the fork in her hand correctly.

Unlike her, who was only draped in a silk robe over her flimsy underwear, Raul was well-dressed in his formal attire.

Nicole looked at him. It had been a week since she was allowed to contact anyone, let alone get permission for anything. She drank the wine in front of her, feeling anxious.

She had hardly any experience with alcohol, but strangely, it tasted sweet.

"You can't control my meals as you please."

Nicole blurted out unconsciously and was embarrassed. It was the same thing she used to say to Raul in her past life.

And Nicole was in Raul's large room. Raul's people had brought in a table and set it up for her meal.

“I do, you just don’t know about it.”

Raul sat leisurely, holding a wine glass. Raul’s food was not as easy to digest as Nicole’s.

“At least let me make sure that Grace is safe.”

“No.”

“Grace has been involved in something dangerous. You know that. The royal family is-”

Raul lifted his head.

“Are you trying to ask Grace for help?”

“.....”

“Do you think Grace truly cares for you? What did she say about me?”

Nicole was taken aback.

Cold-blooded, unknowing of love, the one who caused her daughter’s death. Must not be off guard. Not easy to deceive.....

Yet, a disciple who is annoyingly beloved.

That was Raul in Grace’s mind.

“She must have been protective of you. And she would have tried to drive a wedge between you and me.”

“She is not that kind of person.”

“Why do you think Grace loves you?”

“.....”

Nicole knew the answer. Grace was weak for women of Sienna's age.

“Shall I guess? She must have said she wants to protect you in Sienna's stead, that you're different and precious from others. So, she said she couldn't give you to me?”

“She, that's not...”

“You know it too, haven't you used Grace?”

In her past life, Nicole hated it most when Raul was right.

“I knew she saw Sienna through me, but I never intended to use that. I...”

“I know you. I did the same when I was young.”

“.....Yes?”

“Grace was weak for children. Moreover, she harbored resentment towards the royal family. And I knew Grace had a card to use against the royal family, the debt of her parents. So I used that to get myself out.”

Nicole's hands trembled. She clenched a napkin in her hand.

“If so, you should be thankful to her for her daughter...”

“Out of gratitude, I didn't marry her daughter, even though Sienna desperately wished it.”

Nicole stared blankly at Raul.

“Why couldn't you marry Sienna?”

"The moment she becomes my woman, she would be a target of the royal family, and she would fall into hell. The royal family wouldn't just leave her alone."

"Then why didn't you marry that woman Isabel? She would have made a good target, especially with your betrothal to YvesChapel."

Nicole couldn't hold back and blurted out. She was increasingly gripping the napkin in her hand tightly.

Raul looked at her with a strange expression in his eyes.

"I don't use useless cards. That woman is not of the type I favor. She's damaged goods."

*So, what about me? In my past life, was I a useful card to you, a target dubbed the shield of the royal family?*

Even knowing that wasn't all, Nicole's mind darkened.

The truth was, her despair wasn't because of Raul's hateful way of speaking. Their physical relationship endlessly enticed her, but that wasn't all she desired.

She didn't dare hope for marriage either. He was a man she would have to let go of someday. But at least... just a little...

'I long for your sincerity.'

The sorrow of knowing oneself is the inability to ignore what one truly wants.

Nicole yearned desperately for Raul. If only Raul would give her his sincerity for a year, she would be content to spend that year with him and then live out the rest of her life in a temple. However, Raul would not do so.

She was merely a mistress, imprisoned at his whim and touched when desired.

Because she is Karen.

“Do you even have a heart?”

“You and I are the same. We live by clinging to what we need to survive.”

“You and I are different. We are not equals.”

“We are equal. More than you think. You are not as honorable as you believe yourself to be.”

Nicole turned her gaze away.

“I will do as I am told regarding my stay... But please let me go home just once. And allow me to meet Lady Grace.”

“You can no longer contact Grace for the rest of your life.”

“Why? Are you punishing me?”

Nicole found it increasingly difficult to control her emotions.

“No. It’s for Grace’s sake. Grace will probably die because of you.”

*Clang.* Nicole’s heart sank. She looked at Raul with disbelief in her eyes.

“How can you... say such a thing?”

“Because it’s true. I’ve seen Grace’s future.”

The power of prophecy.

Nicole thought of that word. It was a power currently possessed only by the royal family.

Raul had different abilities on different days. So it wouldn't have been strange if one of them was the power of prophecy.

'But can a person be so omnipotent? If so, why is this person ruling the country and not the royal family?'

Flame.

That came to mind again. The mouse disappearing by Leos's power.

Perhaps that ability is held by the royal family.

But Raul was not meant to possess the power of prophecy. It had been a long time since an outstanding prophet was born in the royal family.

The royal family, known for their jealousy, would not just leave a man who possessed such superior abilities alone.

"Grace will die because of a young woman who reminds her of Sienna."

Raul spoke indifferently, as if he was discussing the breakfast menu.

"Did you see her future?"

"Visions appear before my eyes. Just a line of text emerges. I realized it the moment I saw Grace when I was very young. That woman would save me, and she was also destined to die miserably, because of sacrifice."

Nicole swallowed dryly.

“What else did you see?”

“Well, about my future love? I’ve only seen trivial futures like love fortunes.”

“Please don’t joke. It’s not about that.”

“Why do you think it’s a joke?”

Raul looked at Nicole calmly. She was at a loss for words.

“Anyway, it’s a very old story. The power of prophecy is the worst among those with abilities. It’s not certain, and misuse of prophecy can only lead to bad outcomes. Moreover, there are more unhappy futures than happy ones. Just as I realized through one very pitiful girl that I would fall in love with only one woman for the rest of my life.”

Nicole couldn’t understand. It was too difficult. But one thing was certain, Nicole was not that one woman for Raul.

He would not fall in love with a woman like Karen. The same was true for Nicole. Nicole felt a quiet despair.

“So, there’s nothing I can do before you, who even possesses that great power of prophecy.”

“There’s only one thing you can do. Obey. At least that way you’re safe, aren’t you?”

Nicole eventually couldn’t bear it and threw the napkin.

She entered the side room inside the Grand Duke’s room which used to be her confinement for many years in her past life. Her shoulders trembled thinly.

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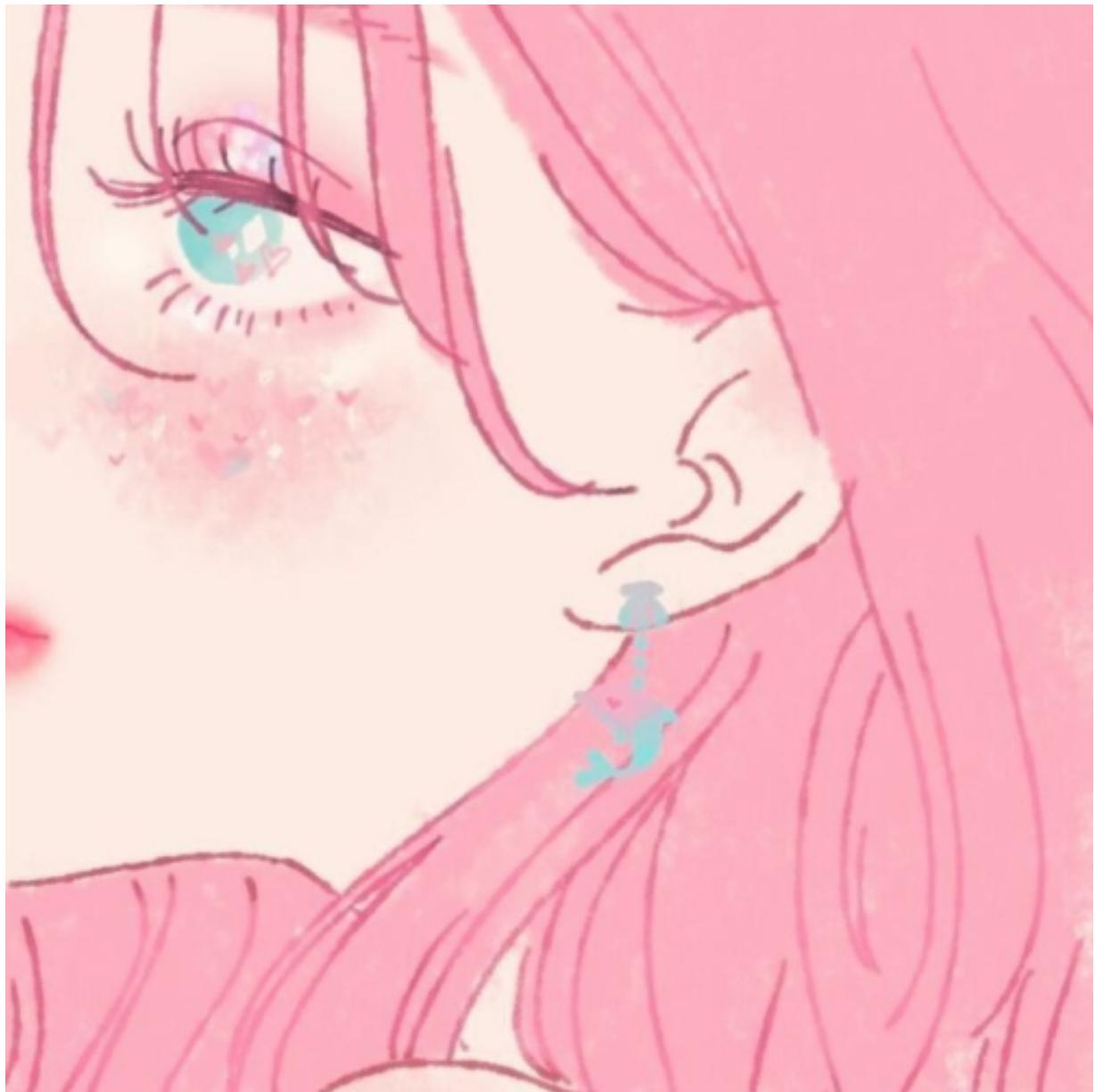
And time passed quietly. Nicole no longer opened her mouth. Raul treated such a Nicole with an interesting taunt.

However, he did not budge, nor was he generous to Nicole.

Cut off from Grace, Nicole became increasingly sensitive, unable to receive letters from her younger brother.

And on the twenty-third day of Nicole's confinement, she met someone unexpected.

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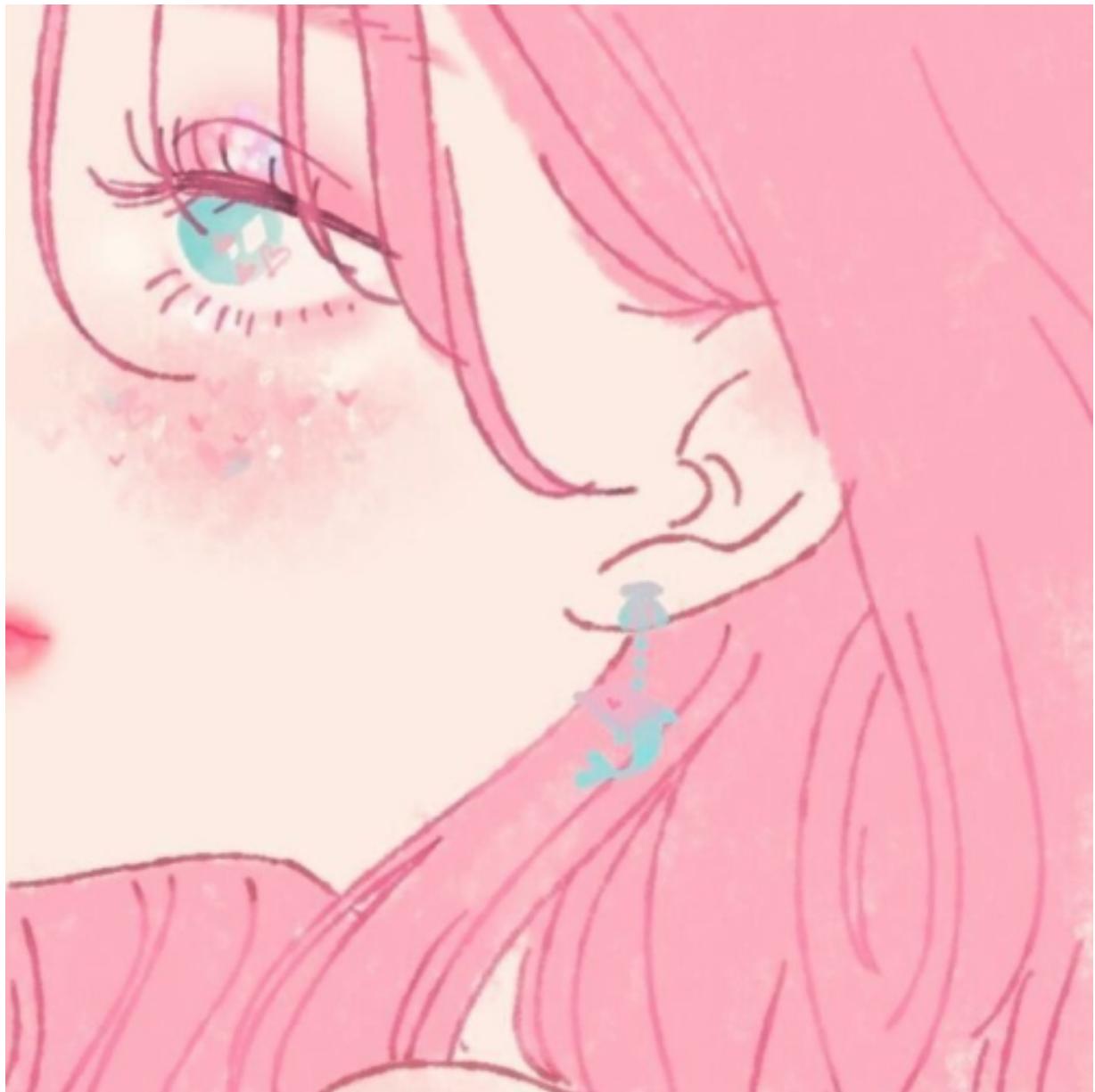


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# Chapter 149

It's been 3 weeks and 2 days since she's been confined.

'You really are a person full of composure, Raul. I wonder why I didn't notice this charm of yours in my past life.'

Nicole couldn't help but admire Raul's aristocratic demeanor. At night, he would hold her like a beast and do as he pleased with her.

And he did nothing else. He made sure Nicole couldn't leave the mansion, but that was all.

Nicole once crossed the garden without permission and strode out the front gate, curious about how the mansion's people would react.

As expected, several maids and servants hurriedly followed Nicole.

*(It would be best to wait for the Grand Duke in your room.)*

And they politely told her to go back.

When she returned to her room after a while, there was a resume on the table for joining Sith. It was a resume with Aru's personal information.

And nothing happened. Raul didn't mention it any further either.

*(I know what your weakness is, do you think you can run away?)*

Even without Raul saying it out loud, Nicole could read his meaning.

*'Is he implying for me to imagine what will happen to Aru if I leave?'*

Grace, Aru, Dagger. Nicole had quite a few weaknesses.

And Raul had the power and authority to hurt them all. But Nicole had had enough of screaming and raging like a madwoman in her past life. She tried to stay calm.

Nicole knew that for the time being, she had to live quietly as he wanted. And Raul seemed quite satisfied with that state. For the most part, Nicole was able to suppress the resentment that was slowly resurfacing towards him, except for the occasional arguments they had.

These past few days, the mansion has been unusually noisy.

At the Grand Duke's residence, banquets welcoming guests were held sporadically.

Now, Raul had most of the military power in the capital in his grasp. The royal authority only controlled a part of the security knights.

Besides, all other various titles—for instance, the imperial standing army, the defense forces, and parts of the security knights—were all under Raul's control.

There had been no hostess at the Grand Duke's house for a long time, so regular parties or banquets were not held.

However, events related to the security knights had to be organized.

Such banquets hosted by noble families at their own expense for state institutions were called service banquets.

Nicole remembered that every year around this time, a large banquet was held to commend outstanding soldiers and knights.

"It seems that tonight's banquet will be quite grand."

Nicole said quietly. She and Raul were currently sitting face to face, having breakfast.

"They are tedious events. They don't really concern you."

Raul, who was drinking coffee and reading the newspaper, looked up at Nicole with a languid gaze.

"As the only person with leisure in this house, I feel a bit guilty. It seems everyone else is busy preparing for the banquet."

Nicole said this while poking at a peach on her white plate, her attitude one of boredom.

"Do you want to go to the ball?"

"I like glamorous things."

Nicole answered. Sometimes she had to show behavior befitting her role.

"Yes, it will be very glamorous indeed. The moment you attend that event, you'll become a target for the royal family."

Raul dismissed Nicole's words as if they were preposterous. His response was loaded with various meanings, including that she had absolutely no right to stand by his side.

It was obvious. If a woman of unknown origin attended a banquet with Raul, the entire Empire would be abuzz. The position of Raul's consort was a conspicuous one.

"But do they really not know my identity? Would anything change if I hide?"

Nicole stabbed the peach again. Her nerves were on edge, and she had no appetite, hardly eating.

As such days continued, she felt drained. Perhaps because someone was sucking away her energy every night.

"Until I give you a name, you are nothing. At least if you confess now, there might be another chance, but that too will soon disappear."

Raul said.

"And even if you go on a hunger strike, it's meaningless. Make sure to eat properly."

Nicole put down her fork and looked at Raul. Her meals, even her attire, were all managed...

"It feels like I've been living like this for a very long time."

In the end, Nicole was following the same steps as in her past life.

But what's worse... this time Nicole is in love with Raul. Amidst their repeated physical relationship, her unrequited

love for him grew, and she felt her heart wearing down bit by bit.

"You will live like this for a very long time, as long as I don't get tired of you."

"What will you do if you get tired of me?"

"Nothing."

Raul said.

"You will be thrown out into the world. If you don't like that, you know what you have to do."

Nicole knew what Raul was demanding.

He had a good intuition. He was pressing her to reveal everything she was hiding, everything she knew about the kidnapping of Isabel...

But Nicole couldn't do it. In her dilemma, she felt suffocated.

She had experienced too much in this life to be thankful for at least not being beaten or starved.

She didn't want to lose the control she had finally found in this life. The control over her own life.

"You're a smart woman, Karen. You'll understand what I'm saying."

"Thank you for praising my intelligence. It's really too much. For meaningless intercourse, the lower half would be enough, but you even care about what's in my head."

Look at this. She's really just like herself in her previous life. Nicole felt goosebumps on the back of her hand after

speaking her mind.

Raul clicked his tongue.

"How could I only like your lower half? The tongue I often use is attached to the upper part, too. Besides, a woman like you is irreplaceable."

"Is that so? What kind of irreplaceable? You could find a woman with better skills anytime you want."

"I don't get angry even when you spout such nonsense from morning on. Far from it, I'll stroke your head and say you're pretty before I leave. So, we are quite a good pair, aren't we?"

"The term 'a pair' seems to be for a woman who holds your hand and goes out to official events. We are more of a combination than a pair, a combination for mutual benefit. Even then, you're forcing me now, so the benefit is all yours."

"So all of this is a loss? To you?"

Raul wiped his mouth and smirked cynically.

"Hardly. It's an honor. An honor that will last for generations."

"You come from a family with no lineage. Worrying about a future for generations when you have no past. You're quite a delightful woman."

Raul mocked her indifferently. Nicole felt even more nauseated by the ominous feeling that she would never win against this man in a war of words.

Raul stood up. He approached Nicole and lightly touched her chin.

"I care about you, Karen."

"...Is that so?"

"That's why I keep you safely tucked away in here, so you won't be wandering around outside on your own two feet."

"Are you hiding me away because I'm a source of embarrassment?"

"Shall I remind you how Sienna died?"

Sienna had harbored an unrequited love for Raul, always lingering by his side. In return, she incurred the wrath of the royal family and 'disappeared.' Nicole shuddered again as she remembered the flames.

"Please leave. We have nothing to say to each other in the morning. At night, I'll do as you say."

It was the best form of resistance she could muster.

Raul stared at her with a sharp expression and then left the room.

\*\*\*

Another day began. Nicole had come to understand the unspoken rules of this house.

For example, the floor where Nicole resided, the third floor with the master's bedroom, had everything she needed: a library, a study, Raul's bedroom, and a small tea room.

Nicole was mostly required to stay there. If she ventured beyond that space, surveillance followed.

"I would like to read some books."

After breakfast, Nicole changed her clothes and spoke up. The maids nodded in response.

They took Nicole to the library and then left.

The library on the third floor was larger than expected. In her past life, Nicole hadn't read much after falling ill... she had been ignorant. But now, she quite liked books.

As she entered between the bookshelves, she was greeted by the pleasant smell of books.

Then, it seemed she saw a shadow in one corner of the library.

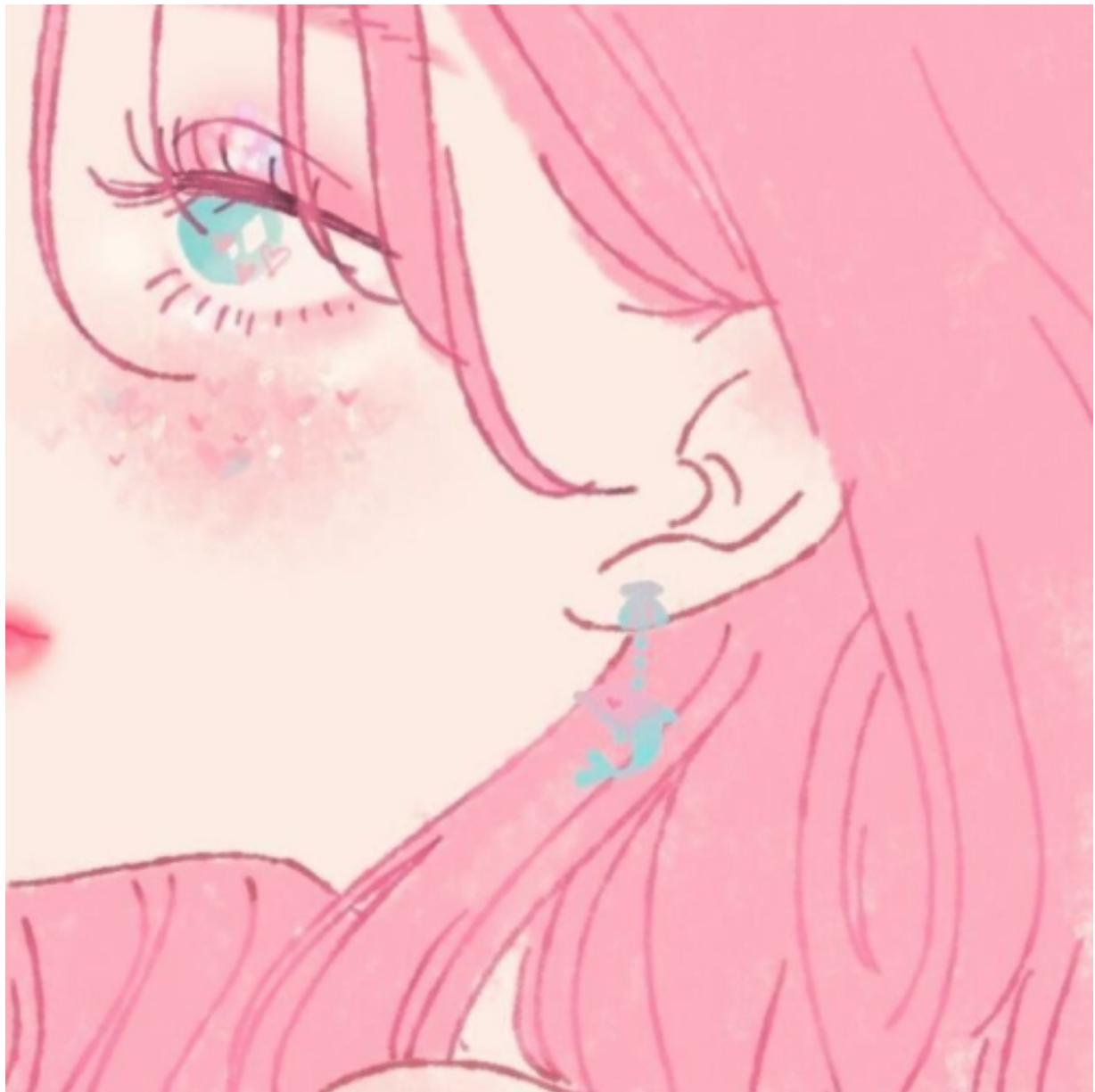
'Who is it?'

Wondering if she had seen incorrectly, she approached.

There was a piece of paper with gold leafing on the table. The sunlight coming in from a nearby small window reflected off the paper, making it shine.

Nicole picked up the paper. And then she recognized the scrawled handwriting on it.

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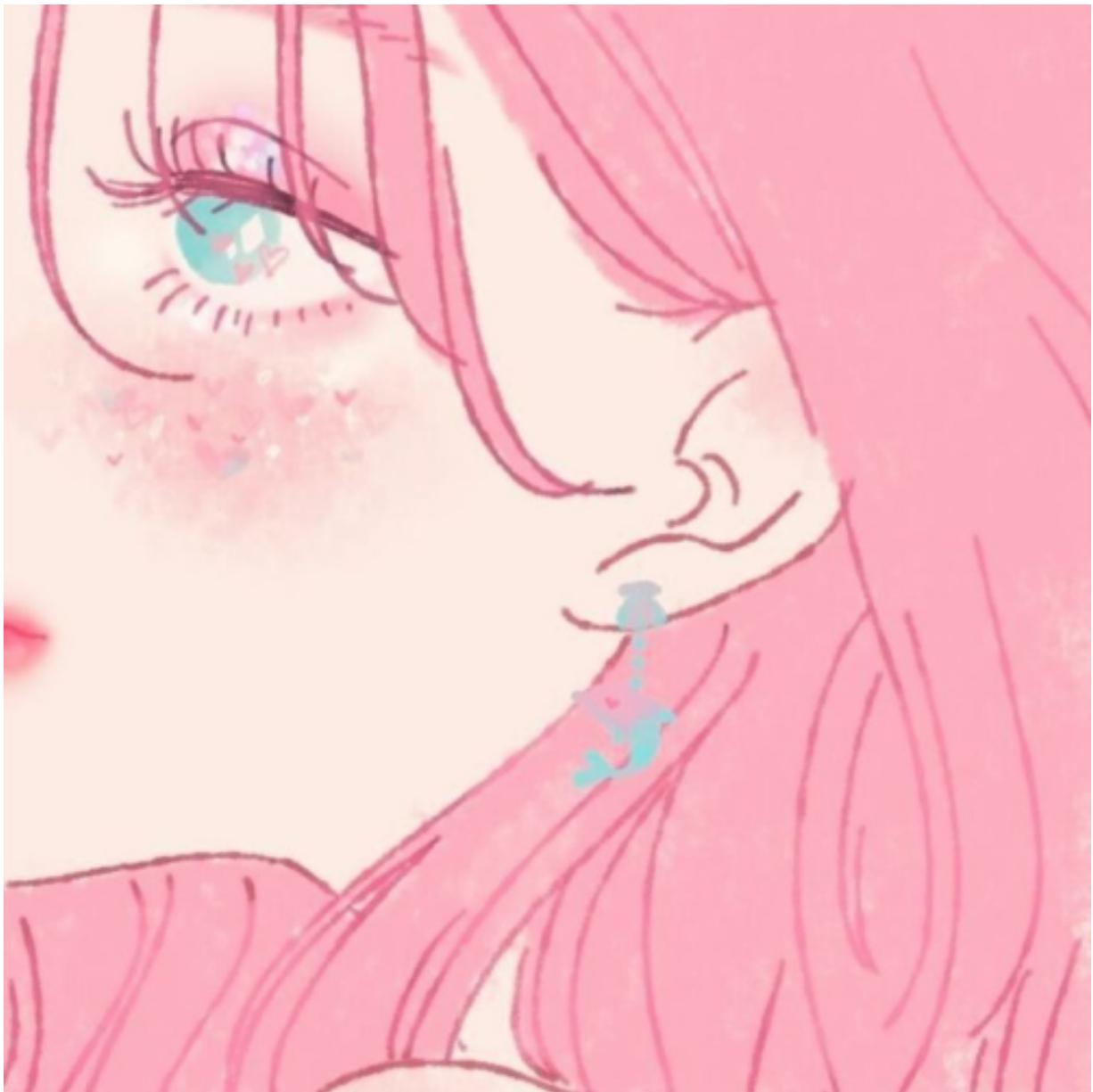


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# Chapter 150

⟨I plan to attend the service event today. If you are safe, you should attend as well.⟩

Nicole recognized the handwriting. It was Grace's.

Nicole smiled lightly.

\*\*\*

Nicole wondered if she had ever surprised Raul in her past life.

She was irritable and always angry, but incompetent and did nothing. So overall, she was a submissive wife.

As soon as she returned to her room, she headed for the dressing room.

Raul's bedroom was very large and included a huge dressing room besides the side room where Nicole stayed.

It was usually filled with Raul's collections and clothes. Now, one side had been cleared to hang dresses for Nicole.

“I've collected quite a lot in just three weeks.”

Nicole smirked. Raul had taken out dresses and jewels from the Grand Duke's warehouse for her.

Not satisfied with that, he also had clothes brought in from boutiques in town for her to wear immediately.

Nicole took out the clothes that were hung in the farthest inside.

It was a slightly unusual dress compared to the others. The inside was covered with very thin silk close to flesh color, and the top was covered entirely with beautifully woven, dense black lace. It was not puffed up inside, creating a mermaid-like line.

Behind it, the design was such that black silk extended like a bud wrapping around, suggesting the silhouette as if it would appear and disappear.

There was also a tulle cape as a set. Overall, it revealed the body lines, but the tulle and the drapery decoration at the back covered any excessive exposure.

Nicole looked at it and removed the drapery decoration that hung from the hips.

Nicole was very quick with her hands, and there was plenty of time left until the service event.

Fortunately, it was not difficult as it was tailored to remove the decoration from the beginning.

Then Nicole called for the maids. One maid quietly entered the room.

“Could you help me get dressed? I think the Grand Duke would like to see me well-dressed when he returns from the event. There will be women in beautiful dresses filling the hall, so he wouldn’t want to be greeted by a woman in pajamas with a disheveled face.”

No maid would refuse such a request. Nicole applied heavier makeup than usual to match her black dress, with particular attention to her eye makeup.

As she applied pearl powder along her facial lines, her face glowed beautifully under the lighting of the dressing room.

Nicole had a pure and delicate-looking face. Her overtly contrasting makeup added an even more intriguing atmosphere.

Next, she put on a black garter belt and short undergarments.

The fashionable undergarments were so thin that they were almost see-through.

‘The Grand Duke’s taste in undergarments is quite impressive.’

Nicole felt a sense of novelty seeing several such undergarments hanging in the wardrobe, and then she put on her dress.

She had heard that such dresses were all made from the finest silk and lace from the Eastern Continent, which do not lose their sheen even after decades. She could tell just by the feel of them against her skin.

“I need the finest perfume oil. I think you know where it will be used. Since I don’t know when the event will end, please prepare it as soon as possible. Is that okay?”

Nicole said this to send the maid away.

Normally, two or three maids would always follow Nicole, but today only one was watching over her.

This was because all the maids had gone out to support the event.

The one remaining today was among the youngest.

The maid blushed at Nicole's words and then went out saying she would prepare it right away.

Nicole quickly slipped into her black silk shoes and, after draping a cape over her shoulders, left the room.

Then she walked very slowly down the corridor towards the first floor where the service event was being held.

As she passed through the hallway, everyone looked at her.

"If you are here....."

One of the servants recognized Nicole and approached, but closed his mouth upon seeing Nicole smoothly remove her cape, revealing much of her chest due to the daring dress.

The Grand Duke's consort coming out in such attire was shocking; the servant looked as if he had seen a ghost.

Nicole handed her cape to the servant.

"Sorry, but could you please take this to my room? It's also fine to leave it in the Grand Duke's storage."

"That...."

"I'm getting late to attend the party."

Without looking back, Nicole descended the stairs.

Silk gloves adorned with jewels wrapped around her hands. Black high heels studded with jewels. A black lace mermaid-

line dress that revealed the curves of her body.

The underlayer of pale pink fabric made it seem as if one could glimpse her skin beneath the lights, a dress that provoked much imagination.

Nicole walked down the stairs and revealed herself in the ballroom, causing a small murmur among the people to grow louder.

Everyone standing near her was looking at Nicole; some men were so openly staring that it was embarrassing for her.

And then... there was Raul.

Across from her, standing at a distance, was Raul with Princess Sylvia by his side.

Sylvia wore a dress with a soft blue hue, covering her from neck to toe, with puffed sleeves.

Sylvia was originally good-looking, but the royal family's efforts to make her appear modest made the dress seem ill-fitting.

However, the small tiara placed atop her long golden hair was quite beautiful.

Raul was staring directly at Nicole. He wore a subtly cynical expression and then licked his lips.

Only then did Nicole notice Sylvia's hand placed over Raul's. Nicole's heart beat unpleasantly.

'Since my last life, Sylvia's existence has tormented me a lot.'

Nicole knew that Raul had no interest in her, but it wasn't always the case that Raul ignored Sylvia. After all, Sylvia was a Princess.

'I wonder how you will react.'

But Raul glanced at Nicole and then looked away. It was complete disregard.

Nicole expected that Raul would be so angry that he might want to grab her hair and drag her to the room right now, perhaps restraining the urge to do so.

Once again, her mouth was dry. Nicole turned her wrist towards her face and caressed her cheek.

'I'm dying of thirst.'

Nicole moved towards the bar.

"I didn't mean for you to come so conspicuously."

As she picked up the champagne, someone spoke to her quietly.

Nicole did not lift her head. It was Grace's voice. She was so relieved that she almost sighed. Nicole pretended to bring the champagne glass to her lips and answered very softly.

"If I'm going to come, I might as well make someone angry."

"Seeing that your mouth is intact, you're not hurt anywhere. Now that I've confirmed you're safe, that's enough."

Grace pretended to ask the waiter about the drinks.

The waiter looked at Nicole as if he knew she was someone close to Grace and nodded slightly.

“Nothing much. They feed me well and don’t hit me.”

“I thought you’d be going crazy with anxiety, given your personality.”

“I’m usually told that I’m calm.”

“That’s true, but you’re goal-oriented. You must be feeling restless by now.”

Nicole lifted the corners of her mouth. Grace continued in a low voice.

“I’ll arrange a way to contact you soon. The Grand Duke’s household is a realm I cannot touch, so it’s difficult for now.”

“It’s okay.”

Nicole turned her back.

Raul, while conversing with others, slowly turned his gaze to stare at Nicole.

It was a chilling look. Like he was about to devour something. Perhaps the look of a predator is this calm and cruel before it cuts off the breath of its prey.

“If my daughter went around like this, I would have locked her up in a room so she couldn’t go anywhere. My goodness, you’re wearing a dress that looks like you’re about to dash into the coat room for a tryst with a man. You’re making me sigh more because of you.”

Nicole knew it was time to laugh. But hearing words that reminded her of Sienna, she slightly tightened her grip on the glass.

*(Grace is going to die because of you.)*

Nicole tried not to think of Raul's words. She thought it couldn't be true. But she didn't even want to imagine something bad happening to Grace.

Nicole thought that once she left this place, she would have to stay away from Grace for a while. That too was heart-wrenching.

"What can I help you with right now?"

"Just find me one man to dance with. If I become a wallflower, I think Raul will mock me. It would make my provocation pointless."

Without a chaperone or respectable parents, she will have trouble getting dance requests tonight. In fact, if her true identity is revealed, she will be met with contempt and disgust from the people.

"Don't expect anything even if Raul shows jealousy. The guy has no heart."

"I know. But he gets angry quite well. If he's an animal that doesn't know love, I should at least make him angry. It's also a method of taming."

Grace didn't say anything, but Nicole could imagine her scoffing with an expression similar to Raul's at some point.

"I'll send someone suitable soon. In fact, everyone looks so eager to dance with you that if you just push them a little, you'll probably get a queue number."

Nicole stood in a corner for a moment, observing the people. Soon, a man approached her.

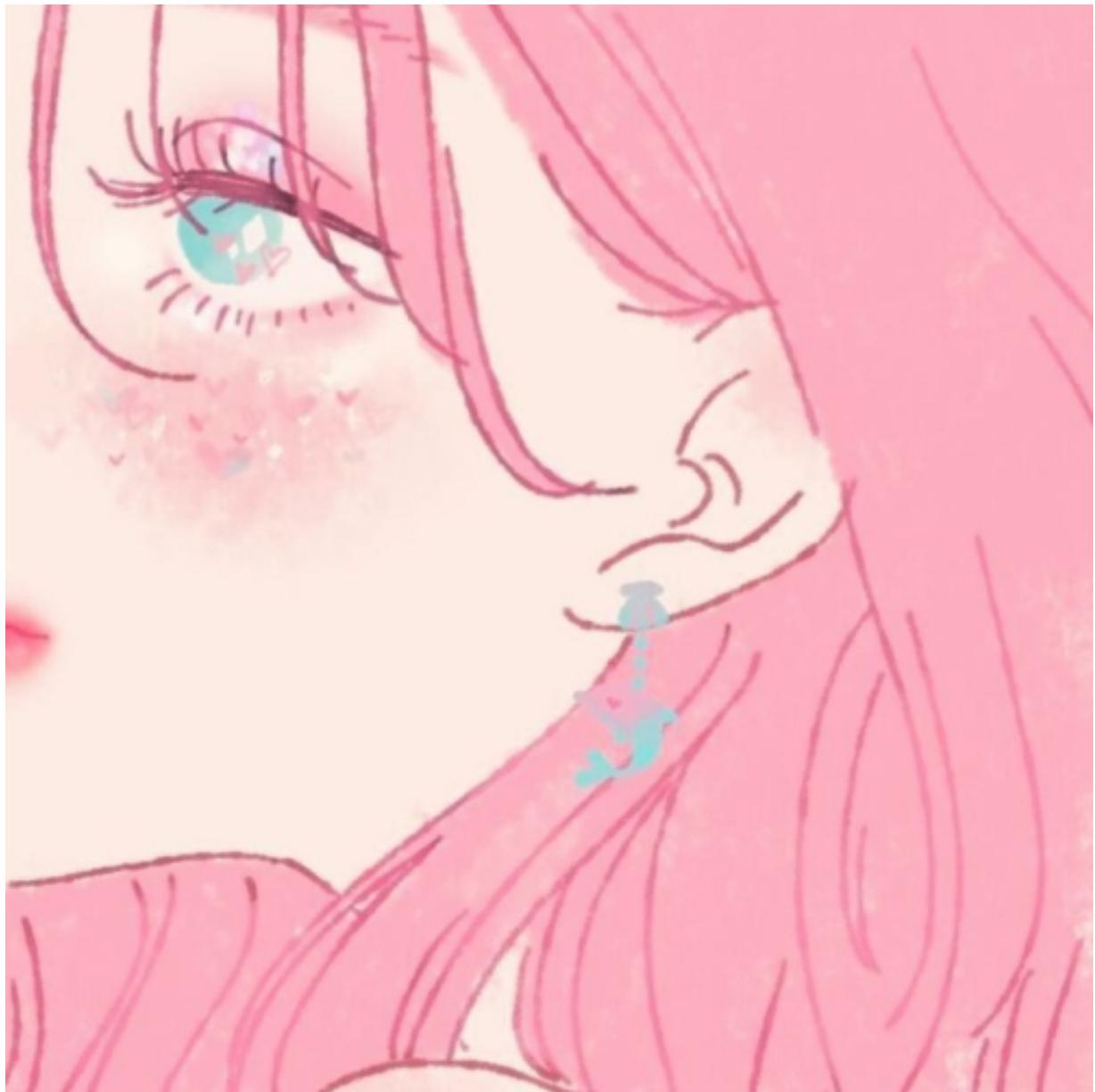
“Hello, I’ve come at the introduction of a distinguished person. You have a remarkable chaperone, I see.”

The man said with a smile. The gazes surrounding Nicole grew even more piercing.

“Hello.”

Nicole faced the man. It was clear he was sent by Grace. Nicole tried not to look at Raul.

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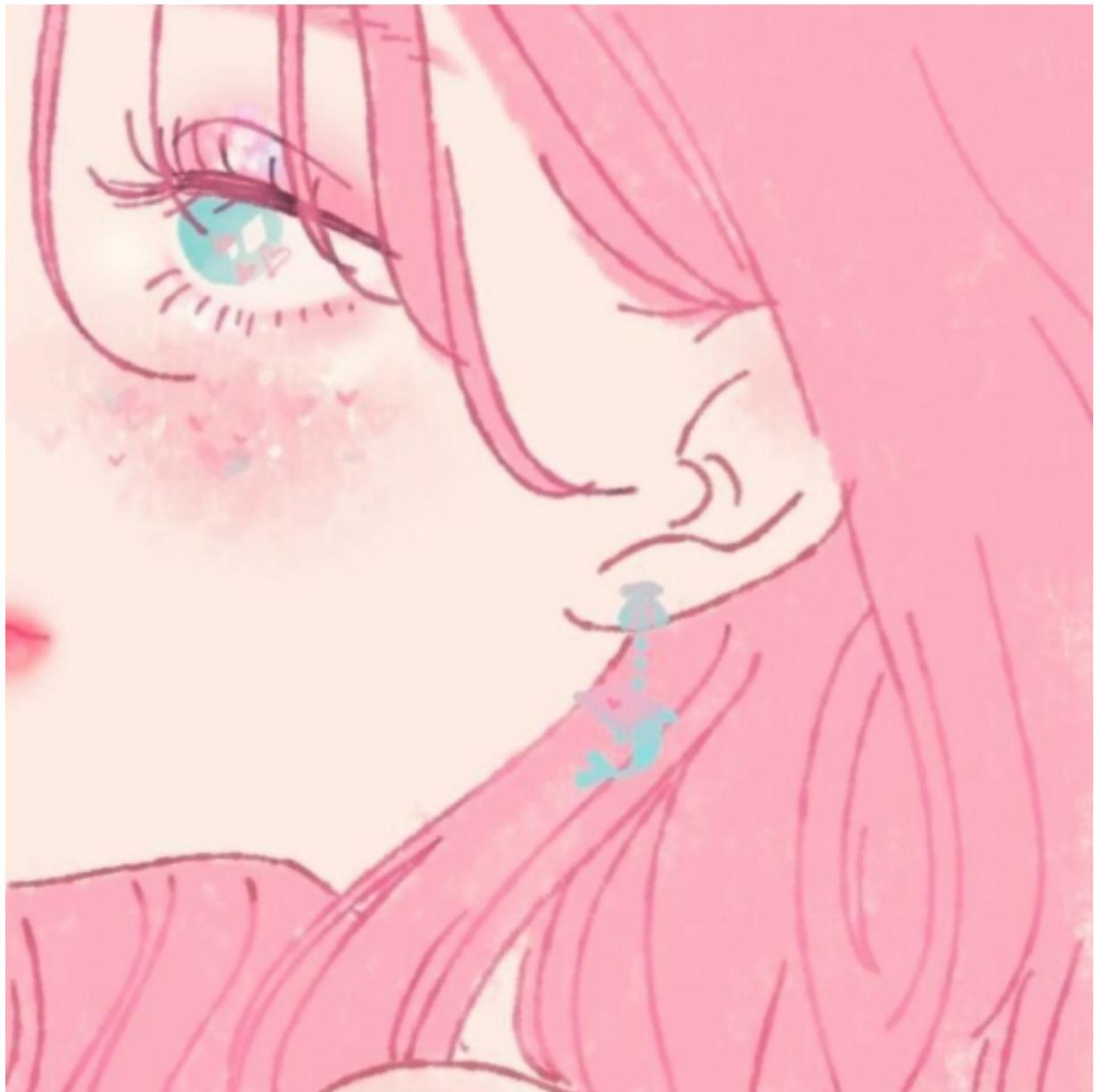


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# Chapter 151

The man sent by Grace was an ordinary nobleman.

“I owe Grace a favor from before. Sometimes I act as a social informant for her.”

“I see.”

The man introduced himself as Amin. He mentioned his surname too, but Nicole somehow felt she wouldn’t remember it.

Nicole tried not to show that she was conscious of Raul. However, she couldn’t help but glance at him from time to time. Amin followed Nicole’s gaze and let out a small sigh.

“Even if you look at him as if you’re thirsty, the Grand Duke will not ask you to dance. He never dances.”

Nicole, feeling sorry, met the other’s eyes.

“I’m sorry for bothering you.”

“Not at all. Everyone here will think I’m the lucky one to have the first dance with the most beautiful woman present.”

Nicole smiled faintly. Such words were a kind of politeness in society. Nicole well knew they held no special meaning. It was just the other’s goodwill to be kind.

Nicole took the man's hand. Before dancing, there were a few types of hold positions that men and women would take with both hands clasped.

Typically, in such settings, men and women would cross their upper bodies without touching chests, standing side by side and clasping hands over their shoulders.

"Don't worry, I can dance well enough not to step on your feet."

Nicole said softly. She had learned to dance in her past life through etiquette training, and her skills had improved significantly with Grace's additional coaching.

The dance was a fast choreography popular in other continents these days. It involved movements where the woman's body lines were easily revealed due to extensive motion. Moreover, Nicole's skirt was not long enough to drag on the floor, occasionally exposing the top of her feet clad in black heels.

Fortunately, a fair number of people had gathered around Nicole and Amin, and the atmosphere of the ball began to change again.

"I heard rumors that he has someone special now. But I didn't know she would be this beautiful."

"Thank you for the compliment. I'll take it as a kindness."

"Everyone will think the same." Amin said with a shrug.

The music stopped for a moment before the next song, and once again, new partners and people filled the space.

It was then that Nicole felt a heavy presence beside her. It was Raul, standing next to an unfamiliar woman.

"That's enough," Raul said.

Once again, the music began to flow slowly. This piece was much more elegant and seemed to wail. Nicole thought it wouldn't be difficult to follow the rhythm, even though it was a tune she was hearing for the first time.

Amin shrank back a bit and let go of Nicole's hand. Raul grabbed her wrist.

As Raul strode to the center of the stage and stood, everyone watched.

"It's time for a partner change."

Amin turned his eyes and stepped back.

Nicole shivered. As Raul seemed to make a move to change partners, the people around them formed a circle en masse and exchanged partners with the person next to them.

"Is this a feature of a service banquet? Submission."

Nicole said, looking at Raul. His pupils faintly distorted as he sneered.

"If we must get technical, it's about understanding the theme, including the ability to know who holds the power."

Raul pulled Nicole by the waist towards him.

When Nicole had danced with the unfamiliar man just before, she maintained a hold that did not allow their chests to touch. However, even in such a setting, couples

sometimes embraced so that their upper bodies were completely against each other.

Raul pressed the two fingers he had on Nicole's waist firmly for the last time to ensure her upper body was completely against his.

Nicole took a breath. The gazes of the people stung her as they fixed on her half-bared back.

Raul began to step.

"I originally had a different partner."

"You seem to be mistaken, but I am the only man in this space who can touch your body."

"Is that so? I thought I wasn't even invited to this party. Such an amazing rule exists?"

"How about you grasp the situation before making sarcastic remarks?"

Nicole then realized the terrible anger seeping into Raul's tone.

"You must think you've slept enough for tonight, showing up in such clothes?"

Nicole realized that the gazes of the people meant nothing.

Raul's emotions. His gaze. It was more than stinging. Tonight, she might burn for this man.

"Aren't you ashamed to dance with me in front of everyone?"

Nicole had the rare experience of her body and mouth acting independently. Raul was very strong, and they were well-matched.

Dancing is an activity that relies on the strength of one's partner. As Raul controlled the pace and pulled Nicole's body toward him, her body naturally moved as he intended, drawing perfect curves.

The process of stepping was as natural as being in waves. As a result, Nicole's body leaned heavily on Raul. At the same time, she felt a subtle pleasure in his decision to hold her hand in front of the people, yet her mouth continued to want to fight with him.

"It's better than you being in the arms of another man."

"Is that so? I thought you enjoyed watching me with others, since you never dance."

Raul sneered. He flicked the heel of Nicole's high-heeled shoe with the tip of his foot.

"Ah!"

Nicole's steps faltered and she staggered. As she momentarily fell backward, Raul's hands wrapped around her back. She leaned her upper body back and then straightened up, regaining her balance as best as she could. To an onlooker, it would have seemed like a perfect dance move. Raul firmly held Nicole and spun her around once.

A small applause broke out from the ignorant crowd, as if it were a comical short play. After all, these people would cheer and clap even if Raul suddenly flipped her over and threw her upside down.

“I already warned you that it’s dangerous. You’re now going to be a target of the royal family.”

“Did you think the royal family doesn’t know about me?”

Nicole whispered back. If she was going to be exposed to the royal family and become a target once again...

“It was only a matter of time before I was discovered. Did you believe the Grand Duke’s estate was a safe place?”

“At least you shouldn’t have provoked them.”

“Being afraid doesn’t suit someone like Sith.”

“Yes.”

Raul looked at Nicole with dark eyes as the dance came to an end.

“Protecting a woman like you doesn’t suit me either.”

Nicole thought to herself that it was better to be a woman dancing in the middle of the ballroom than to be involved with Raul’s dirty secrets. And it should have been the same in her past life. Definitely—it was something that should have been done. At least now, Raul could not ignore her.

\*\*\*

The dance ended. Then, people approached Raul. His face twisted faintly with annoyance, very slightly.

“These are the guests of honor for today’s event. The knights who will receive awards.”

Nicole nodded.

"You have exactly 15 minutes. Stay quiet."

Raul whispered into Nicole's ear. As he was surrounded by people, Nicole felt liberated.

Nicole deliberately distanced herself from Raul and headed back towards the bar. Then something unexpected happened. People began to cautiously approach her.

"What is your name?"

"Have you known the Grand Duke for a long time?"

"You are very beautiful. Was this dress a gift from the Grand Duke?"

"I haven't heard any rumors about that..."

"Are you from the Empire?"

People asked frantically. Nicole was bombarded with questions before she could even remember the names they hurriedly introduced themselves with.

Nicole had already created a false identity named 'Sophia' after dealing with Duchess Lisbeth's case.

Sophia was a fallen noble who, after the death of her parents, lived alone in a mansion on the outskirts of the capital, squandering her parents' inheritance.

Raul had already hinted that Nicole would live under that identity for the time being.

Not sure if she would use the name Sophia, Nicole answered appropriately based on that identity.

“I was invited here because I’m acquainted with him. This dress is an old piece that I’ve mended. It’s not easy to find such fabric.”

Nicole did not answer completely, leaving them hanging.

It was easier than she thought. The old Nicole was always afraid.

The nobles in their splendid attire looked like towering mountains, sometimes like demons from bizarre tales.

But now, being there as Raul’s mistress gave her a sense of confidence. They were more courteous to Raul’s first-ever mistress than to the unloved Grand Duchess. This comedic disparity made her laugh.

“Excuse me.”

As Nicole left without giving any information, an old lady muttered softly.

“She doesn’t seem ordinary. It’s natural since he chose her.”

She spoke very softly, but her hand covering her mouth with a fan was clumsy. Nicole understood what she was saying by reading her lips. Lip-reading was a basic skill for Sith’s Shadow.

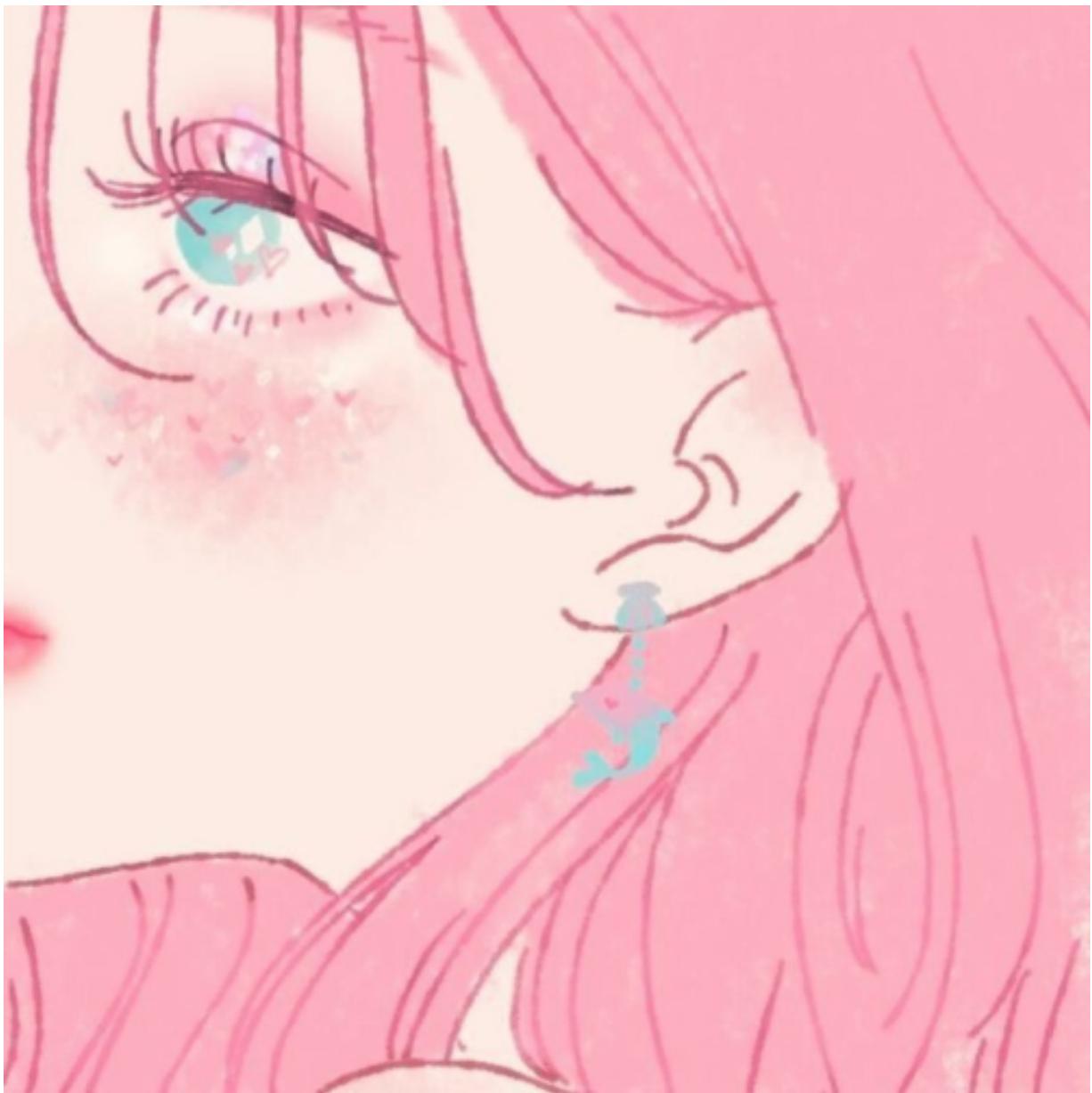
A few others mumbled something behind her, but Nicole, leaving the spot, did not pay attention.

Nicole headed to the balcony to catch her breath. Raul had not instructed her not to be there.

On the balcony stood an unexpected figure.

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# Chapter 152

The figure standing on the balcony was none other than Princess Sylvia.

She had dazzling platinum blonde hair, partially braided and pinned to the side. Her eyes were a lighter shade of ice blue than Nicole's.

'She's prettier than I thought.'

That fact inflicted a subtle wound on Nicole.

In her past life, oddly enough, she had never seen Sylvia up close. She had never thought Sylvia, seen from a distance, was pretty.

Nicole's standard of beauty was all attuned to Isabel. Isabel possessed a beauty that left an unforgettable impression on anyone who saw her once.

Once that afterimage faded from her mind, Nicole could easily find the beauty in someone else. Sylvia had a somewhat unusual face.

At first glance, it appeared plain, but upon closer inspection, her face was slender and small, with a strangely androgynous aura.

Upon seeing Nicole, Sylvia's eyes widened in surprise before she quickly contorted her face in arrogance, a noble demeanor to the bone.

“I greet Your Highness, the Princess.”

Nicole greeted her without any perturbation, politely. Naturally, Sylvia did not acknowledge the greeting.

“You.”

Sylvia twisted her fingertips nervously.

“Why are you crawling here where there’s not even the scent of a male? If you’re in heat, you could just step out in the middle of the ball and keep seducing any man, couldn’t you?”

Nicole was impressed. Indeed, this girl was born of the royal family.

‘The woman who beat my younger brother to death for a nonsensical reason in my past life.’

Simply because she couldn’t heal Raul’s injury.

If that fate were to continue, Jay would die by next fall. Of course, much of the destiny has changed now, but...

Sylvia was not quite Isabel, but she was one of the few whom Nicole truly hated, even though she had hardly ever encountered her directly.

At the same time, Nicole realized how ugly her hatred for Sylvia had been throughout her past life.

Everyone in the world hoped that this princess would become a Grand Duchess, and they wished Nicole would be left in the streets to become a beggar.

This mockery was not just Nicole’s delusion; it was echoed in numerous magazines, newspapers, articles, and satirical

drawings.

"I'm here because I haven't seduced just any man. I'm only interested in great men."

Nicole decided to play along with Sylvia's prejudices. In fact, regularly acting in a Karen-like manner was something Nicole was starting to enjoy.

"This is a state event, you know? A woman like you shouldn't be wandering around in such clothes."

Sylvia raised her eyebrows in disbelief and had a tone as if she was strangely trying to teach Nicole, which Nicole found incredibly irritating.

"You're talking about attending a national event with a pious heart."

"Yes."

"Then one must never have personal feelings, especially regarding the Grand Duke."

"You're spitting in your own face."

"It's not personal feelings for me. It's mutual. The mutual feelings are simply of a kind that Your Highness couldn't guess."

Nicole said, her eyes wide open.

Emotions you can't guess. The world of adults.

The implication seemed to hit Sylvia hard. She was speechless for a while, then she forced a corner of her mouth up into a rotten smile.

Strangely, she looked like a foolish schoolgirl trying to act tough like a delinquent. Sylvia soon pursed her lips and spoke.

"My mother would have said that a woman like you deserves proper punishment. How dare a mistress raise her chin in front of me. Such a wench should be stripped and whipped by the hand of the lady in a place where all the servants can see. Speaking of which, congratulations. For a while, you'll become the talk of the social circles, known as the Grand Duke's mad mistress who dresses like a mermaid in heat."

A mermaid in heat. That metaphor was somewhat amusing. Nicole had to suppress a chuckle.

Duchess Lisbeth had at least some humility worn by time, but this girl, who seemed never to have faced failure, had none of it.

Instead, there was the foolishness of someone raised too high, unaware of the ways of the world, and a cruelty unique to such people. These were easily imaginable qualities.

"You have quite the wit, Your Highness, and even advice to offer. I'm truly grateful."

Sylvia cocked her head, confused. This isn't right? Nicole read the gap in emotions from Sylvia's furrowing brow.

"Are you stupid? Or is it because you're smart?"

"Everything in this world will be judged as Your Highness has named it. That's what royalty does. So please, feel free to judge as you wish."

Now Sylvia's face turned even redder. She had never been talked back to like this by anyone before.

"You know? I... I was born to become the Grand Duke's wife. I will be the Grand Duchess."

"Do as you please. But whether you'll be a wife powerful enough to whip a mistress, that's for the Grand Duke to decide."

"You're out of your mind, aren't you? You have no idea what's going to become of you? You dared to covet something that belongs to the royal family."

Something of the royal family. The bridegroom she was assured of. Raul. Nicole was not surprised by her displeasure.

"Is my life one that could disappear without a trace, just like these things floating in the air? I'm well aware of that."

Nicole said with a smile. Just then, a tiny flame appeared before her eyes. Nicole stepped back to avoid it.

"What are you..."

At that moment, Sylvia's eyes shook greatly.

Nicole's eyebrows raised slightly.

A look of momentary horror crossed Sylvia's face, as if to demand, 'How do you know about the flame?' But soon, her expression returned to one of arrogance.

Nicole swallowed dryly. She suspected that the royal family had the ability to handle flames, and this moment only strengthened her suspicion.

‘Should I probe further? No, it would be dangerous if they realized that I’m onto them.’

There will be a better opportunity. Nicole concealed her anxiety.

“If you know so well, then don’t act so rudely. I’m not kind enough to tolerate a wench like you.”

“Is that so? You seem kinder and more benevolent than anyone else, especially since you’re tolerating it so well right now.”

Nicole said softly. She realized that she really did not like Sylvia at all.

“Don’t be sarcastic. I’m not a fool.”

Sylvia said, her lips twitching slightly.

“What is your relationship with the Grand Duke?”

“One of the relationships you’re imagining, Your Highness. But according to the Grand Duke, we might be nothing at all.”

“You’re mocking me. You’ve got the nerve, the best in the Empire.”

“But no man looks at a woman he has no relation to in that way. Even if the people of the world don’t teach me anything, I know that much...”

Sylvia looked at Nicole as if she had made a mistake while speaking. She then composed her expression again.

“You’re not nobility, are you? You can’t hide the signs of having grown up in low circumstances. Your father passed

away early and you inherited his wealth? Lowly blood gives off a scent. Just like you."

Sylvia said this. Nicole was subtly surprised at how clever yet simple the girl was, and that her status was somewhat recognized. Indeed, the royal family was aware of Raul's mistress.

"Then what scent does noble blood have? Anxiety and anger?"

"Shut up."

Sylvia said, and she threw the glass she was holding and stepped outside. The clanging sound seemed quite victorious.

'There is some merit to being childish for the woman who killed my brother.'

Nicole thought. Then, she heard the sound of the balcony door opening roughly.

Raul was suddenly standing there.

Sylvia froze as she saw Raul, her shoulders shaking visibly.

"Grand Duke, why are you here..."

"I discovered the most interesting section of tonight's ball, I couldn't help but listen."

Raul said affectionately. Sylvia's face turned even paler.

"I..."

"I am well aware of the royal family's character. But it's surprising you treat a Grand Duke of a nation like a trophy. If

you wish to be a lady, it would be best to return home now. To the largest and most comfortable home in the Empire, to Your Highness's house."

Nicole was witnessing the rare sight of Raul issuing an order of dismissal to the princess.

Sylvia tried to say something, but upon seeing Raul's cold eyes, she quickly left the spot. Nicole clearly saw Sylvia's hands trembling.

Now, only two people were left on the balcony.

"How long have you been here? Eavesdropping is a bad hobby."

"You really have no manners."

Raul said coldly.

"If you are angry because I was impertinent to your young fiancée, I apologize."

Nicole said nonchalantly. She glanced down at the floor, where golden liquid was seeping through the broken glass.

"Follow me."

Raul said. He turned his back.

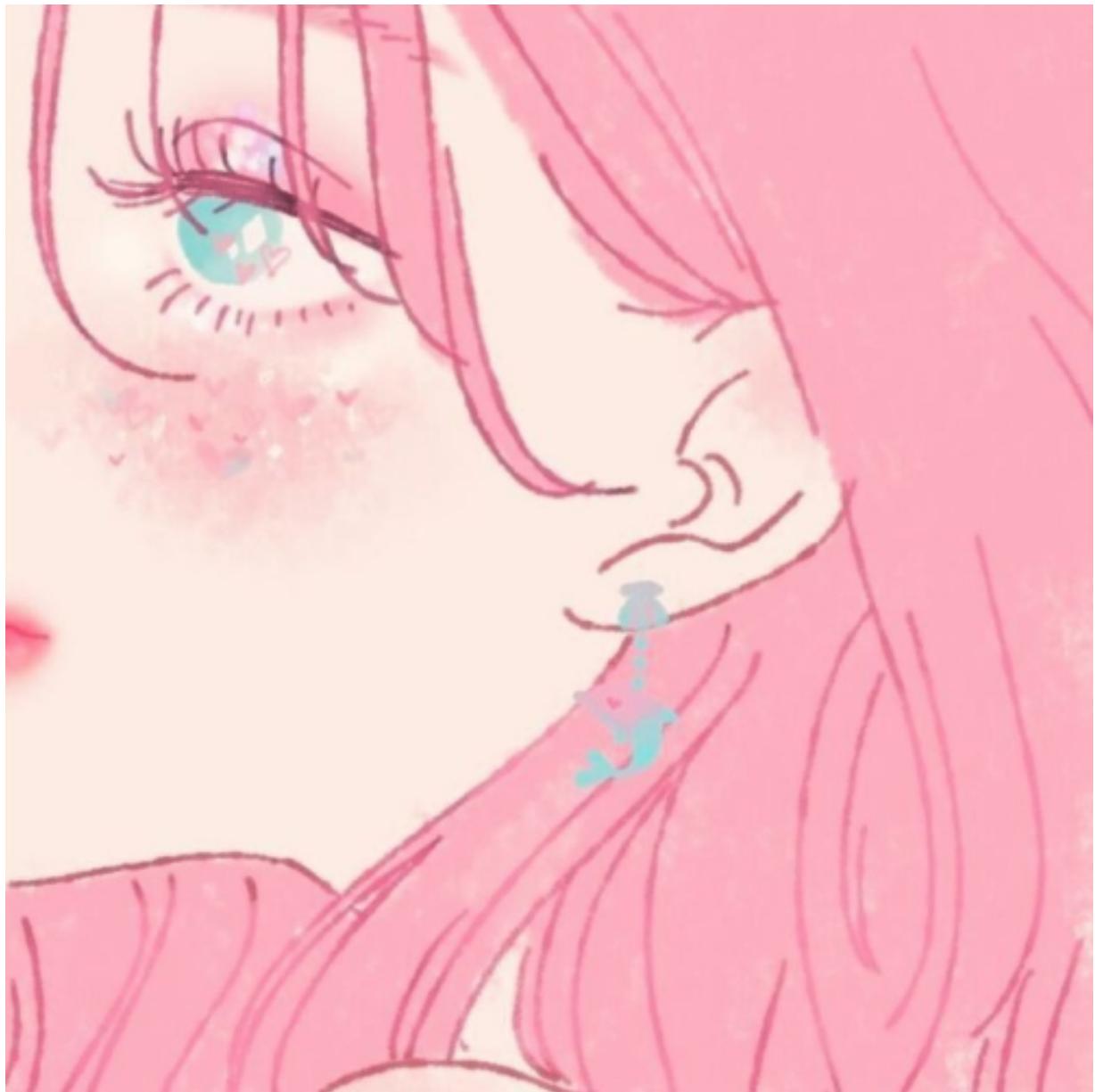
It was clear that Nicole's disrespectful attitude towards the royalty had provoked Raul. He grabbed Nicole and took her somewhere.

Nicole realized that they were in a dimly lit coatroom.

Being dragged there by Raul, Nicole spotted Sylvia hesitating in a corner of the ballroom. She stared at Sylvia

for a few seconds.

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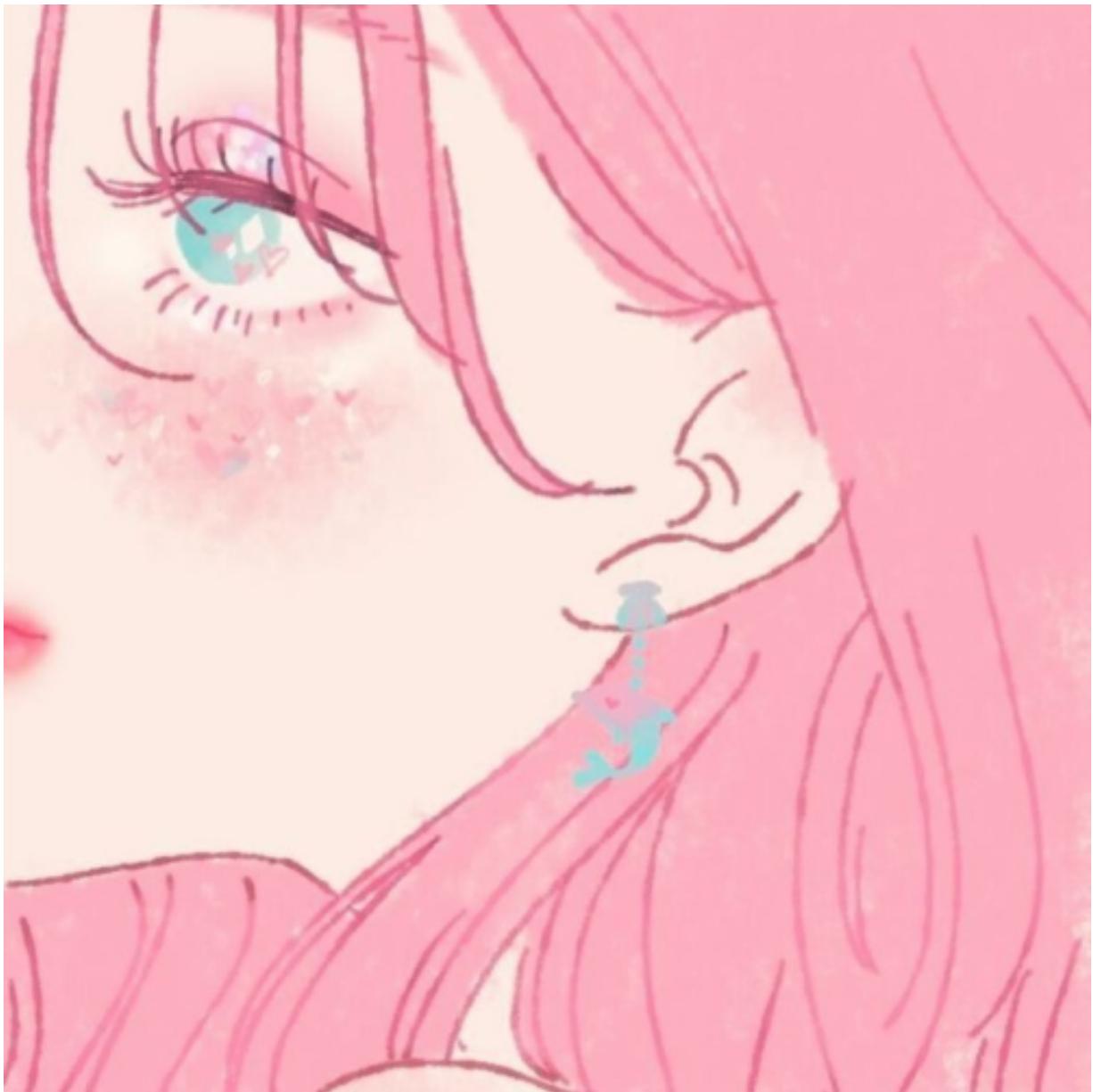


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# Chapter 153

(You look like you could disappear into the coatroom with a man for a tryst at any moment.)

Someone said that to her today. Could she have imagined it?

Who would have thought that the person who wanted to be locked in the coatroom sucking on her tongue would be the brightest star at this ball? Nicole felt a bit amused.

“Are you laughing?”

Raul, who had pushed Nicole against the wall, lowered his head, a growling sound coming from him.

“Ah, ungh...”

He almost devoured her lips. A deep and hot kiss was exchanged. Nicole’s hair, twisted up, became disheveled several times as Raul ran his large hand through it.

Rustle. Nicole’s hair came undone. When Nicole tried to pull away for breath, Raul grabbed her wrist and pinned it against the wall. Nicole exhaled a heated breath.

“Don’t show the top of your foot in front of others.”

Raul said threateningly. Today, Nicole’s dress revealed part of her foot provocatively every time she danced.

Of course, it was wrapped in stockings and shoes, but ordinary noble young ladies don't wear such dresses.

"Then, is anything else okay?"

"Do you think showing your chest is okay? Are you really that stupid?"

Nicole blinked slowly. Raul was genuinely annoyed.

'Is it not because I was rude to Princess Sylvia that he's angry?'

Then, Raul buried his face in Nicole's chest. The bite marks engraved on the upper part sent vibrations through Nicole's body. Nicole gasped for breath.

"Not here. I don't want to go all the way here."

Then Nicole noticed a faint light. Through the slightly opened door of the coatroom, someone was watching them-

At that moment, the lights in the ballroom changed, and Nicole noticed a subtle color. Sylvia was spying on them.

"I was trying to protect you."

Raul caressed her thigh over her dress and said.

"It doesn't matter."

Nicole said. And she felt a faint sense of revenge and the pleasure of its fulfillment. The music paused for a moment.

Nicole spoke clearly, loud enough for Sylvia to hear,

"If someone can kill your lover at will, then you, Grand Duke, are in danger too. If I'm to be in danger anyway, I'll

go to hell with you."

Nicole let out a languid moan. Raul bent his body towards her.

"You're a terrible woman. But I can't stop you."

Raul said.

Nicole felt a vulgar sense of victory. At least for tonight, she had won—a victory she had never experienced in her past life.

\*\*\*

Today, the Grand Duke's mansion, the largest hall, was decorated as a banquet hall.

Holding Raul's hand and returning to the banquet hall, Nicole felt the stares of the people. The bite mark on Nicole's pale chest blatantly drew people's attention.

⟨You are mine.⟩

Raul said persistently as he clung to her body.

Nicole savored his possessiveness. In reality, her body was powerless, and sticky wetness soaked between her thighs.

"What about the people?"

"The ball is over for today."

This time, Raul directly pulled Nicole towards the study. His hair was slightly disheveled too.

Raul stood leaning on the desk in the study for a moment. Nicole, looking at his broad back, sensed that his anger had

not subsided at all.

Raul's gaze soon returned to calm.

"Kneel, Karen. It's time for your punishment."

Nicole flinched. However, she soon looked at Raul calmly.

If Raul had completely ignored her in the banquet hall today, she might have obeyed this command. But not today.

"...I don't want to be punished like that tonight."

"You don't have the right to refuse."

"I do. I'm not your subordinate anymore since I've been dismissed."

Nicole said quietly. Raul's gaze furrowed.

"Take off your clothes, Karen."

"I won't do it like that."

Nicole summoned her courage to speak. Strangely, she wasn't afraid. Perhaps she was intoxicated with the euphoria of victory.

These words should have been said a long time ago. Today was a day to bring out many things.

"I told you, I'll do as you say at night. It's okay if you handle me a bit forcefully sometimes. Even if you tie me up or hit me in the bedroom, it's fine. But not everything in our relationship can be like this. If you want to subjugate me, do it like Princess Sylvia would, truly tie me to a pillar and whip me in front of people. If you won't do that, then don't punish my emotions too."

Raul's lips faintly twisted.

"You have no right to demand such a thing."

"At least for tonight, I have that right."

Raul laughed briefly.

"Do you want to pretend to be jealous? Want to play house like lovers? Why did you provoke Princess Sylvia?"

Nicole's eyes trembled.

"Because I've realized it. You would never treat Princess Sylvia like you treat me. Answer me. Would you have treated me this way if I were a princess?"

"Comparing you with Sylvia is meaningless."

Raul said.

"Sylvia is the most useless card in my life. Marrying her would have been at my lowest point. And you compare yourself to her? Do you not realize how many privileges you have?"

"I don't know about that. What I saw was you holding Princess Sylvia's hand in front of everyone today..."

"Don't talk nonsense. It's ridiculous."

Raul dismissed it.

"I'm stupid, at least when it comes to this relationship!"

Nicole glared at Raul and said,

“You just think of me as a woman with tremendous ambition. Fools only see fools, and the clever always see ambition and schemes. But I’m not like that.”

“Are you being that honest with me?”

Raul tilted his head, his gaze gradually becoming calmly cold.

“Then why can’t you tell me? The reason you hid a woman named Isabel. Should I trust a woman who can’t even give loyalty?”

“What I want to give you is not loyalty. And my very nature is the same as those others you despise!”

Nicole spat out the words. The ghost of her past life seemed to float above her head. But it was sincere.

One thing she must never reveal to Raul was her unrequited love. But emotions can’t be completely hidden and sometimes surfaced, especially when she lost her composure.

“You wondered why I whisked away a woman named Isabel. Are you afraid that I might be a double agent for Lady Grace?”

“Or perhaps Isabel knew something disadvantageous to you. There might be even more significant reasons.”

Nicole felt a chill from Raul’s gaze. He knew everything, perhaps even more...

“I was scared.”

Nicole said.

“The woman from YvesChapel, who was thought to be all dead, appeared. I never imagined the last daughter of YvesChapel would be alive. Moreover...”

Nicole bit her lip.

“That woman was so beautiful. I’ve never seen such a beautiful woman in my life. And she looked like a very naughty woman.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“You like such a messed-up woman. She’s naughty and pretty.”

“I really don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“You keep me by your side because you like such women. I really have nothing!”

“.....”

Raul remained silent.

“I’m not hiding any huge secrets like you might expect. I was just afraid of losing my place. Moreover, I heard that the remaining descendants of YvesChapel are a useful card for you. If that woman becomes the Grand Duchess, then I am.....”

“Are you saying you’re scared that a woman named Isabel will become the Grand Duchess and chase you away?”

Raul had a look of hearing something absurd.

“I imagined something even worse. Becoming unnecessary. Losing you....”

Raul made no expression. His fingers tapped, tapped on the table. Nicole swallowed dryly. She knew when Raul made such an expression. It was contempt.

“A mistress can’t own me. I don’t know where you began to misunderstand-”

“Then let me go down there. If I’m going to marry another man after parting with you someday, let me look for a prospective groom in advance. Or enjoy watching me throw myself at other men. That’s okay, isn’t it?”

At that moment, the space subtly shook. Nicole felt the desk’s objects vibrating and the bookshelf moving. Nicole held her breath. Raul’s psychic power was on the verge of running wild.

“Nonsense. You are mine.”

“I am not your possession. That’s not all there is to me.”

Nicole swallowed dryly again. Her fingertips trembled slightly. But she was not frightened.

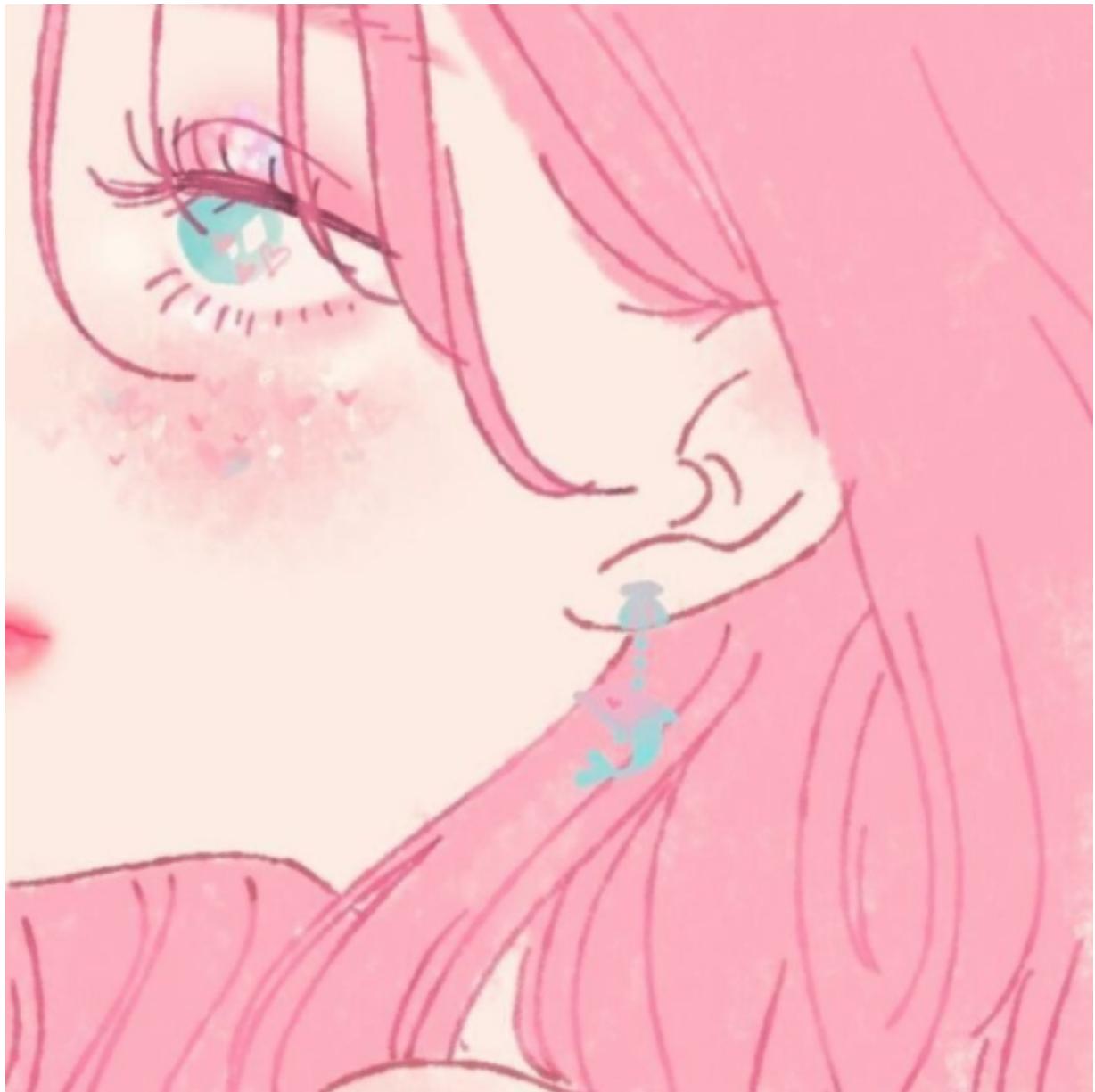
Nicole looked straight into Raul’s eyes. She took a step forward and touched Raul’s body.

“You called me nothing. But today, you proved it. You know it, and you are aware of it. You just haven’t realized or admitted it yet.”

Nicole said softly yet clearly, without avoiding his eyes,

“I am not nothing. And you want me.”

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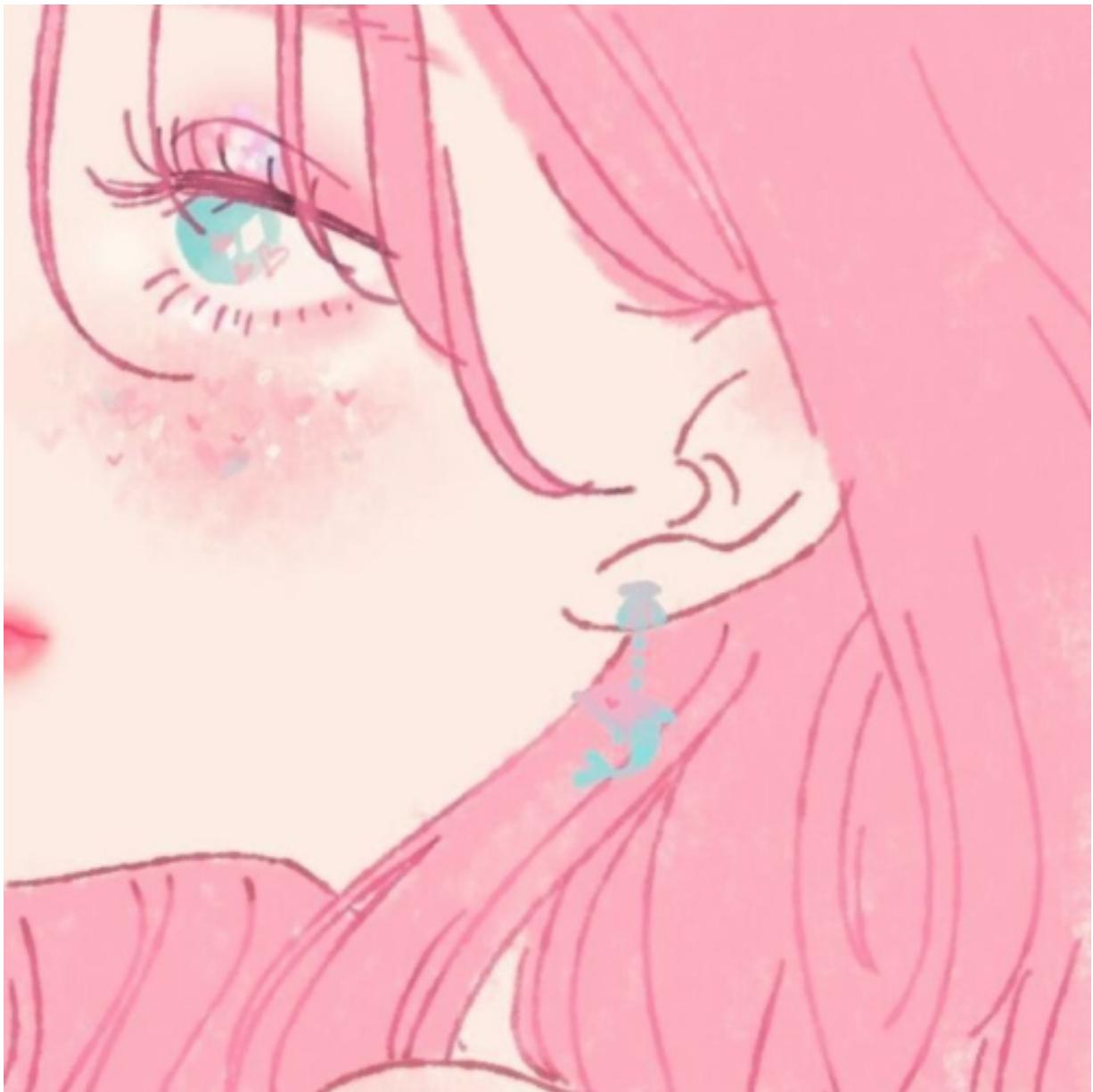


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# Chapter 154

At that moment, Raul's eyes subtly shook. Nicole caught that moment and felt as if her heart had stopped.

Raul was reacting to Nicole's words.

But that moment was fleeting, as Raul grabbed Nicole's wrist.

"You're trying to deceive me again. You're trying to disrupt this situation with a ridiculous excuse. I can't dismiss the matter of the woman named Isabel for such a foolish reason."

Nicole's heart twinged. She bit her lip.

"The truth... Shall I tell you the truth? You always suspect everything so paranoidly. You think I'm such a great woman. How can I speak to someone who assumes that? That the secret I'm hiding from you is nothing much. That I'm anxious your interest might fade away."

"If that's really the case, why are you spilling it now?"

Raul pressed his face close to Nicole's. His eyes searched her as he looked at her.

"Because you proved it today. That I mean something to you."

"That's a misconception."

Raul took Nicole's hand. He gripped her wrist tightly and growled quietly.

"What I want from you is your body. You're nothing but my pleasure and possession."

"Is that so?"

A short smile played on Nicole's lips.

The next moment, she gritted her teeth and grabbed Raul's collar.

"Shall I tell you an interesting story? You know that I had no sexual experience before I came to you. But is that really all there is to it?"

"....."

"Was it the first time I received a proposal of concubinage from someone? What if, after considering many, I chose you in the end?"

"Then you should have accepted that proposal. Whoever you followed, it would have been better than the garbage dump where you grew up."

Raul said as if he was astounded.

"Others didn't offer a generous amount like you did. But in the process of choosing those men, a lot happened. It didn't end with just dancing. I did everything you could imagine, except going all the way. Imagine it. Where I grew up. The filthy backstreets. And the dirty taverns. What do you think I did there?"

Nicole whispered quickly into Raul's ear. Of course, it was an absurd lie.

Raul always scratched deep within her heart, so she spoke in retaliation. At that moment, the desk began to shake again. In an instant, Nicole was lifted and laid on top of the desk.

*Clunk, clatter.* Everything on the desk scattered to the floor. Nicole looked at Raul in surprise.

"Say it again. What did those guys do to you?"

Raul's voice sounded like it was about to explode at any moment.

"Tell me, right now."

Raul's large hand gently grasped Nicole's chin. His eyes had completely turned. Nicole's whole body began to tremble.

At the same time, Nicole was certain. Raul was jealous with his whole body, and he wanted her just as much.

There was definitely something in this relationship. As Raul said, it wasn't all about sexual desire.

"It doesn't matter."

Nicole grabbed the back of Raul's neck and pulled him closer.

"If it's just lust and possessiveness, it doesn't matter, right? Are you upset that you ended up buying something anyone could buy with money at the highest price?"

"Just answer my question."

Raul said.

“Who touched you? Who forced you?”

Nicole wanted to cry and laugh at the same time.

“Of course, it’s a lie. I couldn’t even eat or dress properly before. There were times when I was no different from a beggar on the streets. Who would have coveted me? Maybe boys from similar streets.”

She wasn’t a beggar, but Nicole was a girl in the mountains, dressed in modest and worn clothes. Who would covet such a girl?

Of course, Raul would imagine himself in the shoes of Nicole, who once roamed the streets in her past.

Raul furrowed his brow.

“So you... continue to play with me with childish lies.”

“The important things are always childish. Childishness is primal. Power, money, monopoly, sometimes taking something from someone else...”

Nicole muttered. Raul stepped back. He looked into Nicole’s eyes with his hand on the desk.

Nicole closed her eyes and inhaled Raul’s scent.

When bodies repeatedly overlap, the sense of smell and touch react first.

Raul noticed that too and flinched.

Raul reached out to touch the back of Nicole’s head, a kiss filled with boiling emotions. Nicole easily imagined the

beginning of it, but she gently turned her head away to avoid it.

"I don't want to, we're in the middle of a conversation right now."

"We don't need words between us."

Nicole quietly looked at Raul's face. Raul did not forcibly press her down onto the desk.

Just like that, Nicole grabbed Raul's tie and fiddled with it with her hand. She lowered her eyes and spoke.

"You feel jealous towards me, and you want to possess me. You don't feel this way about anyone else."

"That's it. I have no intention of playing emotional games with you beyond that."

"But I'm the only one, aren't I?"

Nicole continued.

"There is no one else. You've never felt this way about anyone else. You have to admit it."

It was a mystery where such confidence and courage came from within her.

Raul's eyelashes twitched. Their reactions, their gazes, acknowledged it.

"I... am unique to you."

Nicole said as she tugged on Raul's tie.

"Deny it if you can. I've succumbed to your interrogation and laid everything bare. The depths of my heart. This pathetic worry about being abandoned by you. So, you must admit at least one thing. Do you want me?"

Raul closed his eyes. For some reason, he was furiously angry.

He seemed like someone who felt disgust, anger, impulse, desire, and... affection. Wanting something. Longing. All at the same time.

Why does he hold back so much? What is suppressing his emotions to this extent?

*'Am I such a detestable existence to you now? Is it the difference in status? Or is it me, as a person, that's the problem? Does admitting even a slight emotion embarrass him this much?'*

Nicole's heart ached. But she firmly endured and persevered.

"I can't give you what you want. All I can give you is status and wealth."

"I know. But all those words are just excuses. Tell me."

After a while, Raul spoke with a tone as if boiling up from within.

"I want you. Only you. Desperately."

That was enough for now. It felt like her heart would burst, and a small ecstasy exploded in her mind.

Nicole pulled at Raul's tie and parted her lips to bite his upper lip gently, then enveloped his lower lip and for the first time kissed him actively first.

Soon after, the back of Nicole's head was enveloped by Raul's large hand. In the intense kiss, as if devouring her, Nicole quickly became breathless.

"S, see... Just one kiss proves so much."

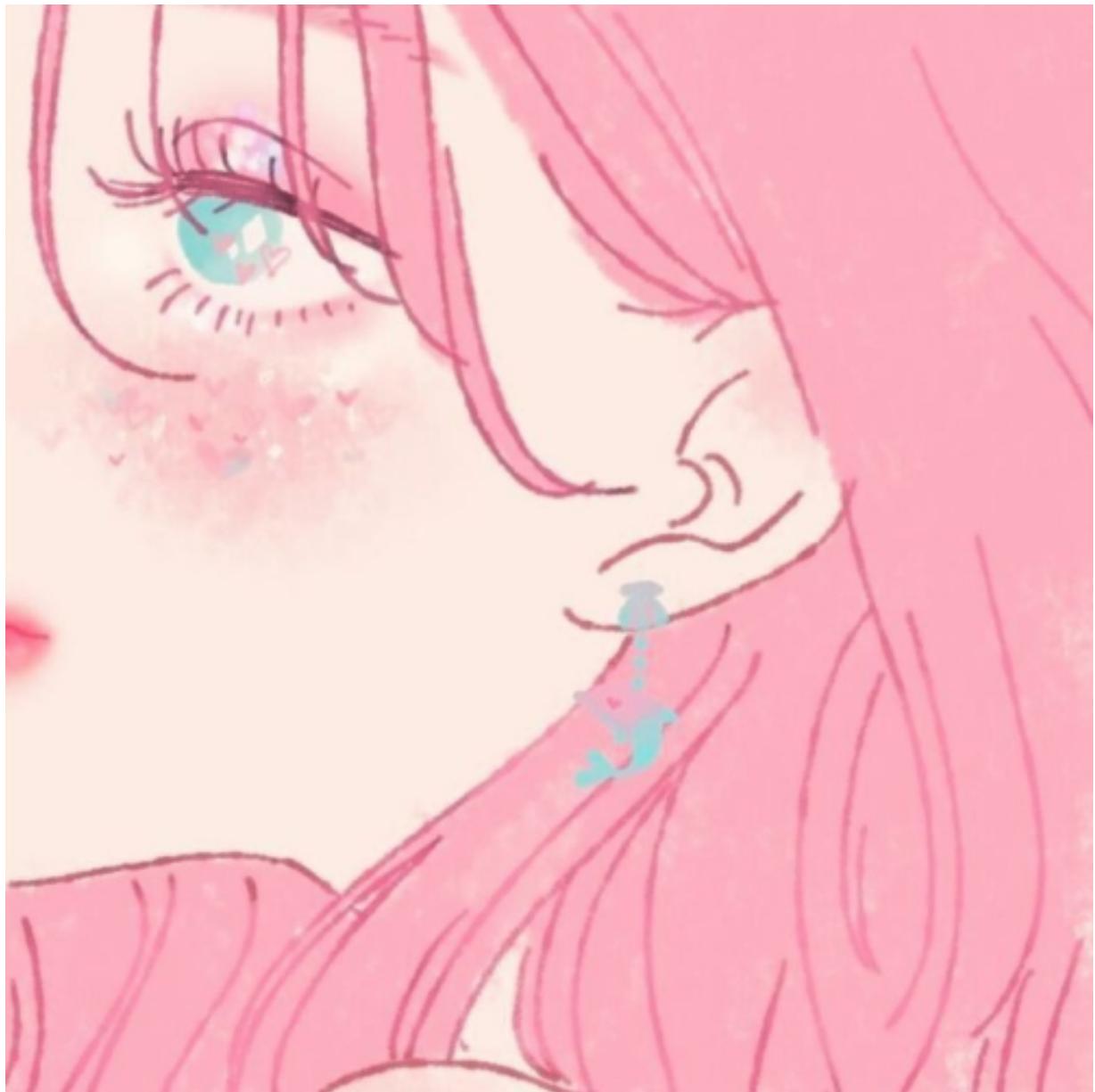
Nicole smiled with a face like she was crying and reached out to embrace Raul's neck. Raul's heart was pounding.

What kind of environment did he grow up in to become an adult who makes such assertions?

There may be many out there who are incapable of loving someone, but it seemed that none would be quite like Raul.

Asserting as if explaining, '*This tool does not have such a function,*' what kind of man is he, really?

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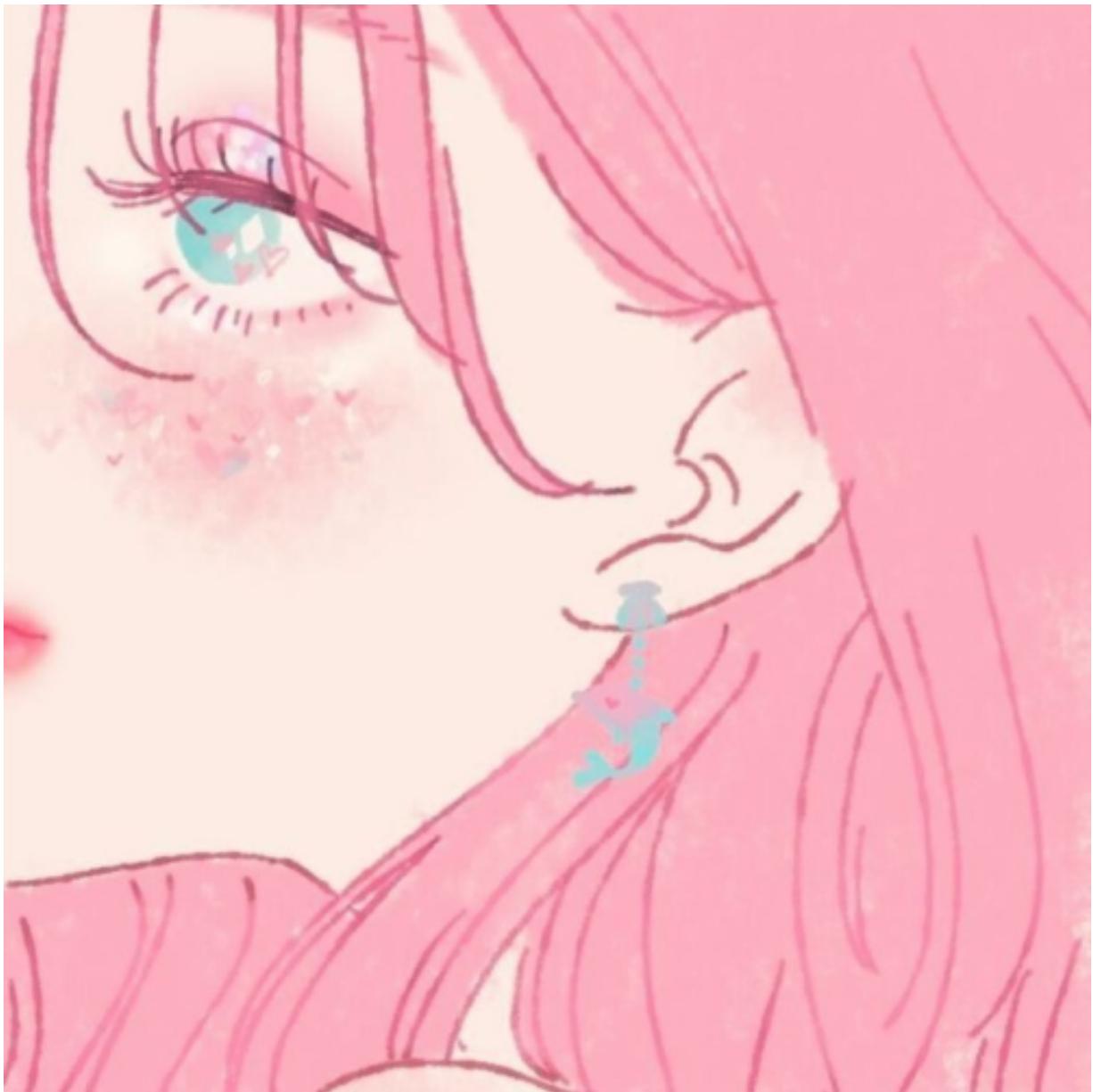


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# Chapter 155

“I don’t expect much, but I will no longer tolerate your doubts about me. Even if you treat me as your mistress, please show me the minimum courtesy. Sometimes, treat me like a lover. It doesn’t have to be genuine. But... to share a bed nearly every night with a man who is nothing to me is also painful for me. You should look after me.”

Nicole said quietly.

“...You’re really crazy.”

Raul muttered.

“Why do you think I would accept everything?”

“You want me.”

Nicole smiled faintly. Eventually, tears fell silently from Nicole’s cheeks, and the tip of her nose was red.

Unlike the glamorous appearance she had shown at the banquet hall a little while ago, Nicole was not beautifully adorned now. But Raul stared at her as if enchanted.

“If you regard me as your possession, I will become your only toy, a perfect amusement. I’ll make it so you can’t look elsewhere.”

Nicole buried her face in Raul’s chest and said,

"So please respect me. If you... if you ever bring in a proper duchess, I'll disappear like a bubble. I want to be at least considered precious."

Nicole felt ridiculous for mimicking a courtesan, but she felt better than earlier.

At that moment, the urge to kneel at Raul's feet and confess everything washed over her again.

Having revealed a bit of her true feelings, she wanted to confess everything. Nicole swallowed her breath and suppressed that desire.

"Go back to your room. Before I want to do something to you. Don't do anything, just lie down."

After a while, Raul pulled away from Nicole and whispered.

This time, Nicole obediently nodded her head.

Raul entered the bed at dawn. Nicole was in a light sleep, dressed in her pajamas.

Raul's large hand gently caressed Nicole's shoulder and face in the dawn light.

"Go home when morning comes. I'll grant your wish."

Nicole opened her eyes in surprise, still half-asleep.

"Does this mean it's over?"

"No."

Raul said, speaking as if trying to suppress his possessiveness.

“As you say, you are unique to me. So, I should give you more. We have been in an implicit contract until now, but I will formally give you much more.”

“Will you return me to Sith?”

“That’s not possible. It’s dangerous because your face is exposed. But nothing else will change. Instead of doing various intelligence work as before, you’ll only have one role.”

“What role is that?”

“My official mistress.”

“.....”

“It would be better to use the name Karen instead of Sophia. You have too many names.”

Raul said as he lay down beside her. Raul closed his eyes and whispered.

“I will give you whatever you want. You can spend the Grand Duke’s money as much as you like. If you need a better status, I will provide it, and if you want people to bow before you, I will make it happen.”

Even in her drowsiness, Nicole faintly smiled.

“That’s not bad either. I came to the capital with determination to live a glamorous life.”

“That’s a wise answer.”

Raul said.

“So make sure I don’t get tired of you. You can’t live without my protection now, so you’ll never be able to leave me.”

Nicole snuggled into Raul’s arms, leaning on his chest to hear his heartbeat.

How wonderful it would be if Raul loved her. But such a thing would not happen.

Instead, Nicole conjured up an abacus in her mind. Click, clack. She mentally pressed down on it.

At least today, more than yesterday, she was closer to Raul. This would do...

“Everything is fine. But... I want one more thing besides that.”

“What is it?”

“A letter, or something small like that. You said sometimes to treat me like a lover. Please give me a token that I can feel is sincere, even if it’s something very small.”

Raul closed his eyes. He let out a somber sound.

“I’m not sure how far I have to accept you. You have a talent for becoming arrogant.”

“You have to accept me sometimes before you get tired of me.”

“I wonder who could handle you.”

“I won’t be like this with the man after you.”

Nicole threw the words spitefully, and then her heart sank.

"Mention another man in front of me just one more time."

Raul's hand, resting on Nicole's stomach, gently tightened. It wasn't painful, just slightly heavy, but Nicole felt chills all over her body.

"Then what happens?"

"We go back to square one, you get locked up, and you'll cry a lot."

Nicole closed her eyes pretending not to hear. Raul chuckled lowly, whether joking or not.

"I'll think about it."

That was the last whisper she heard before falling asleep again.

"Don't even dream of a childish love letter."

"I'm not expecting it."

Despite her words, Nicole secretly hoped. She had never received a gift personally chosen by Raul in her past life.

\*\*\*

Of course, it wouldn't be Raul if he easily met her expectations.

The next morning, Raul was not there. Nicole had overslept and hadn't heard him leave.

Nicole had taken off her dress in the dressing room the night before, hung it up, removed her makeup, and gone to bed. But now, the dress was nowhere to be found.

It was clear that he had ordered the dress with excessive exposure to be thrown away because it was not to his liking.

'Surely, he didn't burn the dress I wore yesterday?'

Annoyed, Nicole clicked her tongue softly.

"What's all this commotion so early in the morning?"

Soon, several maids burst into the room. They took out boxes to pack up the jewels and unpacked all the dresses.

One of the maids answered cautiously.

"The Grand Duke has ordered that all inappropriate dresses be disposed of."

"...Inappropriate, you say?"

"Well... dresses with low-cut tops or those that might reveal the legs a bit with movement... And he said to make all the new dresses with covered necks..."

Nicole thought of Sylvia who was wearing that horrible dress yesterday. Puffy sleeves and a get-up that covered from head to toe, it was the epitome of overprotection.

'I don't want to wear such a dreadful dress.'

Nicole was horrified.

"Please tell him I will have my dresses tailored with my own money."

As she spoke, Nicole furrowed her brow. What would become of the salary she received as Sith? Now that she had been dismissed thanks to Raul, she had to figure out how to manage her living expenses.

There's no need to worry for the time being since she has enough saved money to get by...

In the worst-case scenario, she has to worry about her younger sibling's tuition. Grace has already offered to cover it if needed, but it wouldn't be right to be indebted to her any longer.

"Then why are you packing these jewels?"

"The Grand Duke said to take them as souvenirs of your stay here."

Nicole was a bit disappointed. She had asked Raul for a sincere gift, but it seems that once again, she would be receiving jewels.

Such expensive items couldn't be sold off, so they were like a white elephant, plus Nicole had little desire for luxury goods.

Although she didn't expect a love letter, she secretly hoped for at least one kind word.

She will have to live with this loneliness for a long time to come. But she can't leave Raul either. She has already loved too much. Perhaps Grace advised not to fall for Raul for this very reason.

"Where is the Grand Duke?"

Nicole said.

"He will come soon to see you off."

The maid said kindly. They brought in a late breakfast, and Nicole had a little to eat and changed her clothes.

During the process of changing, Nicole noticed a small cut on the back of her hand.

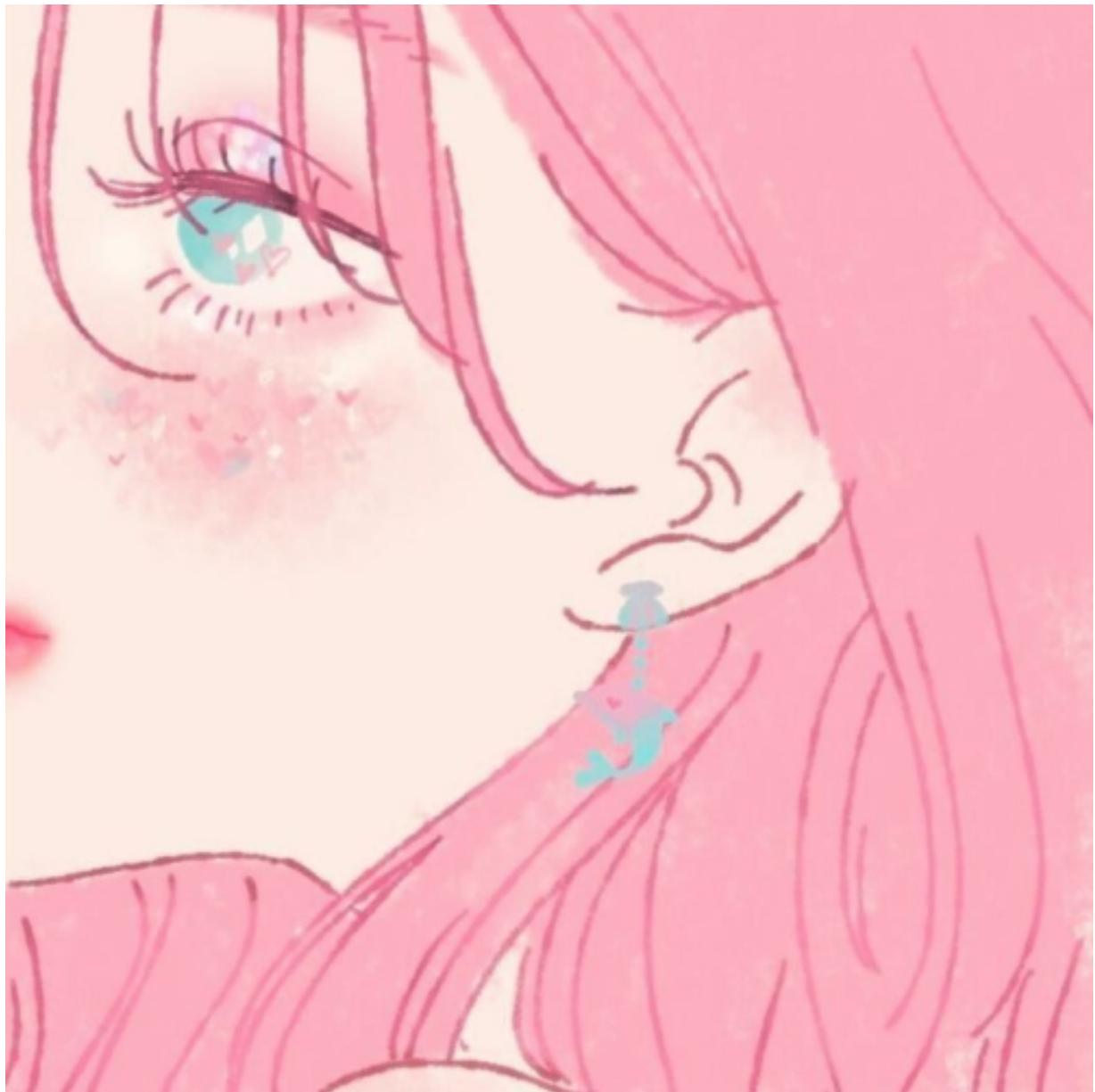
It seemed she had been cut by one of the objects flying around in the study with Raul last night.

“Leave it be; I will apply medicine when I get home.”

Nicole told the maids. She brushed over the cut on her hand once.

The wound would heal, but her feelings for Raul, the memories of last night, would not fade for a long time. Nicole had such an intuition.

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# Chapter 156

There was no official send-off on the way back to her house.

Once the carriage was ready and all the luggage was loaded, Nicole rose from her waiting spot.

The household of the Grand Duke told Nicole to wait comfortably on a sofa near the entrance on the first floor while the carriage was being prepared, so she wouldn't have to be in the cold air.

It wasn't just a day or two of being treated with apparent courtesy, but today it seemed even more polite.

Raul appeared just before the carriage departed, with an indifferent face. He looked down at Nicole and said,

"Stay quiet when you return. You can't go out without my permission for a while. There will be guards staying around the house."

"Please be satisfied with a few guards. I don't want to advertise to people that there's an associate of the Grand Duke there."

Nicole felt a small confusion. She still wanted to go home, but she was sad to leave Raul's side. Emotion welled up in her eyes.

"Are you relieved to be going back?"

Nicole hesitated and then spoke honestly,

"Yes. But... I will miss the times I was always by your side."

Raul did not answer, but an unexpected light flickered in his indifferent eyes. Before Raul could say anything, Nicole added,

"Don't come too often though. After meeting you for a day, I feel all my energy drained."

"You're crazy, now there's nothing you can't say."

Raul looked at Nicole as if he couldn't believe what he heard.

"But if it was a provocation, you succeeded. It makes me want to invade your house right now."

Nicole's mouth went dry for no reason, and she fiddled with the back of her hand. Raul's gaze lingered there.

"Are you hurt?"

"It happened yesterday. It was nothing... I was so out of it that I didn't even realize I was injured."

Raul looked closely at the back of her hand.

"Go home, get treated, and report on the progress."

".....Yes."

Then Raul took a handkerchief out of his pocket. Nicole was inwardly surprised as she did not know he carried a handkerchief.

He skillfully unfolded the handkerchief and wrapped it around Nicole's hand.

"This is....."

"Don't throw away anything I give you, except for consumables."

Raul said indifferently.

"I will return the handkerchief. Later....."

Nicole liked the handkerchief he had wrapped around her hand right away. She didn't want to return it immediately, so she said that. She wanted to keep it wrapped for a while.

"I said I already gave it to you."

It was not a sincere gift, but his concern for her wound seemed quite like that of a real lover.

Nicole's heart was softened by this small gesture. For the first time, she revealed her true self in front of Raul and smiled sheepishly.

"It's not bad."

Raul unexpectedly followed Nicole out. On the way to the carriage, Raul stopped. The mansion's grand entrance was suddenly completely empty, and there were no people in sight.

"Why?"

"I have something to say."

Raul said. He took Nicole into the darkness of the entrance hall.

“Remember. Don’t forget what I said.”

“I won’t leave the mansion without permission, and I will report before going out.”

“Very good.”

“In return, please respect my privacy, Grand Duke. You are welcome to come and go as you please, but within it, you are a guest. Do not interfere with what I do inside the house, and as a guest, please stay with manners. Then, when you visit my home, I will treat you like the most precious guest.”

Nicole’s face, with her chin slightly raised as she spoke, had become quite confident.

“I look forward to your hospitality.”

Raul licked his dry lips. He tilted his head towards Nicole. Nicole’s toes also gathered towards Raul without her realizing it.

But Nicole averted her gaze.

“Now, I will go.”

Something strange happened. It seemed Raul was also reluctant to let Nicole go, as he quietly took hold of her wrist.

“The coachman is distracted. It doesn’t seem like he’s ready to drive yet.”

“Seeing the Grand Duke’s face will get him ready.”

Raul pushed Nicole against the wall of the entranceway. If Raul ordered, the coachman would stick his head in the ground and feign stupidity, pretending he saw nothing.

“What will you do when I come to your house?”

Nicole’s ears turned red. Now, Raul was acting like a charming young nobleman throwing flirtations.

“I’ve shown you honesty once, and you’ve returned it to some extent. Next time, it’s my turn again.”

“What kind of honesty? Do you have something to confess?”

Nicole stood on her tiptoes and whispered in Raul’s ear.

“One honest confession is that I get excited when you tie me up. Very much so.”

A bold hint at what would happen next time.

She finished speaking and her face turned completely red. Nicole’s heart fluttered lightly. She was gently pushed against the wall, and a devouring kiss answered for her.

Huffing out small breaths, Nicole placed her arms on Raul’s shoulders.

“That was nice just now.”

Raul said, brushing back Nicole’s hair.

“Behave so obediently. Then we can get along well. Don’t let emotions, such useless things, interfere between us. As you said, you are unique. By being the only one for me, you can have it all.”

The swell in her chest crumbled away. Nicole knew well that it was not the case.

She will find herself wanting Raul more and more. She will cling to the times she missed in her past life.

Even at this moment, she was falling deeper in love with Raul.

"Love, don't talk of such unnecessary things. You are enough as you are now."

"Yes, I understand very well....."

Nicole smiled bitterly.

"I am more perfect than you think, aren't I?"

"You would be truly perfect if you only knew two more things."

"What are they?"

"I don't like that you're a mess."

Nicole recalled the words she had blurted out during an argument with Raul the night before. She had shouted at Raul, "*You like me because you like women who are a mess.*"

"Is that so?"

"I like that you're a crazy woman."

Unable to hold back, Nicole gave a slightly sad smile.

"It's a joke. Anyway..... You are perfect. Just as you are now. That's why I'm still madly drawn to you."

Raul whispered teasingly in her ear. Nicole felt an even stronger urge to cry.

This man would kill and revive her with the torture of hope. If only he were not so kind. If only she had thought of him as

just a cruel man.

"And secondly, what else should I know?"

"My name."

"I already know it. Your name."

"Good. Then call my name. I've told you many times, after all."

Nicole nodded slightly. But she had a feeling.

The name Raul would now carry a different meaning. Every time she called out his name, she would like him even more.

\*\*\*

Nicole bid farewell to Raul and climbed into the carriage. The warmth from Raul's body that had touched her was still fiery.

The carriage began to move quietly.

A moment later, she was horrified.

"Hello, beauty."

This was because someone quietly rose from within the darkness of the carriage.

She almost screamed but at the last moment, she managed to cover her mouth and hold it back. The face of the person hiding was familiar.

"Estock, you. How did you get here....."

Nicole stopped herself from asking if Estock was in his right mind. It would have been a waste of time to ask such a question to Estock, as he never was.

"Shh, be quiet. The coachman can hear us. Of course, I came to check if Lord Miss Phoenix is safe."

"Miss and 'Lord' are not terms to be used at the same time."

[T/N: Estock called Nicole "Miss Phoenix-nim"]

Nicole scolded Estock for his astonishing form of address.

"Wow, that sharp retort. I'm glad to see you. I've missed you."

".....Besides, why am I a Phoenix?"

"You are really amazing, aren't you? You survive like a Phoenix in any situation."

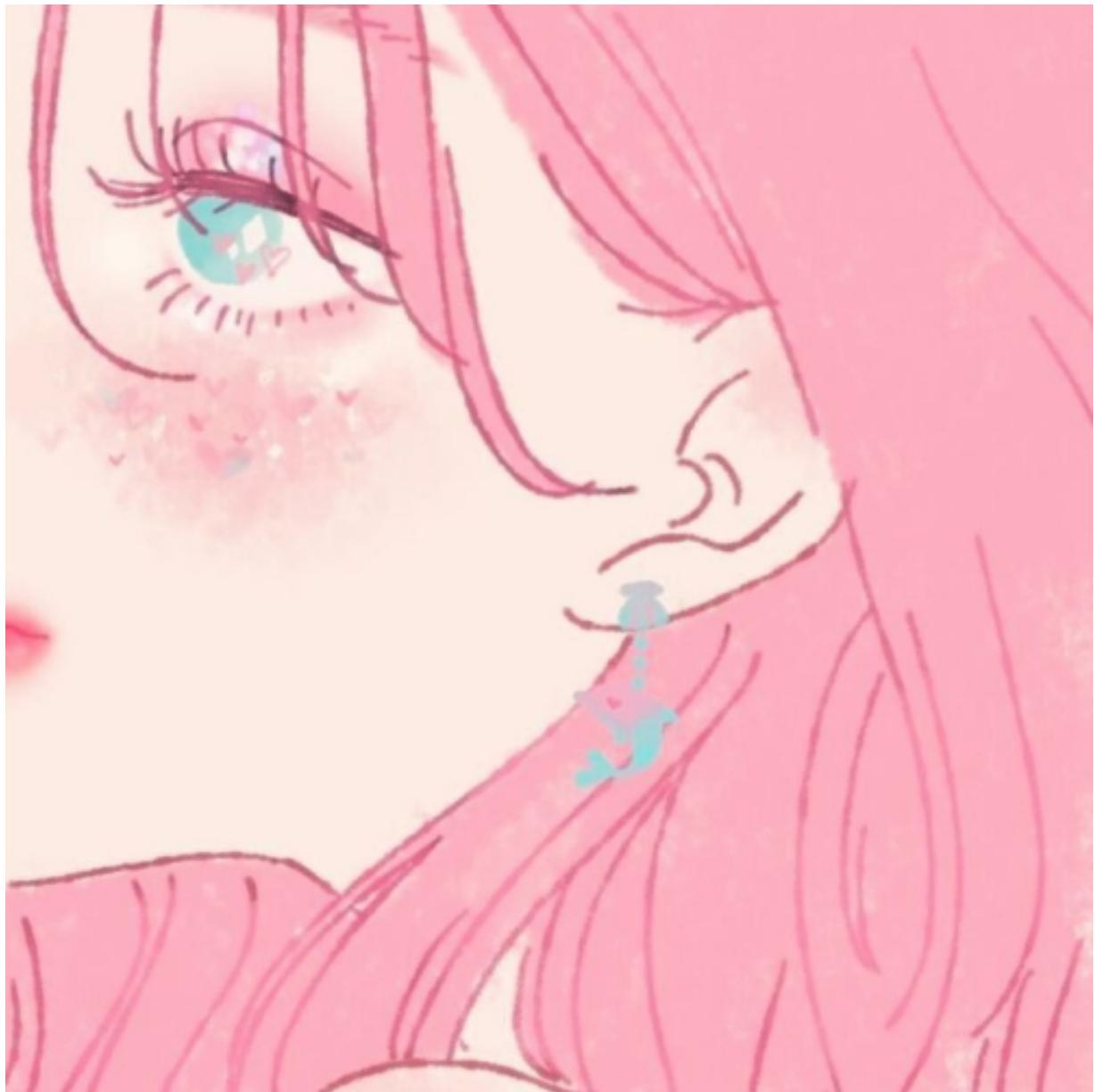
Estock shrugged his shoulders.

"Firstly, no Sith who has been ordered to leave has survived. Secondly, no one has deceived our boss, the Grand Duke, and lived to tell the tale. Yet you've done both and even received a gift in return! I should probably get your portrait and use it as a lucky charm."

"I'll decline that offer."

Nicole already wanted to shut Estock's mouth.

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# Chapter 157

“Understood. Then, Lady Phoenix.”

“It’s settled then, and I’m glad you’re safe. Dagger is safe too, right? He wasn’t suspected? After all, he had disappeared for a while.”

“Ah... Of course, he was.”

Estock said cheerfully.

“Punished again? Or was it a confession?”

Nicole frowned.

“Anyway, it went well. I have my last card to negotiate with him, so don’t worry about me. Fortunately, Dagger wasn’t caught up in this incident. He was involved in Mr. Snake’s business, so he has a perfect alibi, right?”

Nicole felt relieved internally since Raul had mentioned Dagger before. Perhaps it was just a guess at that time. Or maybe Dagger was too important a subordinate to be punished.

“What is Estock’s last card?”

Estock has a card to negotiate with Raul? Nicole became confused.

“Did you tell the Grand Duke about the Flame incident? Did you use that to get out of the situation?”

“...That’s not something worth reporting yet. There’s too little we know. We can’t even be sure if our suspicions are correct. If we report that, we’d be blown away entirely. Don’t even let a word slip.”

Nicole had the same thought. If their assumptions about Flame were realized, they would be dead.

All this struggle is meaningless. The royal family can easily get rid of everyone they dislike. They can even erase them from this world...

“I get that you’re head over heels for the Grand Duke, but this is too valuable a card to give away for free. Don’t hand it over too easily. It might save you, Lady Phoenix, one more time at the last moment.”

Estock scratched his head and said.

*“Well, being a phoenix, you might not die after all —”* (Estock)

Nicole ignored Estock’s pointless muttering.

“Let’s try not to create a situation where death is involved. Even if I don’t know, it seems to me that your Grand Duke is not the least bit charmed by me.”

“I can’t understand the Grand Duke’s way of thinking. Whether he loves or not, he kills if necessary. He’s not human, he’s a Grand Duke. Those who sit on thrones are all like that.”

Nicole was surprised that Estock made a long speech that, unexpectedly, sounded sane.

"Besides, Estock. Why are you here? To check if I'm safe?"

"I came because I'm grateful. After going through such an ordeal, you didn't even mention my name to the Grand Duke. If you had sold me out, you might have gotten away safely!"

"Why would I sell you out, Estock? You didn't sell me out either."

"That's the point. We've been through an incredible adventure together and haven't betrayed each other. We are now truly close friends, a very serious relationship, thicker than blood. You know? That kind of thing."

She couldn't understand at all. Nicole frowned as she saw seriousness frost over Estock's face.

Estock's eyes were sharper than she thought, and sometimes even chilling.

"So what do you want? Shall we draw blood and mix it to make a brother's oath?"

"No need for that. Becoming friends is about being fair to each other."

Estock clicked his tongue lightly.

"I'm curious about how you intend for us to become fair."

"Secrets. I know your huge secret that you are the daughter of YvesChapel."

Estock whispered very softly.

“So what?”

Estock laughed like a fool and then showed Nicole his wrist. There was a number written inside. 239.

That was the number written on Estock’s wrist. Above it, a black daffodil traced a grotesque line.

“What’s this?”

“Remember this. I am number 239,”

Estock said.

“Well, that’s it for today. You must remember my secret and never tell anyone else. It’s a promise.”

Estock approached Nicole and pecked her on the cheek. Nicole was so startled that she let out a gasp.

“Then, my dear Miss Phoenix. See you again, goodbye!”

Estock whistled once. Just as a carriage was passing over the bridge, Estock opened the door of the carriage and leaped in.

“What was that just now!”

The carriage came to an abrupt halt. The coachman, with a stern face, asked sharply.

Nicole realized that the coachman was also one of Raul’s people.

“It was just Estock.”

Nicole said as calmly as possible.

The coachman uttered an “Ah, um,” then muttered ‘*That crazy gentleman?*’ before starting to drive the carriage again.

Nicole realized she would have to give a hefty tip to the coachman upon arriving home to keep him quiet.

However, she couldn’t help but wonder what kind of expression Raul would have after hearing the report about Estock’s antics.

\*\*\*

Nicole entered the house.

“Young lady!”

Redia and Bluea. The two maids greeted Nicole with pale faces.

“Bluea, you’re back. How are your injuries?”

“Is my lady seriously worried about *me* now? Are you alright? I was very worried because Grace said that you might not return this time.”

“Shh. Don’t get overwhelmed. Everything is fine.”

Nicole calmed Bluea down. Unlike at the Grand Duke’s mansion, Nicole’s expression had become quite calm, except for a bit of fatigue.

Nicole asked the maids if they had taken good care of the plants as she had instructed. Nicole had written down detailed care instructions for each plant in preparation for her absence from the house.

The maids, lacking the special ability of the YvesChapel family, the Healing Hands, had tended to them, and although it was just a life-prolonging measure, quite a number had survived.

It was only then that Nicole carefully unfolded the handkerchief. She caressed it affectionately.

"It seems you should go up to your room."

That's when Redia spoke cautiously. Nicole hurried up to her room. After placing the handkerchief on the dressing table, Nicole surveyed the room.

*Rustle.*

A shadow flickered on Nicole's bedroom balcony. Nicole approached it.

"You entered without a sound."

"It's basic etiquette. And to meet the homeowner secretly, the master's bedroom is always best. It's usually the most secure place in a noble's residence."

Grace stood nonchalantly, a long cigarette holder in her mouth. Nicole looked at her.

"I see you did well, just as I instructed. I can tell by your return."

"Yes."

Nicole cast her eyes down. She had already anticipated being dragged away by Raul and imprisoned, or something even worse.

Grace said to Nicole,

〈Now there's only one way. Since you're involved with Raul, you have no choice but to disrupt him through that connection. Make this matter personal.〉

Nicole quickly understood what Grace was implying.

〈I was afraid that a woman named Isabel would take my place.〉

It wasn't for nothing that she had said such things to Raul while crying. Grace had told Nicole to beguile Raul with that excuse. It was all part of their strategy.

“Raul is no fool. He would have understood her nature after just a few words with Isabel. Even if Isabel wasn't a criminal, Raul would never have married her. I believe in Raul's discernment.”

“Of course. How discerning is the gaze of that cold-hearted man.”

Grace smiled faintly and put down the cigarette holder. A little ash fell to the floor.

“But I don't want to subject my pupil to such foolish training again. The art of seduction—no way.”

Reluctantly, Grace taught Nicole how to deal with Raul.

Young and attractive male and female spies often used their charm to their advantage.

However, Grace stated she did not want her disciple to become a woman who resorts to cheap tricks. That's why, while teaching Nicole many things, she had avoided education in that particular area.

“It worked. I won’t be pursued for Isabel’s matters anymore...”

Nicole felt a pang in her heart. She had not been honest with Raul.

“But why that expression?”

Grace said. Nicole took a deep breath.

“I was almost devoured. Talking with that man every day and spending time together... I felt like I was being enchanted. Just a little longer and I might have completely...”

Just a bit longer and Nicole herself might have knelt down. She might have confessed everything to Raul and given herself to him entirely.

Grace’s expression twisted cynically.

“And then? What did that guy say to coax and bewitch you?”

“Grace.”

Nicole spoke with a hint of agony.

“He talked about you... You... He said you prevent me from being honest with Raul. That you do not wish for Raul and me to become close.”

“So, should I hand over my dear pupil to such a guy? I told you, Raul is heartless.”

“.....”

“I instructed you. To provoke Raul’s personal feelings and to imply a request for his love.”

“...Yes, I did.”

Nicole provoked Raul and hinted that she could marry another man and leave. Afterward, she demanded his love.

Grace said that would surely change Raul’s attitude, even if out of regret.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“...Yes. But he will never love me.”

“That’s what he’ll do. He’ll promise you more in return and show you formal affection. But if you give your heart to Raul from now on, you’ll fall into hell. Raul is someone who can never engage in a normal emotional exchange.”

“He is cold-blooded, not a psychopath. Still, he has his tender moments—”

“Even a passing dog would laugh at that. If you knew what he had done to survive up to this point, you wouldn’t say such things.”

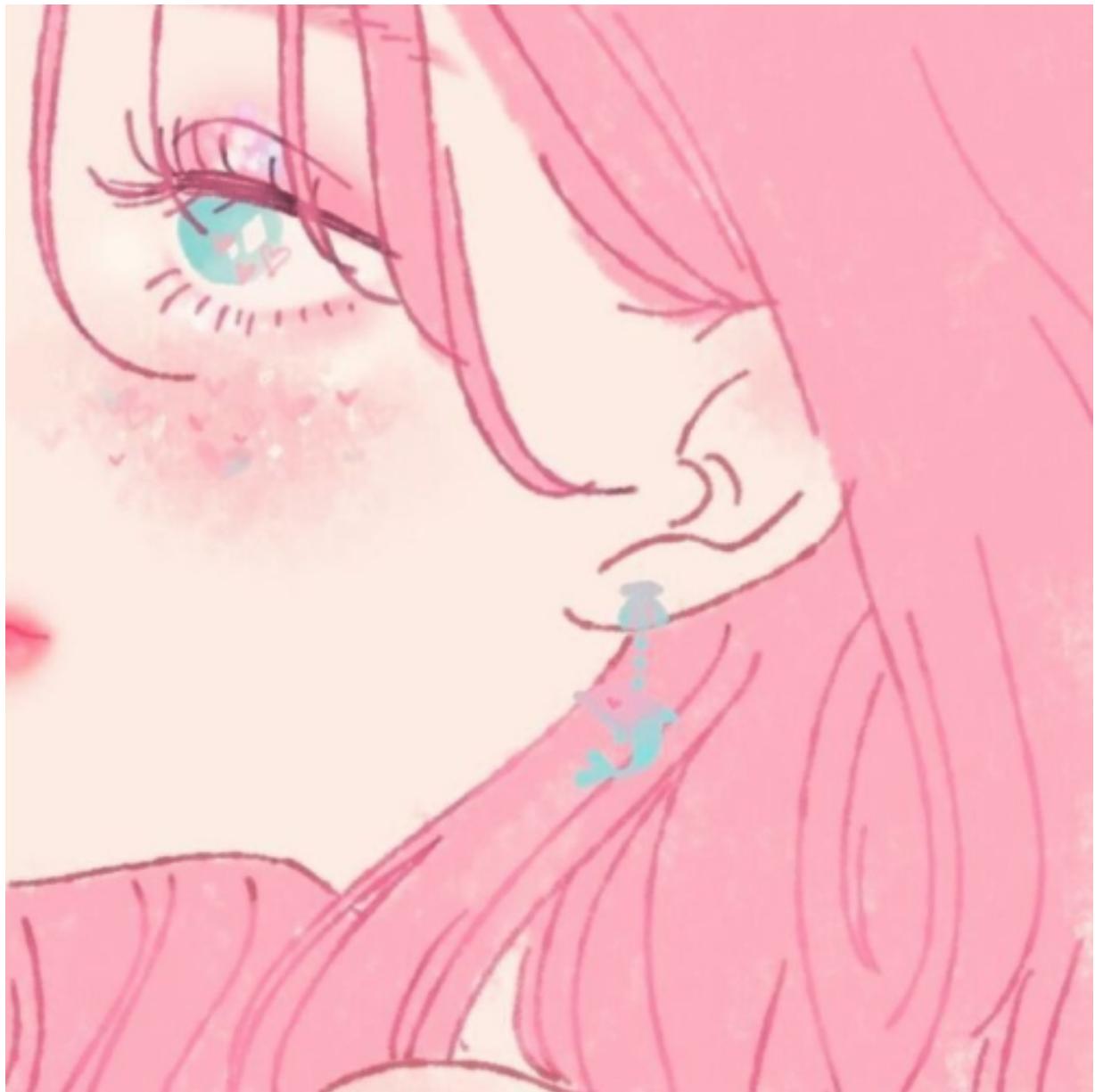
Nicole sensed a strange gap in those words.

“What do you know, Grace?”

Nicole said.

“Is there a problem with Raul? Why do you keep saying he’s devoid of feelings?”

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# Chapter 158

A look of scorn deepened on Grace's face.

Grace stepped out onto the balcony. In Nicole's bedroom, there was a table and two small chairs. Grace sat down there.

"Take a seat as well."

She rang the bell naturally, as if she were the mistress. Although the bell was placed in Nicole's bedroom to summon the maids, Nicole seldom used it.

"Whiskey."

As Redia arrived, Grace naturally gave an order. Redia, returning quickly, placed a glass of alcohol in front of Grace and swiftly set down a glass of lemon water in front of Nicole.

Grace took a sip of her drink.

"This matter is a story known only to me and Raul in this world."

"...Yes."

"Who conducted your confession training?"

"...Raul did it himself."

"I thought as much. He recognized you from the beginning, that guy full of possessiveness. He's not in his right mind. He wouldn't have wanted others to see you disheveled..."

Grace clicked her tongue.

"Anyway, even if Raul harbors possessiveness towards you, it means nothing. His father turned him into a wretched guy."

Nicole's movements stiffened.

"...Turned?"

"I'm not sure how else to express it."

Grace continued speaking calmly, very quietly, occasionally rolling the glass in her grasp.

It was as if she had prepared for a long time, very vividly. Yet, the story continued placidly.

"The Grand Ducal family is like a couple in a bad relationship with the royal family. Over 200 years have passed since the empire was established. During that time, most of the capable families have fallen, but only the Grand Ducal family has survived firmly."

That was something Nicole also found strange.

The Grand Duke's family was unusually powerful and long-lived. The royal family's chronic illness was mental illness. The very existence of the powerful Grand Duke's family beside them was a thorn in their side.

However, the royal family always acknowledged the existence of the Grand Duke's family and, in fact, always

kept them close by.

And they tried somehow to marry Raul to Sylvia. The royal family loved the Grand Duke's family. They aimed to unite their bloodlines and produce a superior heir.

"Some Grand Dukes were powerful, while others were suppressed by the royal family. The royal family left the Grand Duke's family itself alone but always tried to tame the heirs, keeping them under their control. Sadly, Anthony was different from Raul."

Nicole knew the name of Raul's deceased father, Anthony. She knew only his name because she had seen it on the Grand Duke's family tree.

"Anthony... Raul's father... Was his personality different from his?"

"Yes. Anthony was a coward. Moreover, he suffered from severe neurasthenia after his wife died."

Grace nodded calmly.

"Anyway, Anthony... That man was a bit strange. Raul's mother... died in a disgraceful incident. Anthony blamed Raul severely for it."

"Why?"

"Raul's mother was kidnapped along with Raul. And to save Raul... she was said to have sacrificed herself. Because of that incident, Anthony came to hate Raul terribly. He loved his wife too much."

"How could he do that? Shouldn't he be grateful that his son is still alive?"

Nicole said, dumbfounded.

"Weak people always find a way to blame others. A worthless man blames his own family."

Grace said.

"Anyway, Anthony was a complicated man. He suspected his wife's death was due to the royal family. He's probably right. Anthony's wife was... of much lower status. So the royal family did not approve, but Anthony married her after a rebellion-like defiance."

Nicole's hand trembled once. If that's true, then Raul has lost much more to the royal family than one would think.

"What about evidence?"

"None," Grace said. "That's how it is with all deaths related to the royal family."

Nicole bit her lip. She nodded slightly.

"Anthony lost his mind in grief after losing his beloved wife. He lost his will and was completely defeated by the royal family. Yet, only his desire to win remained as malice. But he did not have the courage to rebel on his own. He eventually realized that such things happened because he was weak, and he wanted to raise Raul to be a strong successor."

"What did he do to Raul?"

Nicole swallowed hard.

"I don't know well either. Raul... I thought he was a bit strange since he was young. He was like a machine, consistently cynical for a child, and had a slightly different

thought system than ordinary people. At first, I thought it was just because he was intelligent. It's not uncommon for smart kids to show cruel tendencies."

"But that wasn't all, was it? The confession drug training. Something happened then."

"Yes. He underwent confession drug training at the age of fourteen. I personally trained him, and that's when Raul started saying strange things."

Grace had detailed records of that time.

Raul remembered every statement he had made, having read and reread those records numerous times.

〈Raul, remember this. You survived on borrowed time from your mother's life. If you were truly a great man, you would have saved your mother. But you failed and were incompetent. Moreover, I am emotional and foolish, perhaps the most of any Grand Duke in history. You must not take after me.〉

〈This is invisible but special... It is said that if this creature takes root in your body, many things will change. I have been feeding it your blood in preparation for today.〉

〈Since it has fed on your blood, you are its master now. You must now obey yourself. From this moment on, follow the words I tell you and earnestly give yourself three commands.〉

Raul described in detail the clothes he was wearing at that time, the atmosphere of the room, and even the pattern of the gold-trimmed clothes his father wore.

Young Raul was wearing knee-high white socks and shorts.

A vest and a ribbon tie around his neck sparkled over the top. Raul was sitting on a wooden chair, looking at him.

And Anthony made Raul swallow ‘something transparent.’ The moment it entered his body was excruciatingly painful.

It was certainly invisible.

Yet, the moment it entered his body, Raul felt the world change.

*I am my own master. And through this, I can perfectly control myself.*

At that moment, such a thought came to him.

Raul sincerely commanded himself as Anthony had instructed him to do.

〈First, I do not love anyone. I am not worthy of it and will dedicate my life to the Grand Duke’s family.〉

〈Second, I am not entitled to personal happiness. I will exclude personal emotions as much as possible. My lifelong goal is to protect and prosper the Grand Duke’s family.〉

〈Third, I will now forget this memory. But remember one thing: my master is my age, so I can live without fear or being shaken by emotions or minor matters.〉

*Clang.*

Nicole shattered the glass filled with lemon water. Cold sweat ran down her face, and her hands trembled.

“Nicole?”

Grace tilted her head.

"Did Raul say it was transparent?"

"Yes, he said he heard a buzzing vibration."

"Was that all?"

"A worm. He definitely mentioned it. But when asked to explain the existence of it logically, he couldn't continue his words. It doesn't make sense, does it? A transparent thing, a worm, the master of itself... It's strange. However, he clearly stated that such an event occurred. Just once..."

Grace recorded everything just in case.

*'Glassworm.'*

It all made sense. Raul's father had implanted a glassworm in his son to prevent him from finding happiness through love or warm emotions, or emotional exchange with someone else.

To turn his son into a tool for the family.

*'He's his bloodline. His only son. How could he do such a thing?'*

It wasn't that Raul didn't love Nicole. He truly couldn't.

Raul said, "They are equals," as if they resembled each other.

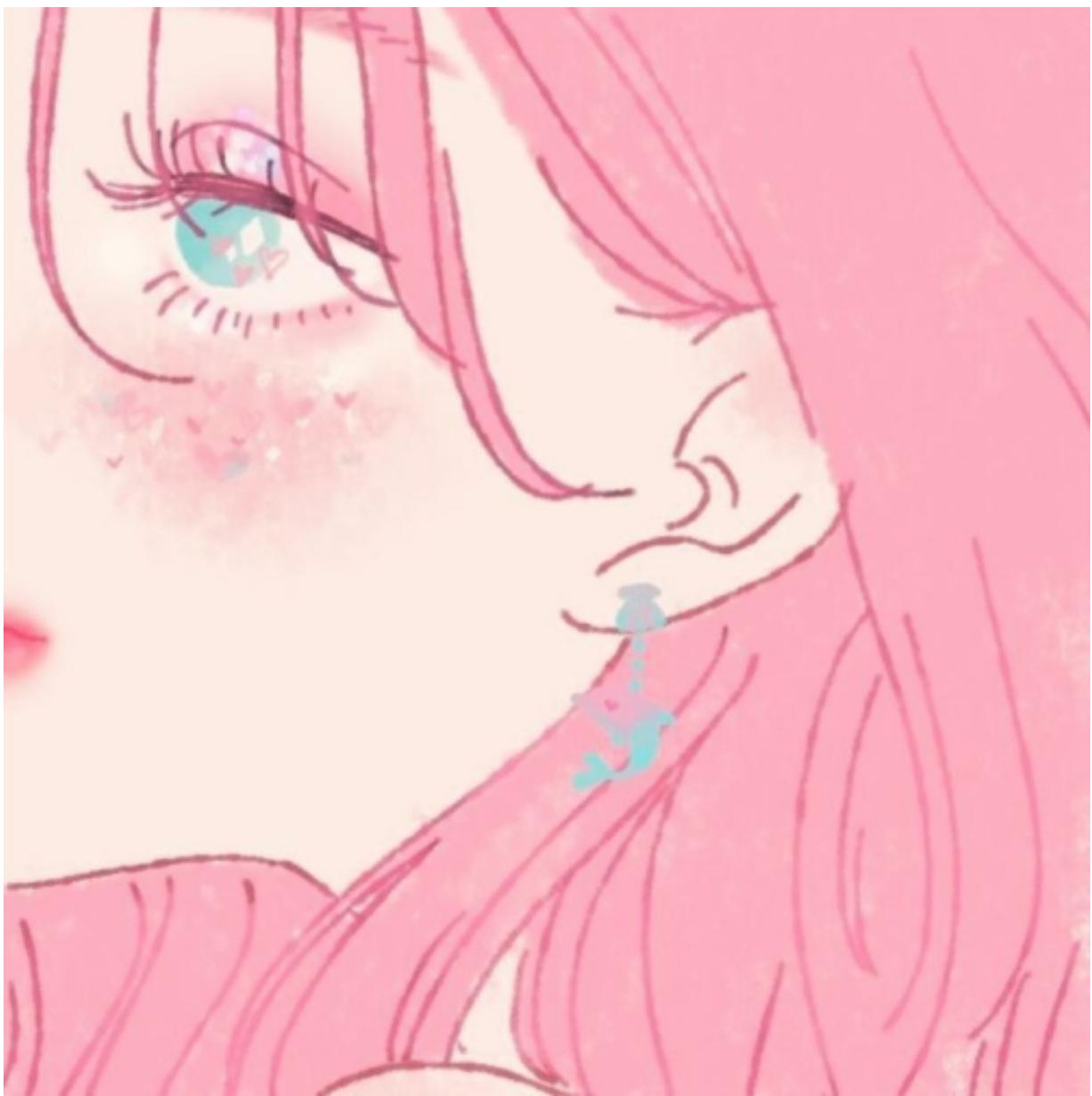
Raul knew the essence of the two people.

*'Whether it was me, who had suffered such deeds at the hands of a relative, or you. We were the same...'*

Nicole's shoulders trembled finely.

And throughout her past life, Nicole never knew Raul and hated him for a lifetime.

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# Chapter 159

If there's a silver lining, it's that Raul himself was the master of the Glassworm embedded within him.

Unbeknownst to himself, Raul had cursed himself when he was younger.

"And then? What did he say about it?"

"Nothing. As soon as Raul opened his eyes, he forgot the facts he had confessed. He repeated several times that it never happened, as if he wanted to forget."

The third command was to forget this fact.

Raul obeys himself, the host and master of the Glassworm. His memory must have forcibly suppressed it.

"Let me guess. He got angry, didn't he?"

"...Right. How did you know? He must have thought it was similar to a sermon he heard from his father in a similar situation."

Nicole rubbed her eyes and wiped them. Through Isabel's statement, she learned a bit about the Glassworm. The Glassworm can modify the host's thoughts.

The problem is that this is a process that even Isabel had to find out through experimentation.

For instance, if commanded from today to ‘like apples,’ one will find reasons to like apples on their own.

If the command is repeated and intensified, it can even create memories about apples. Raul likely showed similar symptoms.

*‘I really knew nothing. I was by your side for two lifetimes, but still....’*

She didn’t know that Raul was living in hell.

It wasn’t that he didn’t love her. He didn’t regard her merely as a toy for sexual desire.

He couldn’t love Nicole.

“You must have known what it was, Grace. You should have treated Raul. Back then, he was young and needed help.”

“Do you think I haven’t tried?”

Grace said,

“I had no idea what it was. Long ago, before the Empire was founded, I heard rumors that the nobles of the sanctuary used vile spells to effectively remove their children’s ‘emotions’ and make them strong. I thought it was one of those kinds. But numerous doctors couldn’t cure him, and Raul said he was fine.”

Even Raul said this.

*“There’s a possibility that I spoke nonsense under the influence of a truth serum, but if not, I would like to investigate this matter.”*

“I naturally thought he wanted to be cured and went to all lengths to find a doctor. Do you know how hard it was to secretly search for all kinds of experts? But Raul wasn’t looking to be cured.”

*“If I have placed such a demand on myself, then I must find a way to reinforce it. It’s an efficient method. If one wants to live a life desiring and loving someone, they shouldn’t be in this place, this position. For high places come with such responsibilities.”*

“I even felt betrayed. Raul was trying to find ways to strengthen his demands. To use it.”

“That’s... Raul... Raul must have been desperate.”

“How much more lenient must I be with that guy? At that time, I pitied him. Will that remind me again that my daughter died because of it?”

Nicole was at a loss for words.

“So even if Raul shows you possessiveness, it’s probably not love. The emotions you see are everything. Think of him as a demon or a beast. All the emotions he shows are just an imitation. There’s no way they could be genuine.”

The only clear emotion Raul had ever shown Nicole was one: his possessiveness and desire.

The more Raul took a liking to Nicole, the more it became a rejection of his own commands, making him anxious and displeased, and he would have wanted to reject her.

Nicole’s love was poison to Raul. He felt repulsion... and it must have been painful to defy the words of the Glassworm.

All those emotions were expressed through violent possessiveness. That was the best Raul could do.

The more he tried to love Nicole, the more a whirlwind of negative emotions would have arisen.

He must have been tormented and in agony...

“So that’s why you advised me to imply that I demand love from Raul.”

Nicole said in an empty voice.

“Emotions are Raul’s weakness. Grace, you know Raul better than anyone else. So you knew that if I demanded the impossible from Raul, he would be helpless. You gave me the weapon to defeat Raul.”

Meanwhile, Grace knew. She knew that Raul was truly starting to take a liking to Nicole.

And Nicole had won against him. She didn’t realize she possessed the knife to stab him, nor that she had stabbed him. She just thought she had survived.

“I’m worried about you. I was trying to save you.”

“Grace.....”

Tears streamed down Nicole’s face. She couldn’t bear it. The fact that Grace’s concern for her was genuine drove Nicole even madder.

“I knew this would happen. When Sienna fell for Raul, it drove me mad every moment. I didn’t want to see this again. The outside world is full of people far more miserable

than he is! Do you want to see yourself become unhappy too?"

"If he is unhappy... I am already unhappy. There's nothing I can do about it now."

A look of pity spread across Grace's face.

"Then you have disappointed me. Another disciple has betrayed me. If you insist on truly becoming Raul's person, I can't favor you as I did before."

"I'm sorry. It's not that I intend to betray you, Grace."

Nicole said softly,

"I'm truly sorry... But... It seems better for you if I don't see you for a while, as Raul advised. He said he heard a prophecy about you."

Nicole revealed the prophecy.

In a past life, Grace was tricked and killed by Isabel, a woman of her age who reminded her of Sienna.

But what if time has turned back, and that prophecy has not yet come to pass?

Grace knows she sees Siena through Nicole.

So Nicole was afraid that Grace might die.

"You hear all sorts of crazy things."

Grace said coldly,

"Then the prophecy must have already come to pass. After Sienna died, a part of me has already disappeared."

Nicole shook her head.

"I only wish for your safety. But... It seems best to keep a distance now. From everything."

Grace stood up. With her usual dignity, she straightened her clothes and nodded her head.

Then she left the room silently. Nicole felt a slight despair.

'You were in the same situation as me in a past life... I didn't know.'

It's irreversible now. Raul denies Nicole's existence and her heart through the Glassworm.

If Nicole knew she had deceived herself, could it be reversed? For such a person?

Nicole, suspecting that something was wrong with Raul's mind, only added to his confusion.

She could not receive Raul's love. Not unless she healed him...

"Miss, please try to eat something."

Nicole lifted her head. How many days had passed, and how much time?

Nicole was holed up in her room. A tool of the demon race. She researched everything available on the 'poison insects' that chained the mind and did everything she could.

'I need to know more about the Glassworm. Even Isabel didn't have a high understanding of it. So, the data is insufficient based on Isabel's statements alone.'

It's unknown whether Raul wants the Glassworm removed. But at least she wanted to give him the choice.

But there was no answer. Thanks to Isabel, the literature on the Glassworm had been lost.

"I've eaten already. It's okay."

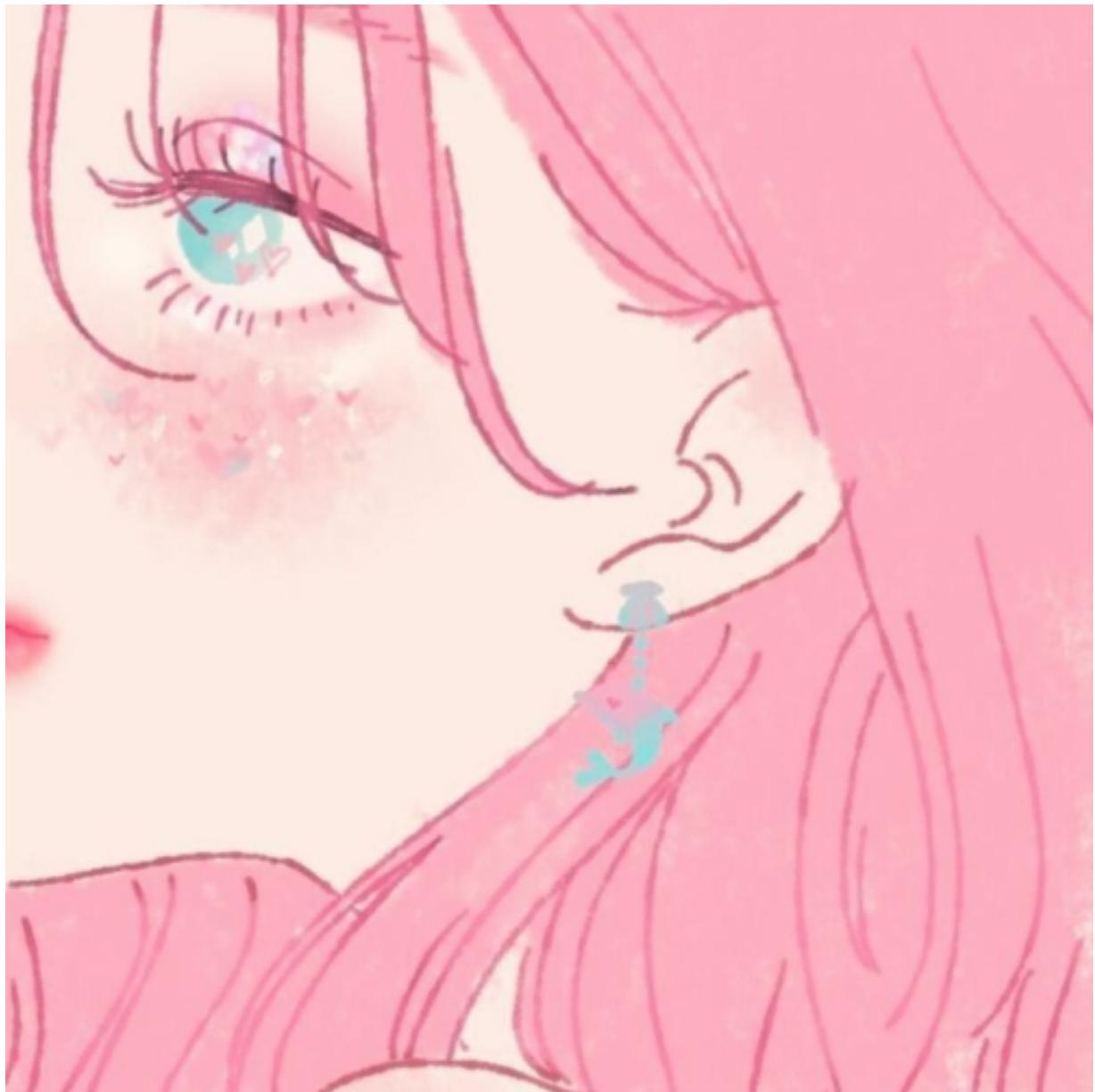
Nicole said,

"Unless it's something important, I want to focus a little more. You all take a rest."

Redia cautiously spoke, noticing something amiss.

"A telegram has arrived from the sanctuary where your brother is. It seems there might be some trouble."

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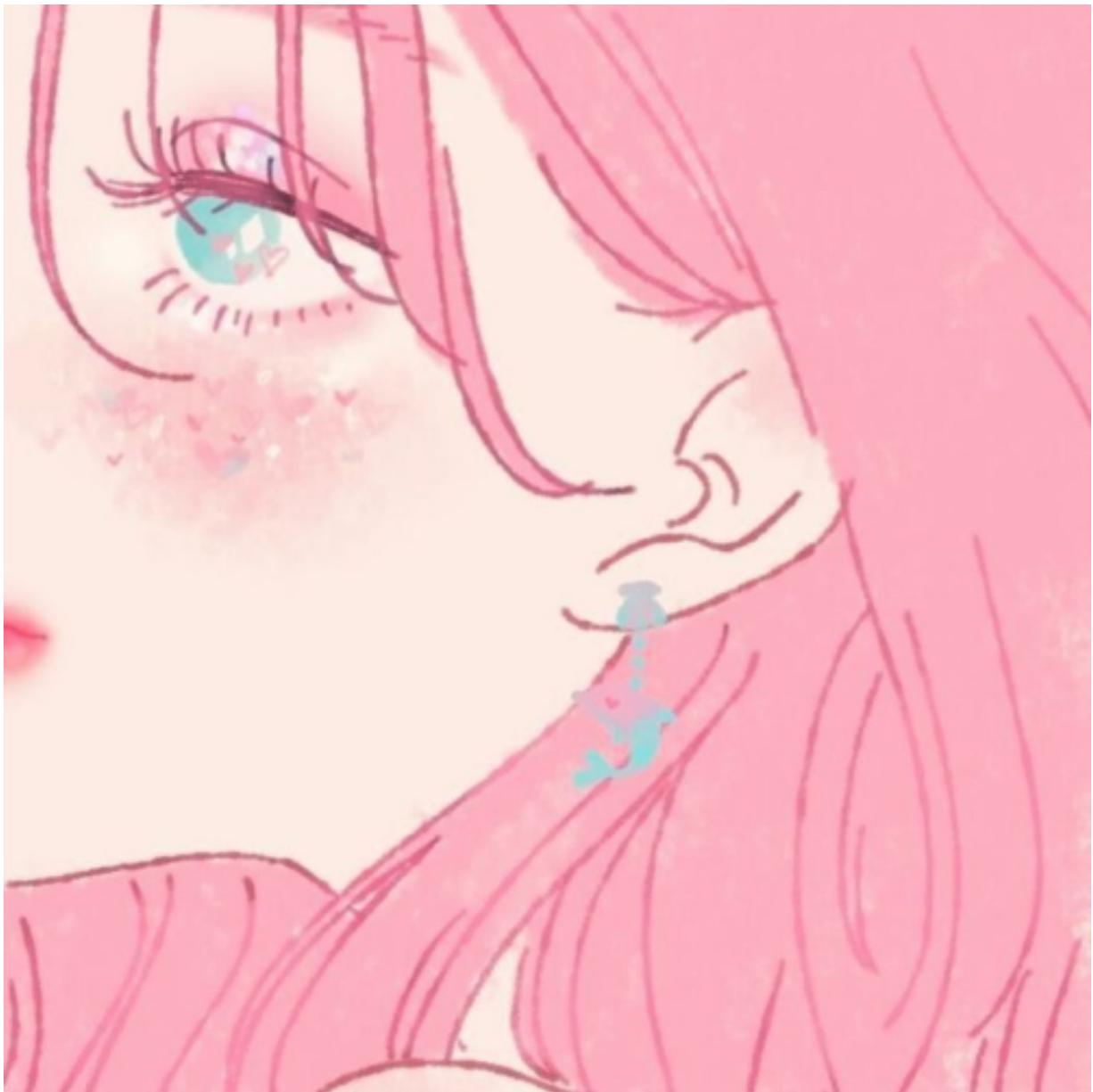


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# Chapter 160

There were few things that could draw Nicole out while she was obsessed with thoughts of Raul.

One of them was a matter concerning her dear younger brother, Jay.

⟨Urgent guardian interview request for Mr. Jen Coles, who is currently completing our academy's course. Please attend at your earliest convenience.⟩

The telegram was succinct.

Karen and Jen's last name was Coles.

It wasn't a last name with a proper genealogy. It was a name created to issue identification to wanderers without a surname.

There were a few such surnames in Fadebel, and Coles was one of them.

Nicole felt her heart drop.

“What happened to Jay... Could he be hurt somewhere?”

She had to go to Fadebel as soon as possible.

\* \* \*

Karen was from the slums near the sacred Fadebel, but it was Nicole's first time visiting Fadebel.

"I am surprised. Miss Coles, you came through the gate that only VIPs can use..."

The priest who greeted Nicole said. Nicole realized the immense power surrounding Raul.

There was a gate connecting Fadebel and the capital. However, for ordinary people to use it, they had to wait through a complicated permission process.

*'I want to see my younger brother. Please allow me.'*

For the first time, Nicole wrote such a letter to Raul. Raul replied succinctly that he would make preparations.

Nicole was stunned that she was granted permission to leave so promptly.

Regardless, Nicole arrived in Fadebel within a day and headed to the academy.

Fortunately, the academy in Fadebel was very close to the gate.

"I was fortunate."

The academic priest in charge introduced himself as Allen. Nicole noticed him stealing cautious glances at her.

Since Nicole attended the banquet with Raul, a few articles about her appeared in the capital. She had now become a celebrity.

The Grand Duke's first mistress. A woman whose origins were unknown.

Perhaps he knew Nicole's true identity.

"I heard you called me for an urgent matter."

Nicole sat across from Allen at an old desk.

"Do not worry. Jen is safe and well. He has caused a few problems, but they are minor."

"....Problems?"

"Unauthorized departures during the curfew period. It's common for boys to climb over walls."

Nicole felt relieved at his words. Allen continued.

"More importantly, Jen is... a bit... How should I put this?"

"Yes?"

"His academic performance is too perfect. There's no one to compare him with."

Nicole's eyes widened.

"Even his thesis on ancient theology surpasses experts. His knowledge of ancient languages is at a level even scholars must learn from. Despite suggestions to publish his works formally, he has no such intentions and expresses little interest in the scholarly path. The temple always needs talent, regardless of status. Please earnestly persuade your brother."

The news was better than she expected. Nicole was at a loss for words.

*'Father and Mother did make him study quite a bit. But to this extent? To find and cite documents that even top*

*scholars can't interpret?’*

Nicole began to wonder if there was a hidden genius in their bloodline. She herself did not think she was at that level.

“Then, the reason for requesting an urgent meeting is.....”

“There are courses in the temple. To become a paladin or a theologian, you must submit applications to various places within the academy. That time is not far off. He says he has no intention of submitting anywhere.”

“Is that so?”

“Perhaps he thinks that continuing his studies is too ambitious?”

Understanding Nicole’s gaze, Allen spoke gently.

“The Great Temple is the only place where one can acquire a multitude of learnings regardless of their birth status. So please persuade the fine young man before he ruins his future. There are many ways to continue studying if he is determined.”

“Yes. I will discuss it with my brother.”

Lately, Nicole felt that her heart could no longer be surprised.

\* \* \*

Jay was in a small chapel meant for students. Nicole quietly opened the door and entered.

Beneath the stained glass, there was a vivid mural depicting the battle between demon folk and imperial citizens, radiating brilliant light.

Underneath that mural, Jay's bent back, kneeling in prayer, caught her eye.

It was as if Jay was a part of that painting.

"Nicole."

At that moment, Jay lifted his head. Nicole's heart dropped at the sound of her name, which she hadn't heard in a while.

"Shh, it's Karen."

"Your original name suits you better than Karen. I can't get used to that name."

Jay rose from his place.

"Don't worry. There's no one here who can hear our conversation."

Nicole scrutinized Jay slowly, and she was disconcerted by how unfamiliar her brother felt.

*'Is this really Jay?'*

Jay had inherited their father's unusually handsome features. But his current appearance was... beyond imagination.

Jay's hair originally had a navy blue hue. But now, the color had faded, approaching a silvery gray close to pale blue.

It was not the gray hair of an elderly person but the silver of a wolf's fur.

His eyes were originally the pale blue he inherited from their father. However, his distinct pupils made him look

exceptionally handsome.

"You've really grown tall. It's been a while since I've seen you."

"I couldn't sleep at night because of growing pains. One day, it felt like the world had changed as soon as I woke up in the morning."

"This place must suit you. It has made you grow a lot."

It was common for a pretty boy to grow into a handsome young man. Not only had Jay's features become sharper, but his manner of speaking and even his gaze had matured.

Nicole realized how much the atmosphere could influence a person. It was a strange expression, but it seemed as though he had developed a kind of dignity. To exaggerate a bit, he looked like the most handsome man of his time.

*'Even if he is kin, it's possible to feel estranged after not seeing him for a long time.'*

Nevertheless, Nicole had an important discussion to have with him. It was about his future path.

Jay was a precocious child who hadn't even properly gone through puberty. If he was suddenly exhibiting erratic behavior, she needed to handle it carefully.

"Were you praying?"

"I was thinking about our family from the past. We always gathered and prayed at dinner time. We had this picture in our house too."

Nicole looked at the mural. A great war that had driven out the demon race and reclaimed the holy lands and the empire's territory. A large shield symbolizing that war was depicted.

Around that shield stood two men.

"It is said that the gods sent down two deities to liberate the demon race. It's the first thing you learn in all theology."

"I know there are many interpretations of those two. You learned basic theology from Mother, didn't you? One of them is the royal family's power of prophecy. The prevailing interpretation is that the messenger of the gods bestowed strength directly upon the royal family. The scholars are divided on what the other one is."

Remembering their mother's voice in prayer made her feel a bit better. Nicole felt her eyes welling up with tears.

"Are you okay? You don't look well."

Jay took a step closer.

"Shall we go to my room?"

"Is it okay for me to go?"

"Family is fine. Just wait at the door for a moment. I'll tidy up and come out."

What does he mean by 'tidy up'?

That's when Nicole realized she had been hearing a humming sound, as if the room was resonating, since earlier.

Curious, but Nicole quietly went outside. Then, with a sidelong glance, she peeked at what Jay was doing.

Jay approached the innermost part of the chapel. There was a small confessional there, whose side door was not noticeable unless looked at closely.

Jay flung the door open, and out ran a boy with his hands bound.

Nicole, about to close the door and wait in the hallway, froze in shock at the sight.

“I said to keep your mouth shut because my sister was coming.”

“Hey, you rotten brat! You bastard! What are you trying to do to me!”

The blond boy shouted indignantly. Jay looked at the boy with an expression of annoyance.

“Have you forgotten that you started this first?”

“When did I ever try to tie you up and lock you in a confessional? How dare you treat me like this?”

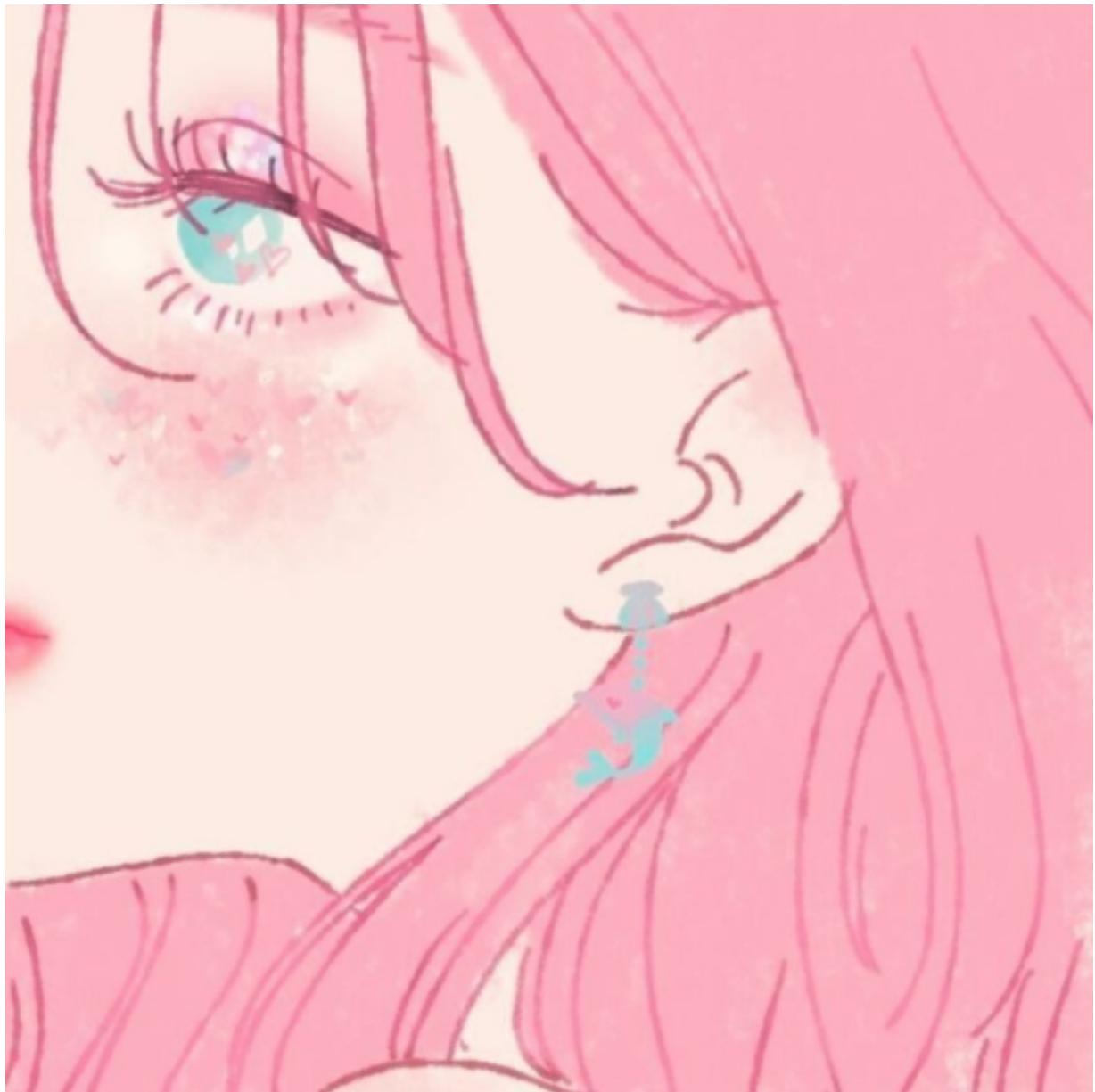
Tying someone up and locking them in a room?

Like... school violence? At that moment, Nicole tasted sweetness in her mouth and her vision went dark.

“...Je, Jen? What’s happening here?”

Nicole stuttered without realizing it.

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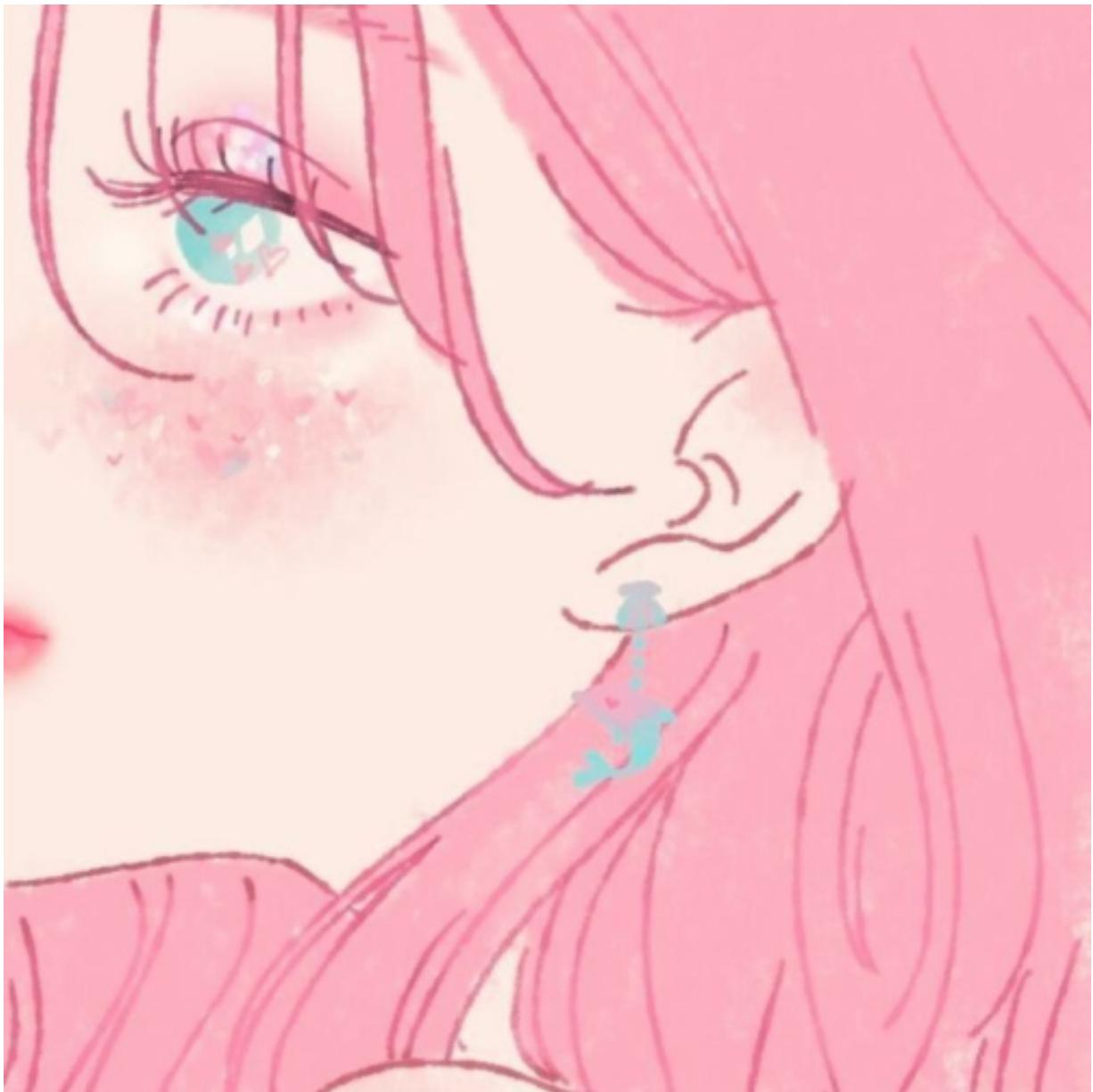


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# Chapter 161

“Sister.”

Jay’s expression softened a bit as he spoke.

“I told you to stay outside, sister. This guy is Aaron.”

“The Aaron you always write about in your letters?”

“You wrote about me in a letter?”

Aaron’s eyes furrowed. A momentary look of disgust flashed in the boy’s eyes.

“You, to your sister? Ridiculous fool.”

However, Aaron’s voice trembled slightly. Nicole somehow thought that his emotion seemed feigned, that disgust. On closer look, it seemed he was also slightly excited.

Nicole finally got a proper look at Aaron whom she had only known through letters. Luminous platinum hair and green eyes. He was an astonishingly beautiful young man.

Jay had a good build from a young age, so anyone could tell he was a boy.

Unlike him, Aaron was slim to the point of looking more like a girl, like Dagger.

“Was it you who tied up and imprisoned that kid?”

“Yes.”

Jay admitted readily.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because he started it first. He put sleeping pills in my drink, not just once but twice.”

“So you captured and locked him up for that? You said no one could hear us, right? Was that kid listening all this time?”

“It’s just as a temporary punishment. I thought it would be alright since it’s soundproofed well here. No sound can be heard from outside or inside this confessional.”

“Are you being serious right now?”

“Next time, I’ll double-check the soundproofing.”

“Do you really think that’s the answer?”

“I got a bit anxious when I heard that sister came looking for me—”

“Jen! Is that something a sane person would say?”

Nicole raised her voice.

“Shut up.”

The response, unexpectedly, came from Aaron. He was looking at her with eyes full of contempt.

“So this woman is your sister?”

“You know nothing of my sister.”

Jay's calm tone felt like a warning to Nicole.

"How can I not know this woman? She's the most famous woman in the capital right now. The Grand Duke's disgraceful mistress. Her portraits must have already started selling nationwide. Ha, I wondered under whose favor you were studying here, but I had no idea you had such an impressive sister."

"I told you to shut up."

Jay quickly grabbed Aaron by the throat and shoved him against the wall.

Aaron's face turned pale in an instant. Nicole was angry at Aaron's words. But she feared more for Jay, who might be expelled for harming a fellow student.

"Stop it."

Nicole spoke with the firm tone she used to scold her younger brother.

"It's not such a big deal to make such harsh comments. Let go."

Jay let go of Aaron.

"This is why I kept him locked up. He insults our family when she's bored."

"Still, violence is not okay."

"I told you not to meddle!"

Aaron shouted sharply.

“I told you to get lost before I refuse to deal with you ever again.”

Aaron’s face turned red as if unable to contain his anger, he clenched his fists tightly. Then he turned his back and ran away.

Nicole didn’t know how to define this strange relationship.

It was hard to say that Jay was unilaterally bullying the kid, as Aaron’s words were quite harsh too... They seemed strangely close.

“Shall we go?”

Jay shrugged his shoulders. Nicole walked with him through the academy’s grounds.

“What’s really going on? I can’t believe it. What kind of school life are you leading?”

As soon as they started, Nicole grabbed his arm and asked.

“Don’t worry about Aaron. He always goes crazy and throws a fit when he sees me. We just give as good as we get from each other.”

“Won’t that cause problems? Did Aaron really try to give you a sleeping pill?”

“He calls that a joke. He was trying to pull one over on me while I was asleep.”

“Then you should tell your academic priest about it.”

“Sister, not just anyone can enter this academy. All the other students come from wealthy families. I’m the only commoner here. You know what would happen if someone

like me caused trouble. Luckily, Aaron isn't dangerous, so I just play along with him to an extent."

Nicole was surprised that Jay wasn't at all servile when he said that. A delayed ache settled in her chest.

"Are you really having no problems?"

"Yes, sister, there's no need for you to borrow the power of great people to help me. The people here are gentle, after all, it's a place where they play with ink under the name of the deity."

Nicole almost twitched her lips at the sharp words.

"So... it's not that you've developed a rebellious streak late in life."

"Me? Why?"

"I got an urgent message from your priest, and I thought you were seriously hurt... or there had been some kind of accident."

Jay smiled faintly.

"Nicole, you haven't replied to my letter for three and a half weeks."

"There were circumstances."

"I know."

"Huh?"

"I found out from the newspaper articles. Who you were meeting with."

Nicole's face turned pale.

"Anyway, I was worried something might have happened to you, sister, and so..."

"You used your influence to call me here? You made the priest in charge contact me?"

"It's the wisdom of our family."

Jay smiled with his eyes. Nicole had already noticed that he knew enough about the YvesChapel family.

From the conversation they had just before Freya died, Jay already knew about the family...

"There are more abundant resources here than in the Empire. Even those forbidden in the Empire, about the families of traitors. I've studied a lot about the YvesChapel family."

Nicole found Jay to be both impressive and frightening.

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"Although it's in the forbidden archive, the priest in charge trusts me. He easily gave me a permit to study there."

"What did you learn?"

"Ancient knowledge. Magic that demon races actually used. For instance, the ritual performed by the now-fallen Saratheve family. A ritual to offer people as sacrifices to enhance power. Did you know that's a ritual of the demon races? But they got the method wrong. No matter how many innocent people they sacrificed, nothing happened... I guess I have to write a thesis on it."

“Don’t obsess over extinct families. As soon as you write a paper mentioning something like the Marquis Saratheve family, you’ll invite trouble.”

Nicole warned in a low voice. Jay shook his head leisurely.

“Even if I actually write the thesis, I won’t get in trouble. You know why, sister.”

Nicole realized the meaning of his words and felt a chill down her spine. Behind Nicole... There was the Grand Duke. Raul would not ruin the future of his mistress’ younger brother.

As long as Nicole stands as his mistress. As long as she does not betray the Grand Duke.

Her thoughts of Raul she had barely managed to hold back burst forth like a dam breaking.

Fortunately, they had arrived at Jay’s room. His room was modest and private. However, it was surprisingly spacious, and the bookshelves were tightly packed with books from unknown origins. The whole room seemed to smell of ink and old books.

“Sit here.”

Jay offered a chair in the corner of the room and sat down on the bed himself.

“Ah, thank you.”

“What’s really going on, sister? Should I be worried?”

Nicole bowed her head. She did not want to be a pathetic sister whining to her younger brother.

But now, even with Grace not by her side, she had no one to confide in.

Above all, she wanted to be honest with just one person. Now, the only person and kin Nicole trusted in the world was Jay.

“Since you’ve heard all the rumors about me, I can’t deny them.”

“It’s better than that. I read a newspaper article. It even predicted that the black dress you wore would become fashionable.”

Nicole forced a laugh at Jay’s joke.

“I don’t want to lie to you. That relationship is... true.”

“Are you being held against your will?”

“No.”

Nicole shook her head.

“The truth is, it involves you too. Whatever you do in the future, my name will stand in your way. Our parents taught us to be conservative, to not easily give our hearts to anyone but our intended spouses. It may be shameful to admit... but... I love him. It’s true that I approached him to survive. If I hadn’t liked him, even if he were of higher status, such a relationship would not have occurred. And I only want to do things that would help him.”

“So, you’re not a mistress but a lover. That’s not a sin. Even God has said so.”

Jay concluded simply.

“It’s not that simple. He... he doesn’t want me. Moreover, Grace said that if I continue to love him, she won’t see me anymore.”

Nicole looked blankly at Jay. In that moment, she ended up confessing everything to him.

Of course, she didn’t go as far as to tell the story of how she had turned back time and regressed.

How she met Raul in this life and was drawn to him. The story of the confession drug. And that she was Raul’s agent.

“Grace is Raul’s mentor. There’s no one else in this world who knows him as well as she does. Do you remember all the knowledge of our family we learned, about medicinal plants and poisonous insects?”

“I remember.”

“His father...”

Nicole felt strange. As if confessing, she eventually spilled even the secret of the Glassworm to her younger brother.

“Glassworm? That... I’m not sure either. It’s not in what we learned,”

Jay said, frowning for a moment.

“I thought as much.”

Nicole shook her head. Knowledge about Glassworms was found in the books Freya had banned. It seemed Isabel had smuggled out that book. Anyway, it had already been lost.

“The knowledge of YvesChapel that we knew can’t be found here either. It seems that knowledge was truly special. As

for that person... I'm sorry."

Jay said.

"No, I didn't come here to complain. But I'm glad you're doing well."

Before they knew it, the visiting hours were over.

As dinner time approached, a sweet smell wafted from the dining hall, and the dark grey academy buildings were cloaked in red twilight.

"I should go now. I wanted to be honest with you. I'm glad I was able to speak. But..."

Nicole stood up from her seat.

"Don't worry. It seems my lifeline depends on you, sister, so I won't go around speaking out of turn. You know me."

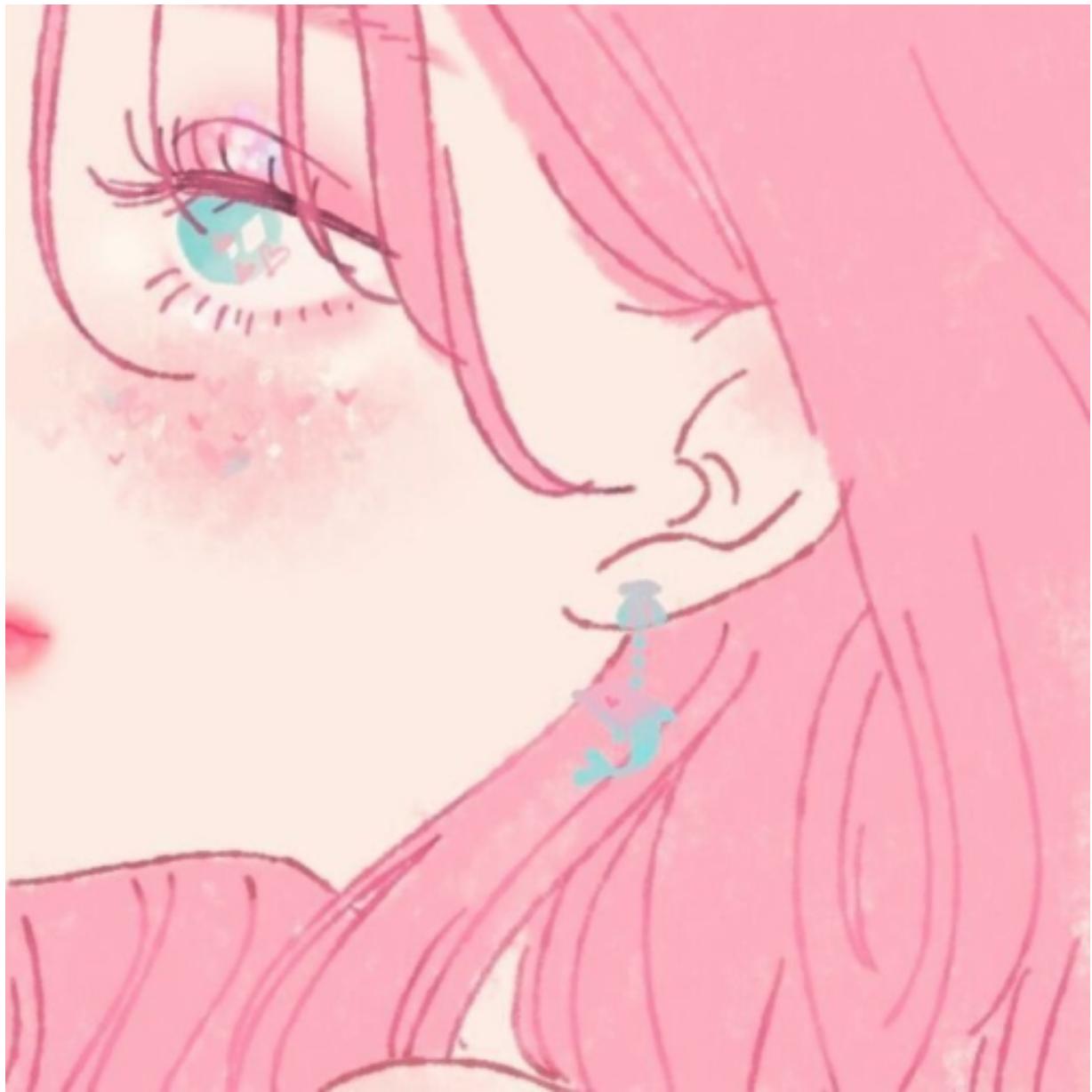
Nicole trusted Jay. She nodded slightly.

"More importantly, Nicole, there's something I need to tell you. Actually, that's the real reason I'm here."

"Yes?"

"I met Father."

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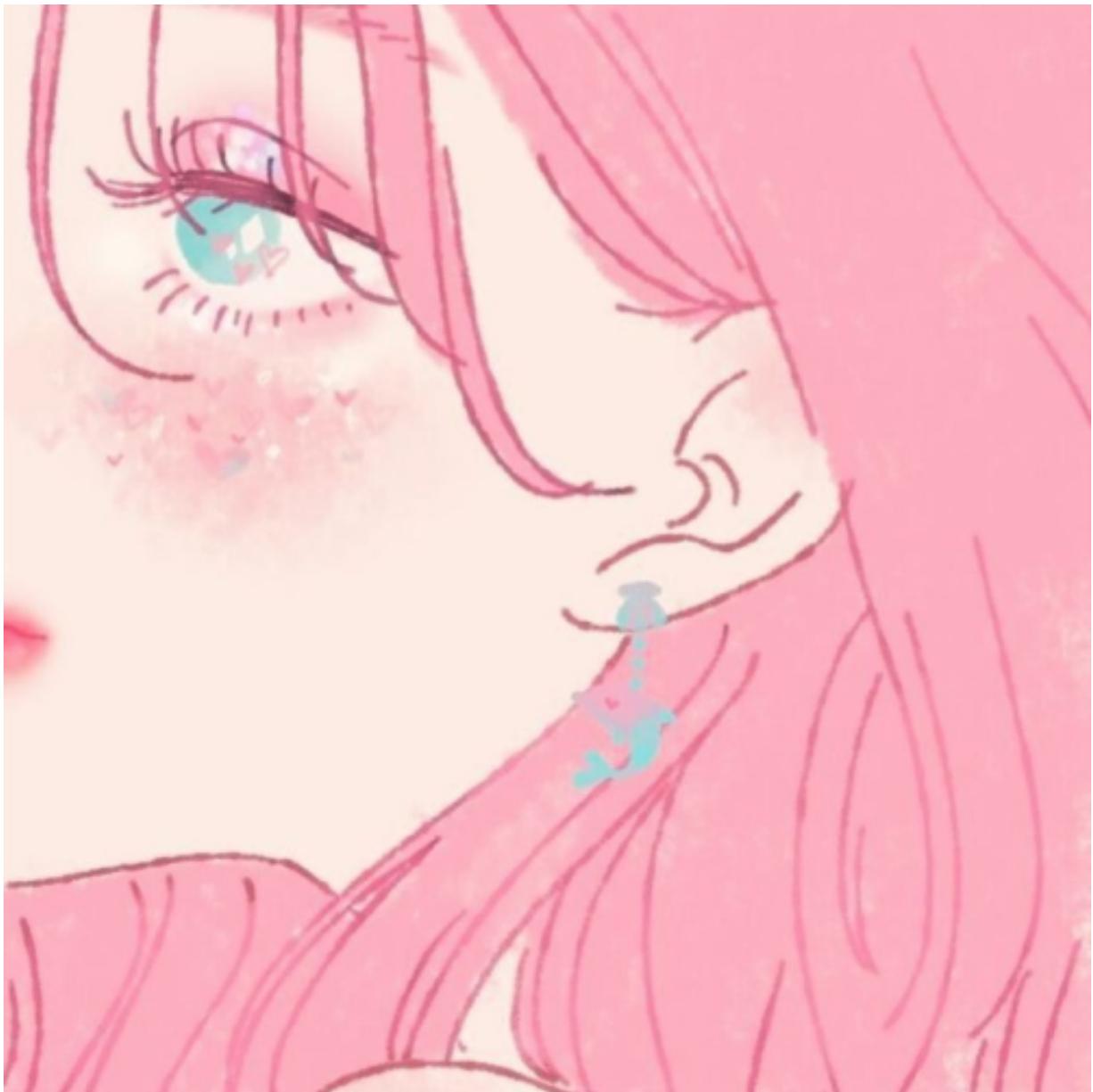


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# Chapter 162

Nicole's body stiffened upright.

"When, where?"

"Here at the sanctuary. I went out to an external event and by chance... I saw Father hiding among the monks."

"Are you sure? Father? Did he look healthy?"

Nicole couldn't contain her excitement. Jay gripped Nicole's hand tightly and said,

"Don't worry. He's doing well. It seems he's living disguised as a devotee and practitioner in a secret monastic facility that takes in anonymous monks. And..."

Jay furrowed his brow.

"And?"

"Strangely, I got the feeling that Father is originally from this sanctuary."

"Where is he? Can I meet him too? Maybe not right away, but..."

"Soon."

Jay whispered.

“The monastery where Father is located is a special facility for the devout who pray to God in seclusion. He said that they are allowed to go out four times a year. He will somehow get in touch before the next opportunity to leave.”

It was a tale like salvation to her disheveled mind. Nicole felt the strength drain from her body.

“That’s a relief. Truly a relief...”

\* \* \*

As permitted by Raul, Nicole returned home to the capital within a day.

At the end of the conversation, Jay said,

⟨Don’t worry about Lady Grace. She has a softer heart than she appears. Once the Grand Duke’s affairs are settled, if you ask for forgiveness sincerely, she will soften her heart.⟩

⟨The matters involving Raul aren’t easy to resolve, but this is comforting.⟩

Nicole said softly,

⟨And if all else fails, I can take one for you, sister, and run away. Now that we know where Father is, what’s there to worry about? I’m here. In the worst case, we run away to the ends of the earth together. If that’s the worst we could face, what’s there to worry about?⟩

Jay’s joke eventually made Nicole laugh with tears welling up in her eyes.

That night, she tasted hope for the first time in a long while.

*'Since Jay saw Father himself, he must certainly be alright. But Jay... What on earth happened? He has grown so much he could be taken for someone else.'*

But for tonight, she just wanted to think about the fact that her father was safe.

Nicole had grown too tired thinking about Grace, Raul's feelings, and her own future.

*'Grace...'*

As she thought of her father, Nicole felt a surge of affection for her family, and naturally, Grace's face came to mind.

Grace might hate Raul and be unfair to him, but at least she had bestowed countless acts of kindness on Nicole without expecting anything in return...

*'I sincerely hope you are safe.'*

Nicole opened the drawer of her vanity.

The hidden compartment of the drawer where she kept her most precious valuables. Inside were a white handkerchief given by Raul, a family heirloom from Grace, and the ring of the Sotia family.

Nicole took out the ring and fiddled with it. If she were to completely sever ties with Grace, she would have to return this.

But Nicole needed Grace, who was like a mother to her. She needed someone to follow. Deep down, Nicole felt affection for Grace.

\* \* \*

Now, Nicole could understand and feel Raul's heart. Raul had been out of touch for several days.

*'Surely, it was time to manage the changes in his emotions.'*

Nicole did not resent Raul for neglecting her.

She spent her time quietly inside the house, secretly tending to dying plants and observing the glassworms still alive in the jar.

Something strange occurred one night.

"Again?"

That night, Nicole once again took out Grace's ring before going to bed.

It was then that a faint light leaked from it.

There had been a precedent. Records about Raul and Nicole. Previous reports had unexpectedly surfaced within the ring.

This ring from the Sotia family was capable of storing documents inside, just like the one Raul had given her in her past life.

A report on the demon race's poison insect.

**Registration number 37, Glassworm.**

**This insect is commonly used in the demon tribe during childhood to correct the successor's mind and eliminate personal emotions.**

**Before reaching a certain age, if members of the demon tribe insert a Glassworm into their body and declare themselves its master, they can acquire the**

**ability to completely block and control their mind from external influences.**

**Sometimes, parents in the demon tribe implant artificial anger, hatred, and ambition in their children. Those young demons who cannot withstand it are culled, leading to their premature demise...**

“These are the knowledge about Glassworms.”

Nicole thought as she flipped through the documents.

All the knowledge about Glassworms recorded in this world was encompassed within.

*‘Who on earth sent this?’*

It couldn’t have surfaced by coincidence. Nicole remembered how Raul had handed her the ring in her last moments in her past life.

Inside that ring were numerous truths she needed to know...

Just like then, someone could insert documents here. There were as many rings, all of the same design, as the seven great families. That is to say, someone...

*‘Is sending these documents. It’s clear.’*

But who on earth?

*‘Could it be Grace?’*

Those who know of the Glassworms are of the YvesChapel family. And then there’s Grace, Raul...

Grace had solved most of Nicole’s problems until now. Could it be that Grace miraculously found and sent the

documents?

But how could this be when the ring is currently in Nicole's possession?

Perhaps Grace knows a way to store documents without the ring. After all, the Sotia family has always been adept at handling magical tools...

That thought was fleeting. As she continued to read the documents, Nicole's grip became sweaty.

These documents could never be obtained by ordinary people. They were records about the demon tribe's poison insects, all lost after a war about 300 years ago.

Even if they hadn't been lost, these were forbidden books, banned from being preserved anywhere on earth.

Merely possessing these documents was a grave offense in itself.

\* \* \*

"Miss, are you alright? It's late at night. Why aren't you sleeping?"

The maids appointed by Grace did more than just run errands or gather rumors for Nicole. They were trained and could act as bodyguards.

Nicole knew that at night, Redia and Bluea took turns patrolling the interior of the mansion.

They were the only two confidants who had access to Nicole's bedroom.

Therefore, it was natural for the maid Redia to be shocked when she saw her mistress, Nicole, hurriedly running down the corridor near midnight.

“Are you coming up from the basement? Is there a plant that blooms only at midnight, like before?”

Nicole was gasping for breath. It was a chilly day, yet she wasn’t even wrapped in a shawl over her nightgown.

“Redia, there’s something I need you to do. It’s very important.”

Nicole took Redia’s hand.

“I’m going to fall into a deep sleep now. I’ll wind the alarm clock and will be in a deep sleep, so if it rings and I still don’t wake up, call Grace. And you must bring the attending physician. If I don’t regain consciousness, follow the instructions I’ve written down.”

“Are you talking about... those procedures? If you become unreachable or fall into a weakened state, to close off the basement... That?”

“To be precise, it’s an order to burn the basement after my death. Exactly that. But it’s just a precaution for the worst-case scenario, so don’t worry.”

Nicole smiled faintly.

“What on earth are you planning to do?”

“An experiment,”

Nicole said.

“It should be safe. It’s a repetition of something I’ve done before. Glassworms... They come from a world we cannot know. I don’t understand the fundamental problem either. Our family has only learned how to handle and preserve such things.”

Of course, the method was a bit different. In her past life, Isabel had forcibly implanted glassworms into her body.

“According to the records, as long as I don’t miss the right moment, it’s not dangerous at all. It’s okay. And... by doing this myself, I think I’ll get an idea of how to extract them from Raul’s body.”

There was a way to remove the poison insects, ‘only if one has inserted them of their own volition.’

In Nicole’s case, Isabel had forced her to consume them, and the glassworms were linked to Isabel. In that case, as Isabel was the master, they could only be extracted according to her will. Moreover, Nicole had been brainwashed by Isabel for too long. So there was no hope.

But what if Raul had only commanded himself three times?

*‘And if the Glassworm hasn’t been activated since then? Then it wouldn’t be bonded to his body unlike it did to me in my previous life.’*

If that’s the case, it could certainly be extracted. The records indicated as much.

“So... you mean to experiment directly on your body? Have I understood that correctly?”

“You’ve understood perfectly. But I can control it.”

Nicole said, just like Raul would have.

“Are there no side effects?”

“Becoming like a psychopathic power-monger with exceptional control over one’s will?”

Nicole chuckled softly. It was, of course, a joke.

If Nicole herself couldn’t remove it, she didn’t know what would happen. But it wouldn’t be the worst-case scenario. At least she wouldn’t die immediately.

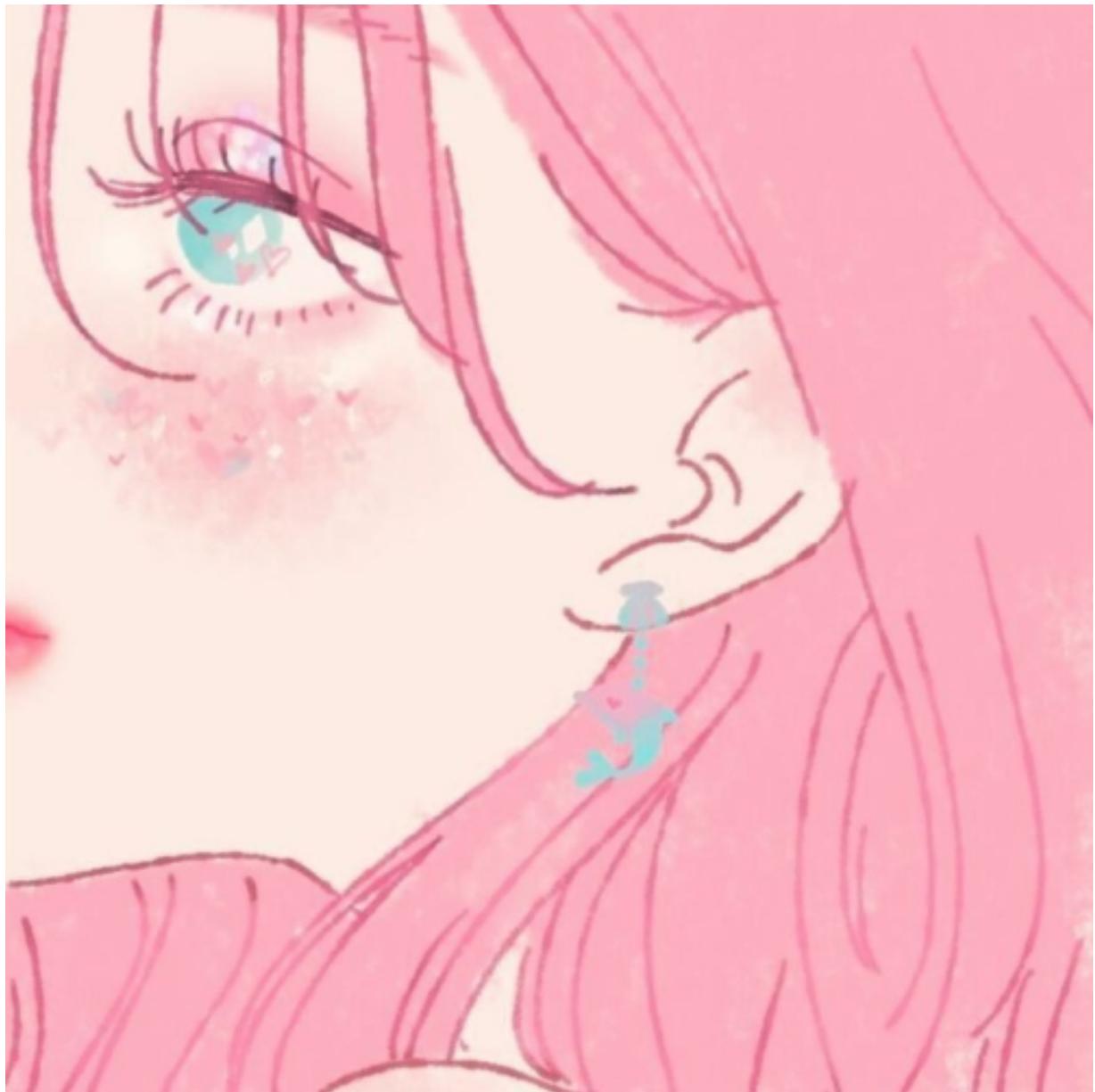
“Do you really have to do this?”

Nicole replied,

“Yes. Right now, this is the only sacrifice I can make for him. Remember my words. If I don’t wake up by the time the alarm rings, use the spices and medicines in order.”

And so, Nicole did just that.

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# Chapter 163

Swallowing the glassworm that occasionally buzzed and made a cracking sound inside the bottle was a frightening task.

*'Once the glassworm is ingested, one falls into a deep sleep for as short as two hours or as long as twenty-four hours.'*

Knowing this, Nicole chose to lie down comfortably on her bed in her room.

Afterwards, Nicole had a deep dream.

*'It's what I expected.'*

...Human memories fade, but the memories of such creatures do not.

Their time flows differently from this world, and so... they hold even the memories she has forgotten.

The number of glassworms preserved in YvesChapel is likely to be few, perhaps only one.

If that guess is correct, then this glassworm is the same one that was inserted into Nicole in her past life...

*'Yes, this is my memory from my past life.'*

Nicole knew that Isabel had manipulated her memories countless times. So, the dream she is having now...

perhaps....

The forgotten parts. The parts misremembered. It would be about Raul.

The first memory Nicole recalled was something very familiar.

The memory of her first meeting with Raul. Laundry trampled by knights. A coercive and sad marriage on paper.

*'I really hated it. Once, I too wanted to marry an ordinary man and live happily ever after. But there I was, sitting across from a man with a terrifying face, signing papers.'*

Moreover, she was forcibly separated from her family and plunged into panic. The fact that the man was incredibly handsome... didn't help at all. It seemed she had her wits about her until then.

Thus, their stale marriage life went on. Raul hardly ever entered their room.

After Nicole panicked on their wedding night, he said he would not lay a hand on her body again.

Her mother's passing was something she had anticipated.

Her illness was severe, so she wouldn't have lived long. It was sad she couldn't be there at her deathbed, but she heard that the Grand Duke's family sent doctors to attend to her until the end.

Jay sent a brief letter saying he had the Grand Duke's permission to be at their mother's deathbed. That was all.

And then... the incident involving Duchess Lisbeth occurred. That woman tried to give Nicole a drug that would make her infertile.

Before Nicole could take the drug, Raul's subordinates arrived.

The subordinate who came to fetch Nicole was Scimitar. Scimitar calmed the struggling Nicole and then took her home.

〈Look into my eyes and calm down〉

Scimitar said.

〈My master is curious. Why didn't you say anything?〉

〈What could I have done?〉

Nicole asked quietly, looking at Scimitar.

〈I can't do anything. If I raise my voice, it would harm my family...〉

Scimitar looked at Nicole quietly and then wrote something on the file in an ancient language.

Nicole knew some of the ancient language.

〈Not dangerous, in good condition, not suspicious.〉

What did Raul think about Nicole's condition at that time? Looking back now, it seemed all the more strange.

Nevertheless, Nicole was certain that day.

〈From now on, you must speak up immediately if something happens.〉

〈Are you that person's... lover?〉

Scimitar's brow furrowed.

〈I am married.〉

〈Then why are you having this conversation with me?〉

〈Having such a conversation with a man would displease the Grand Duchess, wouldn't it?〉

To hide the fact that she had read the words on the file, Nicole made some pointless remarks to Scimitar.

*'That man must wish I'd just live as if I were dead.'*

Nicole felt a bit sad.

She didn't know what the charges were, but anyway, she was now classified as a non-threatening person.

〈From now on, you must always report to the Grand Duke whatever happens. If you abide by this, the Grand Duke will not treat you poorly. He is always generous to those who quietly keep their place.〉

Scimitar hesitated for a moment before offering her personal opinion as a small piece of advice.

For reasons unknown, her treatment improved after that.

Afterwards, Nicole was free to roam around the mansion as she pleased.

With each meal came good food, and she was able to exchange letters with her siblings.

*(The Grand Duchess is truly beautiful.)*

*(Shall we go for a walk together?)*

The maids tried to make conversation with Nicole, an effort that was quickly noticeable as being instructed by someone.

*'Ah, it's that man...'*

Nicole often encountered that man in various places around the mansion.

Raul de Valentine.

It was around that time she realized her husband was a strikingly handsome man.

According to the maids' gossip, many young ladies and wives in the capital were ready to give anything if Raul so much as glanced their way.

*(The royal family covets him, but it's beyond their wildest dreams; it's nonsensical. The man we know is very resolute. Once he has taken a wife, there is no chance he would be unfaithful.)*

Surprisingly, everyone in the Grand Duke's family truly respected Raul.

*'Perhaps the maids see my husband more often than I do.'*

At that time, Nicole was using a separate bedroom, not their marital bedroom.

Raul often came to look at Nicole, and each time, Nicole felt her heart constrict.

When his deep purple eyes stared at her, her fingertips tingled and her breath quickened. Nicole hunched over and bowed to avoid showing it.

Sometimes, even as she lay in bed trying to sleep at night, she thought of Raul. His gaze seemed to linger in her mind.

Nicole was afraid of that man. She avoided him as much as possible.

Isabel said that he was a very bad person, known as a cold-blooded creature rather than a human.

*'Could his blood really be cold? And his skin? Would it be nothing but hard to the touch?'*

Nicole was always obedient to her parents' teachings. Her mother had said that marriage is a vow and the most important event in life.

The noble ones never divorce, she had said.

*'Our families were originally enemies, weren't they? So should I hate him for life? Or should I avoid him forever? Is this what marriage among the high nobility can entail?'*

Nicole was not very bright at that time. A girl who grew up only in the countryside was no different from a child.

However, she had lived her whole past life under the pressure of having to take care of and help her family.

That sense of responsibility hadn't changed. But Isabel and Jay seemed to be getting along surprisingly well.

*(He said that, if we hadn't joined his knight order, we would likely have been taken to the imperial court.)*

Jay had said this the last time they met.

*(It's not bad. I've always wanted to heal people. Besides, we couldn't live in the mountains forever. If this is the fate we must face, then we've accepted it with relative ease. Remember mother's teachings. And don't do anything crazy, sister.)*

Unlike Isabel, Jay spoke in a soothing manner. Nicole agreed with him.

*'Once married, it's done. Right. Now I have a husband. Although somewhat forced, I haven't faced the worst outcome.'*

He was her husband anyway. It was strange not knowing whether his flesh was cold or not.

As time passed, Nicole finally admitted to herself that she was living a fairly good life.

She had been brought here in July, and it was already mid-October.

In the countryside where she grew up, worries began in November. It was bitterly cold there, and winters were always poor. Hunger was a given, and firewood had to be used sparingly.

However, the Grand Duke's residence was built in an ancient style. Buildings constructed in ancient times were equipped with insulation methods incorporating magic stones within them.

Nicole foolishly asked, 'Do you cover yourselves with cotton-filled quilts in winter?'

The maids responded as if they found her question endearing.

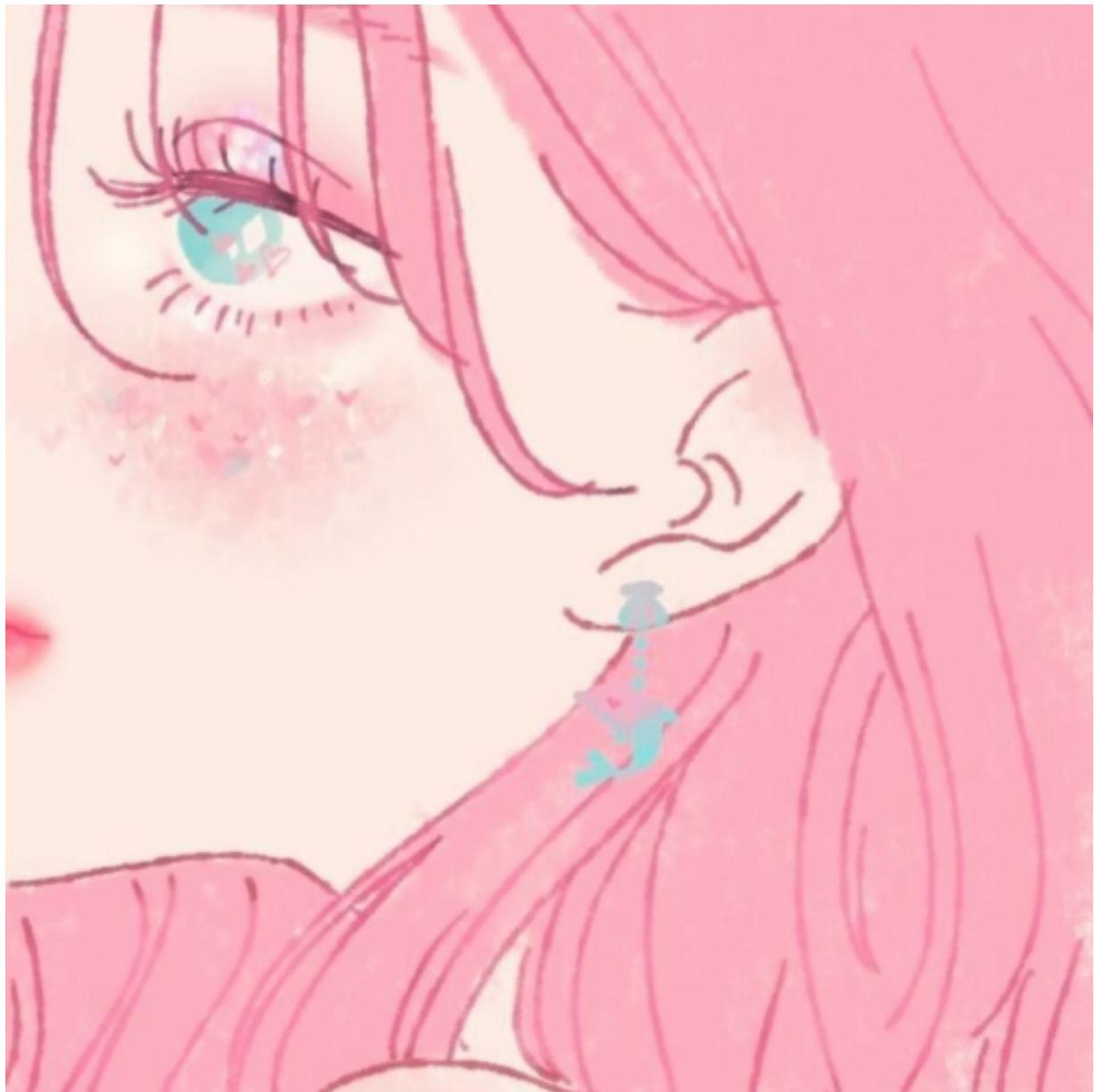
*(From now on, if you feel even slightly cold, please tell us and we will prepare firewood for the brazier and fireplace. The Grand Duchess will continue to be covered with a silk quilt.)*

Nicole lived so comfortably that she couldn't even feel the change of seasons. She was most happy that Isabel and Jay no longer had to reduce their food intake because it was winter.

Her only worry was that she couldn't get in touch with her father.

One day, the steward came to Nicole and said in a businesslike manner that if they found her father, he would be treated as the Grand Duke's father-in-law and would be supported with living expenses and everything else. Nicole couldn't bring herself to refuse.

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# Chapter 164

When Nicole first got married, she was consumed with fear. However, there were no more summons from the royal family. Instead, peaceful and tedious time passed by.

During such times, Nicole's innate temperament of purity and leisureliness gradually began to surface.

Nicole had lived her entire life under her parents' control, following their teachings and being obedient in all things with faith. At least in the Grand Duke's house, she didn't need to hide when meeting people. Nicole gained a sliver of freedom.

Nicole took walks in the garden every day. And with her spare time, she often went to the library.

It was said that the Grand Duke's people had taken all of the frozen bank assets of YvesChapel.

But that was wealth from a world unknown to Nicole, and since it was confiscated on charges of treason, she was not troubled by it.

Only the books of YvesChapel were secretly moved to the Grand Duke's residence. The Grand Duke's people had little interest in them, so they were well stored with locks on the shelves where the forbidden books were kept in the library.

〈The Grand Duchess has access to all books in the library, including the forbidden section. There are no special prohibitions by the Grand Duke.〉

The butler said.

Nicole went to the library every morning to study the knowledge of YvesChapel after a long time.

Even in such peace, when she could not contain her sadness, she wrote prayers for her mother and letters. She carefully selected only the most beautiful stationery.

As early November approached, early camellias began to bloom on the tall trees in front of Nicole's room terrace. They were exceptionally beautiful flowers that bloomed profusely.

Nicole looked down at her feet.

〈The clothes and food are all fine, but these shoes are the problem.〉

Nicole grumbled quietly.

When Nicole first arrived here, a tailor came to measure her body. Upon seeing Nicole's feet, he was amazed.

〈Your foot size is the same as the late Grand Duchess! She had many valuable shoes, lavishly adorned with jewels and silk, and they are well-preserved. With a little adjustment, you could wear all those precious shoes. You are fortunate.〉

That was the problem. The tailor had subtly mis-measured Nicole's foot size.

The late Grand Duchess had feet that were very subtly larger than Nicole's—not by a full size, but by about half of a half size.

Thanks to those custom-made shoes, Nicole only had a minimal number of new shoes fitted.

The late Grand Duchess's shoes sometimes clattered at her feet and caused Nicole pain.

However, she wasn't so clueless as to say she needed new shoes. The shoes she wore that day were exceptionally large.

Nicole decided to gather materials to decorate her stationery that day. She had been eyeing the camellia flowers for a few days.

*'If dried well, they would make beautiful pressed flowers.'*

The maids also admired the pressed flower stationery that Nicole made. She briefly considered that it could be sold for money.

Unfortunately, as a Grand Duchess, she could not have such an occupation.

⟨It seems within reach.⟩

Nicole missed the collecting basket from her hometown. Instead, she brought a mysterious rod from the dressing room.

It seemed too small for a man, with its sparkling red color and a pretty snake engraved on the handle, it appeared to be for a woman.

She held the rod in her hand, swinging it from the balcony railing, intending to knock down the flowers.

Nicole engaged in such odd behaviors when no one was watching. She would quietly lie down on the carpet in her bare feet and underwear to read a book, or secretly snack on something.

Under her mother's supervision, she always had to spend her days strictly and quietly, only occasionally indulging in such free-spirited actions to enjoy being herself.

These days, with more idle time, the frequency of such actions was gradually increasing. Today's gathering was part of that.

The flower in question seemed as if it would touch the rod, yet it did not make contact.

Just then, someone passed by. It was the sound of a man and a woman talking.

⟨She is a quiet person. She doesn't engage in excessive behavior, so she's the ideal partner you've been wanting, Your Grace. However, she seems very sad about her mother's recent passing. Perhaps introducing her to society to make friends would be good?⟩

It was the voice of Scimitar.

⟨There's no need for that. She just needs to fill her place. The ideal Grand Duchess is one who is alive.⟩

At that moment, Nicole froze with the rod in her hand.

She moved her foot to step back, and in that moment, Nicole's loose shoe dropped to the floor with a thud.

*'Oh, oh?'*

Nicole stared at the floor.

*'No!'*

She threw the rod towards a tree to hide it, almost a bizarre reflex action.

With her arms raised high, Nicole stood on one leg, the other bent at the knee.

Fortunately, she had a good sense of balance, and there was a sturdy branch in front of her. She just needed to grab it tightly.

*(Don't move!)*

Raul shouted. It was the first time Nicole found out he could raise his voice.

She stood there like a frightened rabbit, frozen in place.

Soon after, the outside became noisy.

*(Quickly secure the Grand Duchess's safety. Bring her inside!)*

This time it was Scimitar. Ah, Scimitar could also raise her voice.

Nicole had thought that her voice always lacked emotion.

\* \* \*

Shortly after the commotion, Nicole found herself sitting across from Scimitar at the small desk in her powder room.

*(Why did you attempt suicide?)*

Scimitar asked seriously. Nicole wished she could find a mouse hole to hide in.

Now, from being an almost invisible Grand Duchess, she would become a disgraced one. Fortunately, Nicole always knew how to maintain a calm expression like a mask.

*(Was it indeed the grief over your mother's passing that troubled you so much?)*

*(I was sad, quite a lot... That's why I think I was a bit depressed.)*

It was true. Nicole still cried holding the letters she wrote to her mother, not knowing any other way to mourn.

Even if Nicole wanted to see her mother, she couldn't even visit her gravestone.

It was said that the body of a traitor deserves to be hung at the crossroads and stoned, and that offering memorial prayers through a priest was an act of treason.

*(...The truth is, I wanted to collect camellia flowers. They were blooming beautifully. I planned to make pressed flower stationery with the petals to write prayers for my mother. Would this also be considered an act of treason?)*

*(Is that the truth? Were you really... not intending to take your own life...)*

*(If you look in the second drawer of the small desk in my bedroom, you'll see that my words are true. There are*

letters there written on the pressed flower stationery I made. But please don't read the contents.)

Most of it was prayers, but there was also nonsense akin to diary entries.

How embarrassing it would be if someone saw that. Next time, she might seriously consider climbing onto the railing.

⟨Is there something else I should know?⟩

Nicole answered in a voice that seemed to crawl.

⟨Actually... there was a rod caught in the tree... It looked a bit expensive. I didn't think it was valuable, so I used it. It was just lying around in my dressing room...⟩

⟨We will handle it appropriately, so please do not worry.⟩

Scimitar said indifferently.

⟨But Scimitar... that's what you said, right? Does the Grand Duke often consult you on such matters?⟩

⟨As I've said before, I am not his lover. I took on the role of counselor simply because I lead a successful family life. Besides, the Grand Duke does not particularly like such misunderstandings.⟩

At that moment, Nicole blushed, trying to respond, feeling someone's presence.

Normally, a lady's powder room would have a screen serving as a partition for various purposes such as changing clothes. It was an elegant screen in the style of the Eastern continent, with a silk center making it semi-transparent.

Beyond it, the silhouette of a tall man flickered.

*'It's the Grand Duke. When did he come in?'*

Usually, as you get to know someone and gradually become familiar, shouldn't the tension ease?

But somehow, even a brush against that man's collar made her more and more tense.

Sometimes she spent time analyzing how that feeling was, the feeling when they briefly encountered each other. Fortunately, Raul left the room quickly.

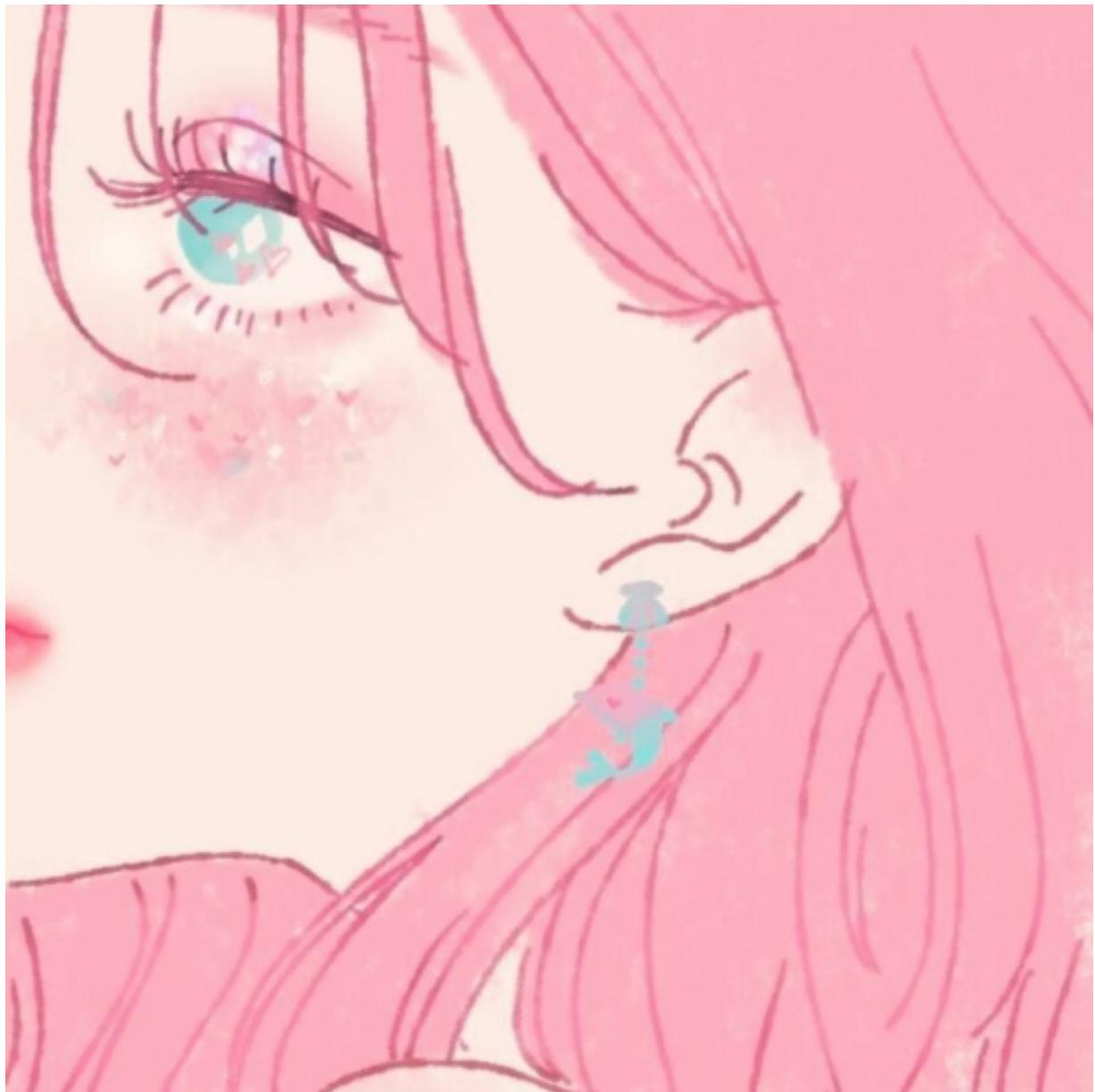
Soon after, the servants rescued the rod caught in the tree.

It turned out that the rod belonged to Raul's stern grandmother.

The next day, among the employees, a rumor spread that 'the Grand Duchess was bewitched by the ghost of the fearsome former Grand Duchess and attempted to throw herself off.'

Nicole was very ashamed and decided not to leave her bedroom for a while.

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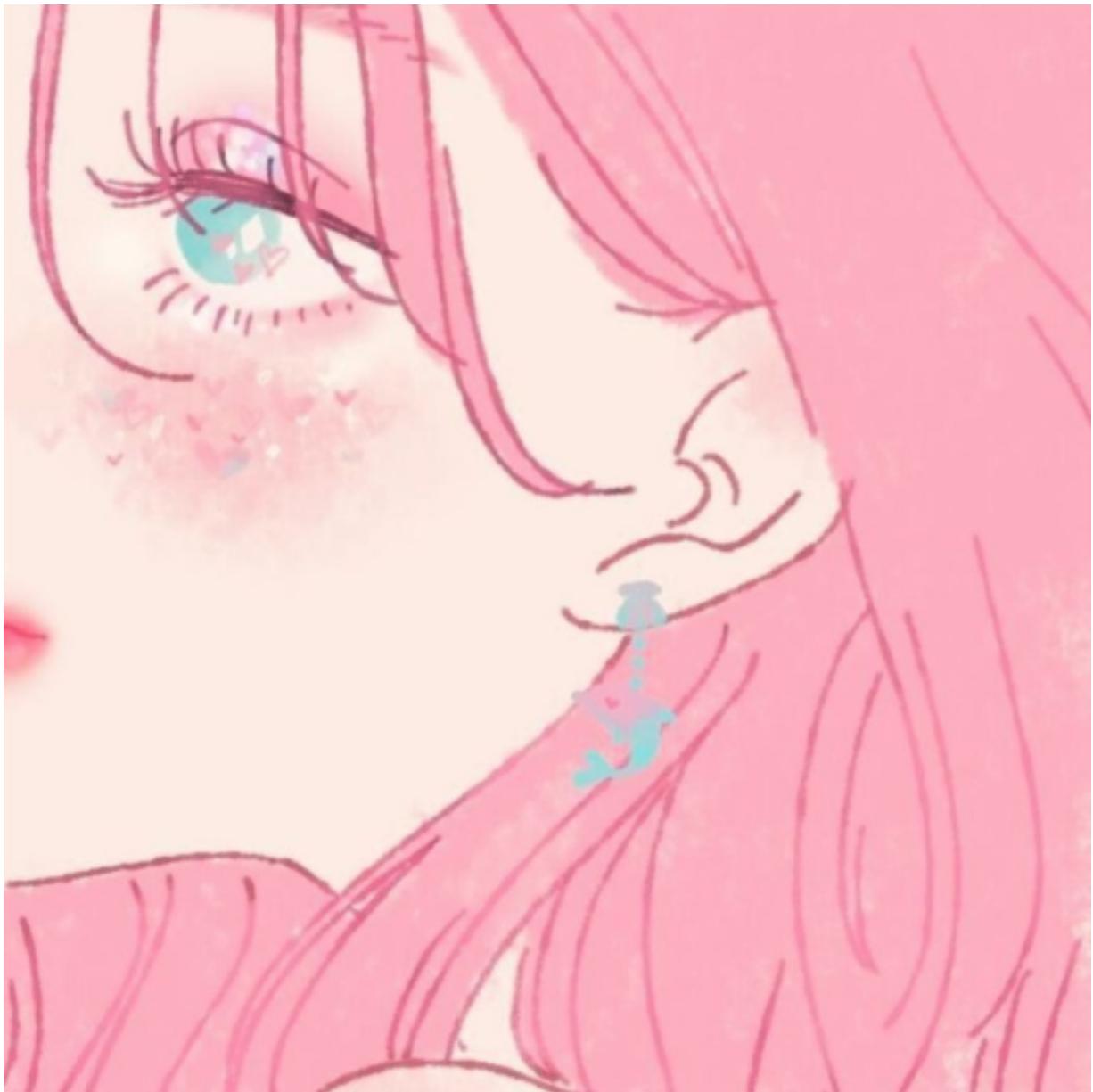


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# Chapter 165

〈Such an incident has occurred all of a sudden?〉

〈It was discovered in the old house. How should we handle this... A letter was left...〉

〈Hide it; it's news that no one needs to know.〉

One morning, Nicole overheard such a conversation near Raul's office.

There had been many times before when she had drifted like a ghost, overhearing Raul's stories.

Usually, she would let them pass, but that day was different.

Even in her dreams, Nicole vaguely realized it. It was the story about her father's suicide.

*'Should I have delved into that story back then?'*

But at that time, Nicole knew nothing and was overly naive.

Afterwards, unexpectedly bright, beautiful, and fond memories continued.

\* \* \*

〈I'm going to the Great Temple. My parents' altar is there.〉

One day, without warning, Raul took Nicole to the Great Temple, heading towards a place full of unfamiliar altars.

That altar was where Raul secretly had priests pray for his parents.

The altar was very large and beautiful, and Nicole looked at the heaps of flowers, overwhelmed.

⟨It's enough to pray only for my mother.⟩

⟨Then what about the former Grand Duke... your father?⟩

Raul fell silent for a moment and then slowly replied.

⟨You have done your job well so far.⟩

⟨I, as the Grand Duchess, haven't done anything so far.⟩

⟨That is your job. To stay alive and keep your place. I need you.⟩

Nicole shrank back unnecessarily and nodded her head.

⟨There are many in this world who can't even do that. Proper submission and obedience. And duty.⟩

Raul bowed to Nicole.

⟨Now, I will start giving you rewards and gifts in my own way. Just keep listening to me as you have been.⟩

His words sounded like those of a villain in a story. Nicole felt more fascinated than frightened by them, thanks to the generosity Raul had shown her recently.

Nicole wasn't reprimanded for hanging the rod, one of the Grand Duke's heirlooms, on a tree.

Nicole now understood the nature of their deal. Raul had to protect the position of the Grand Duchess for some political reason.

And thanks to that, Nicole was assured of her siblings' safety.

It was a fair trade, and living as though she were dead wasn't difficult; she had lived that way in the countryside anyway.

⟨I will follow your will.⟩

Nicole answered naively. Raul looked at her and then turned his head away.

⟨I detested my father. He taught me a lot, after all.⟩

⟨What did he teach you?⟩

⟨That when someone occupies a position beyond their worth, they become a nuisance to many. If those at the top do not stand upright, the blood of those below flows, and someone falls into ruin. There are many reasons a father may hate his child, but the worst is hatred based on self-loathing.⟩

⟨You stand before your father's altar now.⟩

⟨Not anymore.⟩

Raul allowed Nicole to open the hidden compartment of the altar.

Inside the altar were usually marble name plates engraved with nobility's names, bas-reliefs or cameos of the deceased's face.

Nicole gasped. In the place where Raul's father's name plate should have been hidden...

⟨This is my mother's nameplate. How...⟩

On the nameplate was engraved the profile of a beautiful woman.

F.

Only one initial was stamped on the back. However, Nicole knew immediately.

Freya. That's her mother's name.

*'This man... did he switch the altar of the former Grand Duke with my mother's altar?'*

At that moment, Nicole realized that this man might be insane.

The high priests were praying for the repose of my mother's soul, not Raul's father's.

*'This is treason. Praying for a traitor is a crime.'*

Nicole felt her body tremble lightly.

⟨I told you, I hate my father. This is a fitting insult.⟩

Nicole didn't know whether to laugh or be moved.

⟨It's... quite remarkable.⟩

〈But why do you look displeased?〉

〈To be honest, I'm a bit worried. Our mothers' nameplates are together, what if it's awkward since they barely know each other?〉

Nicole watched with curious eyes as Raul furrowed his brows even more. It was much later that she realized he was holding back laughter.

〈What does your mother mean to you?〉

That day, Nicole mustered the courage to ask Raul.

〈The first and last love I learned.〉

It must be an unconditional love. Nicole sensed it.

\* \* \*

It was at the end of the day that she realized it—the place where Nicole kept the letters to her mother. Raul had stolen a look at them there.

It was because Nicole had written several times how sorry she was for not being able to create an altar for her mother.

〈Ah.〉

As soon as Nicole returned home, she opened the drawer. The letter on top read as follows:

〈Mother, the man who is my husband is the enemy of our family. Our marriage is nothing more than a formality on paper. Yet, sometimes I find this enemy to be beautiful. I feel guilty for having such feelings. I pray and reflect before God, following your teachings.〉

Nicole decided she must burn the letter. At the same time, she realized it was already too late.

\* \* \*

First love came easily to the foolish country girl. The small kindnesses of her mysterious husband ignited that love.

At that time, Nicole was brave to the point of foolishness.

From the next day, Nicole stood in Raul's dressing room before he went to work, helping him polish each medal and prepare and put on his jacket in the morning.

⟨Why do you do this?⟩

Raul asked.

⟨I told you, you don't have to do anything. Everything you're enjoying now can be enjoyed without any cost.⟩

Of course, Raul found Nicole a bit bothersome, which made her feel somewhat embarrassed as she had anticipated this reaction.

⟨I don't really have anything to do. Is this a nuisance?⟩

Raul did not answer.

⟨There must be a reason I am in this position. I was taught that finding work to do is good. Anyway, now that I have become the Grand Duchess, I want to do whatever I can.⟩

And so, Nicole began to tend to the abandoned greenhouse.

When spring arrived, the greenhouse was full of bright flowers. Nicole filled the vase in Raul's study with fresh

flowers every day.

〈Even if you try to buy my attention, it won't be of any help to you, so just stay quiet.〉

Raul's emotional limits were reached faster than expected. He was a bit... strange.

Some days he looked at Nicole as if he wanted to devour her, other days as if he wanted to push her against a wall and hit her. Some days she seemed to be an annoyance to him, and yet other days, it seemed he might like her a little.

At the same time, he was always consistently expressionless and cynical. But crucially, Raul never told her not to come near.

Nicole quietly lingered around him, thinking that if Raul didn't have a lover, there might be a chance for her.

One day, Raul looked at Nicole and said as if spitting out the words,

〈I might have to strangle you to death. Or perhaps I should kiss you.〉

Nicole didn't seem surprised at all; she looked at Raul impassively and then blinked slightly,

〈If you have to do both, start with a kiss. After kissing, you'll probably feel better and gently strangle me.〉

Raul did just that, and Nicole knew he wouldn't strangle her.

〈I am yours.〉

[T/N: Nicole rizzzz]

Nicole spoke while fiddling with Raul's jacket. As spring was coming to an end, she realized that Raul kept stealing glances at the letters she wrote to her mother.

Some days, things she wrote as needed happened within a few days. She later found out that Raul had ordered the letters to be analyzed by Scimitar.

〈Don't disturb.〉

Raul said.

〈What?〉

〈My feelings. You're an interference.〉

〈Do I annoy you that much? How do I interfere?〉

Raul took a breath.

〈I'm thinking about you. I need a little time.〉

He was truly an enigmatic person. She wondered what other men were like.

For Nicole, the only men she could compare to were the male leads in romance novels – surprisingly, romance novels also existed in the Grand Duke's library. And Raul surpassed the romantic novel's male lead in every aspect.

He was handsome, wealthy, and mercilessly cold. Moreover, he sometimes acted as if he was infuriated with Nicole – though the reason was unknown – he had never actually been violent toward her.

〈I have a problem.〉

Raul said.

“But if all goes well, I’ll complete our marriage without killing you.”

Raul does not lie. He may omit, but he does not lie. Nicole only came to understand this a few months after their marriage.

Nicole’s happy memories continued. They eventually had a wedding... It was a very small ceremony, to avoid the royal family’s scrutiny.

Raul did not want Nicole to become his weakness. If it became known that he harbored any feelings for her, it would be showing a vulnerability. The reason for the belated ceremony was simple: Nicole believed that a marriage not sworn before God was not real. She had written this sentiment in letters and stored them in her drawer several times.

⟨I don’t know what you’re hoping for,⟩

Raul said quietly as they were married before the high priest, pressing his forehead to Nicole’s.

⟨But let’s try anyway. Looking at you feels like finding a ray of light in a sea of negative emotions. It will take a long time. If you can wait as if you were dead and endure me in the meantime. Maybe there’s a chance. A chance to understand what this feeling is.....⟩

Words whose reasons were unknown at the time. Nicole only came to understand their meaning in her second life.

Raul gave her only one wedding gift. It was a pure white handkerchief.

〈The only absolute affection I know of is the one my mother gave me a long time ago.〉

〈Didn't you say your mother passed away when you were four years old?〉

〈Due to a very unfortunate accident.〉

Raul spoke quietly.

And it was only much later that it was discovered, this white handkerchief was the item Raul's mother had held at the moment of her death.

She was said to be excellent at embroidery, so skilled that she could stitch with soft silk thread and make it look almost invisible at a glance.

She had embroidered every single word of blessing with transparent white thread onto the handkerchief for her son, so adept she could do it without a pattern, even with her eyes closed.

It was believed that such a secret and private blessing would keep her son safe.

When Raul's mother was found, there was faint blood on the edge of the handkerchief, which they say never completely washed out.

At that time, it was the only memento of Raul's mother he possessed.

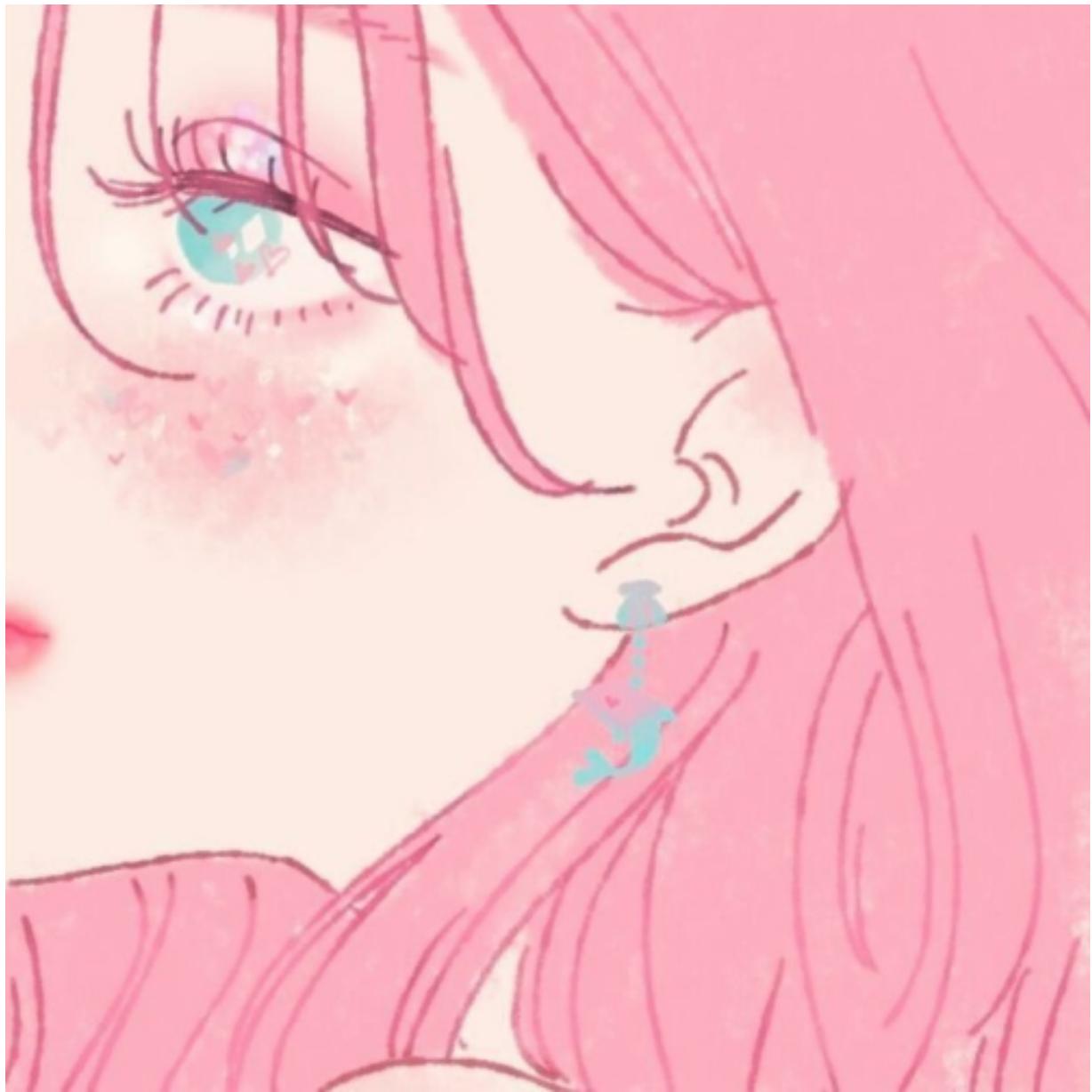
The words of blessing engraved on the handkerchief symbolized the only absolute love that Raul could imagine in his childhood.

That man gave Nicole the only affection he knew. When she understood its meaning, to Nicole, it was utterly worthless.

This was because the brainwashing built by Isabel had already begun.

[T/N: UGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH MY HEART RAULLLLLLLL  
NICOLEEEEE]

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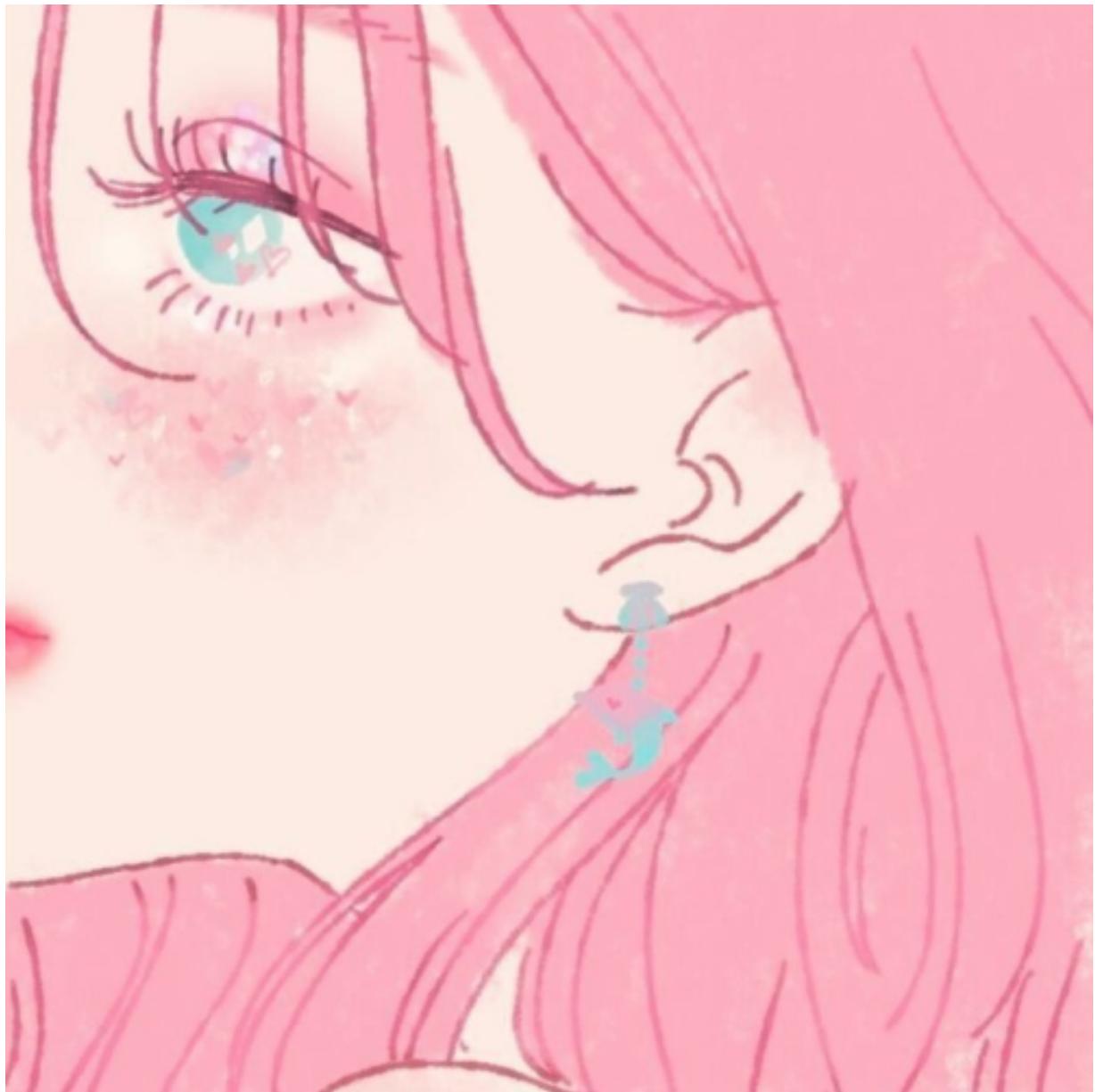


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# Chapter 166

Eventually, her memories head towards a dark and ominous place, starting with Isabel's jealous eyes and trembling hands.

"I've endured a year of your foolish tales. You don't deserve such status, you filthy whore. Now, I will make sure you understand who your master is."

Up to the moment when the glassworm, which Isabel had painstakingly prepared for a year, was inserted.

"This is the first command: make yourself love me, follow my teachings, and heed my will. And you must understand who Raul is. He killed our family, our father. This is our father's will, hidden until this moment:

*I have decided to close my eyes to all secrets to exact revenge on the Grand Duke Valentine's family. My children must sincerely promise never to forgive them... If I were to speak out, it would change the history of the world, but now no one will know the truth...*

Are you listening carefully?"

"Haah, haah..."

Nicole awoke from her dream. She looked at Redia with startled eyes, finding herself in her own bed.

"Did you give me medicine?"

"Yes, it was to help you regain consciousness."

"Well done,"

Nicole nodded.

She recaptured the glassworm circling around her body, now adept at the process.

The document that appeared on the ring contained recipes for medicines that would induce vomiting when a poisonous insect from the demon race, like the glassworm, was injected. Nicole coughed painfully.

'It's done. I can remove things that have been ingested for a day. The next experiment is to see if I can extract things that have been attached to the host's body for a long time.'

Nicole rubbed her head.

*'A year's worth of lost memories.'*

There was a reason for all of it. During that time, Nicole... had loved Raul.

Isabel had made sure the glassworm was firmly rooted in Nicole's body and brainwashed her to hate Raul.

*'Memories of me loving Raul should not have existed. If they did, brainwashing would have been impossible. So, I must have erased a year's worth of memories myself.'*

Redia glanced at Nicole with frightened eyes.

"Are you really okay?"

"Can you leave me alone for a bit?"

Nicole spoke weakly. Redia, sensing the mood, stepped out. Nicole curled up on the bed.

There was a time she had loved him, a time he had shown his heart and made vows to her.

Yet, she had forgotten all that.

In her past life, Raul must have felt negative emotions every time he developed an affection for Nicole.

He would have had to endure and suffer greatly to prevent those feelings from turning into violent impulses, possessiveness, and love-hate.

*'He promised... to find a ray of light for me.'*

Raul expressed his feelings for Nicole in such a way. There was a time when he approached her, using that ray of light as a milestone.

Nicole even manipulated her remaining memories at will, jumbling the order in her head and beginning to interpret all of Raul's actions with hatred.

*'And yet, he lived with me for four years.'*

Raul endured a mad wife for four years.

Nicole was almost too afraid to recall what kind of hell existed within that time.

Nicole truly longed to see Raul. She missed him dearly.

At that moment, Nicole suddenly remembered something and got up from the bed.

*'The modest secret wedding from my past life. Raul had given me one and only wedding gift at that time.'*

A single handkerchief. Raul said it was something his mother had carried when she passed away.

With trembling hands, Nicole opened the drawer of the vanity.

*(Don't throw away anything I give you, except for consumables.)*

Not long ago, when Nicole was leaving Raul's mansion. The day before, they had a non-argument in the study which left a small cut on her palm.

Raul carelessly wrapped this handkerchief around Nicole's hand.

*'Surely not, it can't be.'*

Nicole slowly examined it.

There was a very faint trace on the bottom right of the handkerchief.

It was the mark of blood discolored by the passage of time. Nicole held the handkerchief under the lamp to take a closer look.

The densely engraved phrases of blessing.

It was an item embroidered with all sorts of blessings in white thread by Raul's mother just before she died. The embroidery faintly shimmered and flickered in the light.

"Hugh, huk..."

Clear tears dropped from Nicole's eyes.

Raul had given her the only affection he knew across two lifetimes.

\* \* \*

Two weeks had passed since Raul had not gone to see Nicole.

Raul was returning home late after finishing his official duties.

It was a dusky night again. Something indistinct, whether fog or flame, drifted beyond the window.

Raul recalled a very old memory. It was a memory of his father.

Raul had been intelligent and precocious since childhood.

His father was generally satisfied with his qualities. There was only one time he had been greatly dissatisfied with Raul.

It was when Raul made an emotional decision for the first time in his life.

Raul's father, Curtis\*, had little interest in him.

However, he would call Raul to the drawing room once a week for an interview and personally check on his education. In his father's notebook, Raul was the fifth schedule every week.

*(The abilities of our family must be kept secret in many aspects. Especially among those...)*

*(Everything considered to be prophetic, including indescribable dreams, was said to be particularly secretive. Father said it's best to hide our abilities as much as possible.)*

That day was no different.

Curtis nodded at Raul's answer.

He always had a gloomy face, often muttering to Raul, *(We must reclaim the holy land,) or (The Grand Duke's family never surrenders to anyone.)*

However, since the death of Raul's mother during his childhood, Curtis had gone half-mad and his health had deteriorated. He felt chills even in summer and suffered from insomnia at night. Even when he spoke ambitiously, he seemed like a broken man due to his lack of energy.

Outside, he played the role of a Grand Duke as if he were a normal person, but he seemed like a corpse surviving only on the shell called duty.

But that day was different. Curtis, with sparkling eyes, grabbed Raul and spoke passionately.

*(The power of prophecy is the most precious ability. The royal family received the blessing of the main god and gained prophetic powers, which played a crucial role in the war hundreds of years ago. They discerned the tactics of the demon race and also measured the decisive moments of victory.)*

*(As such, the prophetic power of our family must be kept a secret at all costs.)*

⟨Yes. Your grandfather made an incredible prophecy. It's a story you're hearing for the first time...⟩

Curtis pursed his lips, then leaned towards Raul and whispered.

⟨A child will be born who can save you. You must kill that girl. If you swallow the gem within her body, it will initiate the unlocking of your powers. She will be born the daughter of a reclusive monk. I have already investigated when you can meet her.⟩

Summarizing Curtis's words, there was a girl somewhere in the world who would have a significant impact on him.

In the girl's body lies a kind of precious gem that can only come out if she is killed. His father would offer her as a sacrifice on the small yet grand altar of the secluded temple in the mansion.

Raul must swallow that gem. What then? Even to young Raul, it sounded quite illogical. He thought precisely this: his father's anxiety and madness had reached a new phase.

Now, it was all but a superficial memory.

⟨You will become a Grand Duke unlike me and will prosper our family. All I can do for that is to respect and follow the prophecy. I will surely bring you a sacrifice.⟩

To Raul, his father was nothing more than a man who roamed the hallways at night, screaming in nightmares, searching for his wife.

Even after Raul was kidnapped with his mother and returned alone, he blamed Raul for the rest of his life.

Fortunately, Raul had little memory of the time of the kidnapping.

Only very fragmented memories.

Memories of men huddled around him on the dirt floor, and himself incessantly pleading for his mother's life on what seemed like a stage somewhere.

Luckily, he was only four years old at the time and the memories were faint. This spared him from ruining his life due to the trauma of that time.

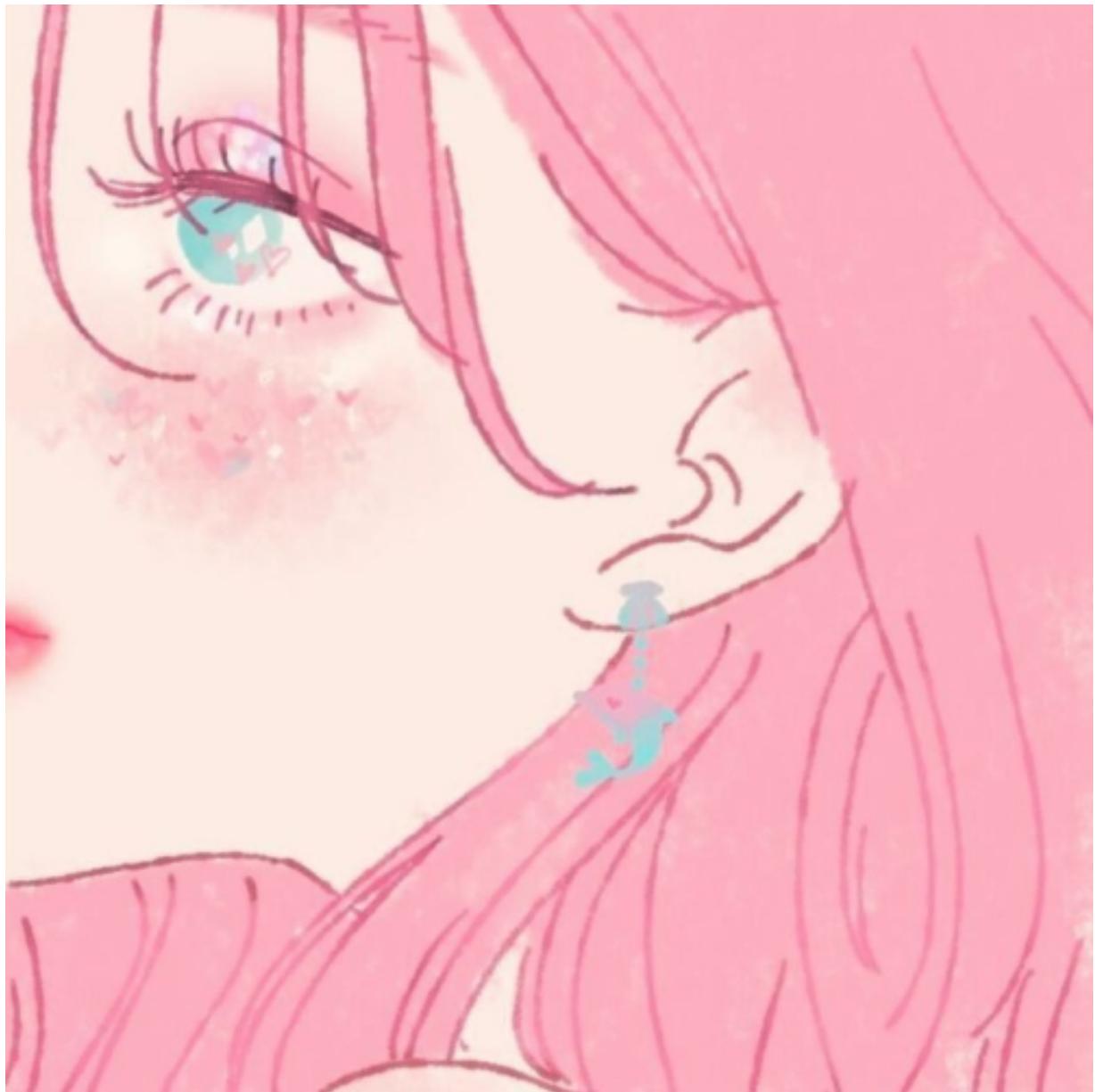
By the time he came of age, he had already been neglected among his tutors.

〈Do you understand? When that child comes, get along well with her. She is the child who will save your life.〉

Curtis said with satisfaction. It was when Raul was 13 years old.

[\*]I am sure his father's name was Anthony(안소니) from Chapter 158, so why is his name Curtis (커티스) now?? I'm so confused. Proof is this line: “안소니는..... 라울의 아버지는..... 그와는 다른 성격이었나요?” which translated to Anthony.... Raul's father....(omitted) from chapter 158. And this line in this chapter: 라울의 아버지 커티스는 Raul's father, Curtis.

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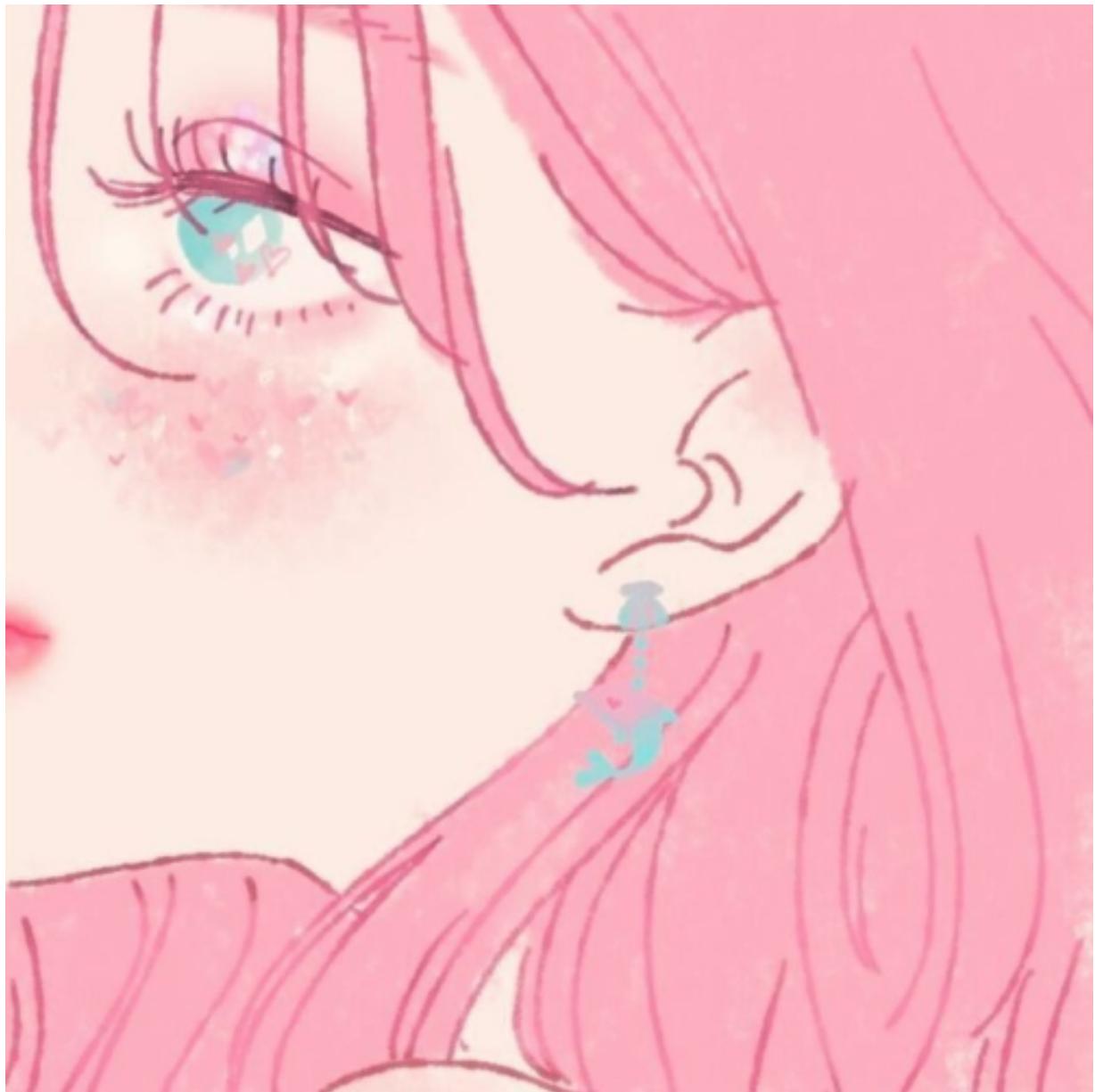


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# **Chapter 167**

Patients with delusional disorder are called such because they imagine things they cannot do.

Thirteen-year-old Raul was convinced that his father was a patient with delusional disorder. However, his opinion changed when that 'girl' truly appeared before Raul's eyes.

That morning, his father smiled so brightly it was almost ominous.

And he muttered as if to confirm again,

(Get along well. If that child likes you, she'll give you even prettier jewels.)

At that time, Raul was staying at the Grand Duke's mansion in the holy land.

The Grand Duke's family had ruled over the holy land long ago. But now, the Great Temple dominates it. Although the Grand Duke's family still owned a vast mansion in the holy land, they no longer wielded significant power there.

Behind the Grand Duke's mansion, there were several unused small cabins. His father took Raul to one of them.

Inside the room, a girl was sleeping. She woke up and startled at the sound of Raul entering, quickly rising to her feet.

**(Hello, who are you?)**

The girl was terrified, gasping for breath as if she was about to have a seizure.

His father closed the door and left. He was out of his mind, leaving them alone like that. Or was this some sort of instruction to seize the moment? For him to personally offer this child as a sacrifice? Is it really okay to snatch people up like catching rabbits?

The girl had doll-like golden-brown hair, plump pale cheeks, and blue eyes. A dreamy aquamarine blue. A color he would never forget.

Raul's brow furrowed. The child shivered and then took something out from within her embrace.

It was an object familiar to Raul. An abacus. He had been taught to press it continuously whenever he could not control his own emotions.

**(Huuu, ah, huuu-)**

The girl pressed on it for a while until her eyes calmed down. It was a sign of artificially repressed and suppressed emotions.

In that state, tranquility came, and the absence of emotional highs and lows was proper. Useless emotions disappeared like that.

Raul felt a strong sense of familiarity. He had learned to manage his emotions through several beatings.

**(Father said there would be people to take care of me while he sells things at the Great Temple. Is this place an inn? Are**

you an employee here?>

It was the most nonsensical thing he had heard so far.

Raul was wearing a white boys' shirt with faintly embroidered daffodils on the cuffs, along with black trousers and a blazer. The outfit was too expensive and impractical for working at an inn.

*(You talk a lot. I didn't hear that part from Father. What's your name?)*

Raul asked quietly.

*(My parents told me not to tell my name to strangers.)*

*(My parents, precisely the tutors under my father's orders, taught me that everyone should know my name. I'm Raul.)*

The girl's eyes wavered.

*(Ni...k.)*

She started to speak but then closed her mouth.

*(Does your name start with Ni?)*

*(No.)*

*(I see. Then I'll call you N.)*

Raul realized shockingly that the girl was very small. She was clearly about seven or eight years old.

And from their conversation, he found out she was a smart and fine child. Now, if his mad father succeeds, this child would become a sacrifice to an unknowable ritual.

‘Someone as insane as my father should have been born a commoner.’

A woodcutter or farmer living in isolation could indulge in delusions of grand social ceremonies, but they lacked the money and power to actually hold them.

Unfortunately, my father had both.

\* \* \*

He had confessed this once to Bastard over drinks.

It was not long ago. Raul had returned from Marquis Saratheve’s funeral and had a drink with Bastard.

Bastard’s reaction to the story was just as Raul had imagined.

⟨Are you being serious?⟩

⟨It’s something no one would believe. I’ve wondered several times if my memory was faulty.⟩

⟨That... Did the former Grand Duke...⟩

⟨He was indeed mad, but not noticeably so, never recorded as such by various outlets. My father was lucky.⟩

Raul snickered. He swirled the brown liquor and downed it in one go.

⟨But seeing the foolishness of Marquis Saratheve, I thought that it might have really happened.⟩

⟨So what about that young child? Surely they didn’t die?⟩

Bastard's expression contorted. Raul shook his head.

⟨I had several servants who would pretend to die at my word. Thanks to them, I released the child, allowing them to escape.⟩

Even though it was a thing of the past, Bastard looked relieved.

⟨That's fortunate. You showed kindness.⟩

⟨It was amusing.⟩

Raul answered briefly. Bastard's expression jumped again.

⟨You find the ritual with a live sacrifice amusing?⟩

⟨No, that child. I was an only child and wasn't allowed to have friends. But my father permitted me to befriend that kid. So, we played together in the forest and read books.⟩

⟨You seem like someone who would be shy.⟩

Bastard said it nicely, but the meaning was clear. He couldn't imagine Raul as a cheerful young boy.

In reality, that time was very short. Raul at thirteen was already mature enough to be cynical.

⟨We had something in common.⟩

Similar emotional abuse, or restraint. There's a sense of kinship that only those who have experienced it can feel.

The two of them spent two weeks together, finally feeling freedom.

*(It was an unusually nice spring, and we spent time in the treehouse. That kid could read and was thrilled with the books in my treehouse.)*

The girl sympathized with Raul. N's parents also taught her to tightly control her emotions, but at least she had been raised more leniently than Raul.

Physical punishment was part of Raul's education. If he failed to meet certain goals, he would be whipped on the knees.

It wasn't quite first love, as the girl named N was too young for that. It was rather the first and last feeling of unfamiliar freshness towards someone else, and illogical happiness.

N asked Raul to find his favorite passage in the book. Raul cut out a sentence from his book and showed it to her.

*(That's cool. It's a good piece of writing.)*

Raul had an abacus that he had used since he was young. It was an old object, studded with jewels on the handle.

It was a gift from his strict grandmother, originally belonging to her. The handle could be opened to place items inside.

Raul tightened the screws on the abacus, placing inside it the flower given by the girl along with that inscription.

*(But that child who didn't know gratitude ran away with my belonging.)*

*(Was it valuable?)*

*(So-so. It was the abacus I used when I was trained to control my emotions as a child. By that age, I could regulate*

my emotions without such artificial tools, so it wasn't necessary. But it was quite a pretty thing.)

Raul said indifferently.

And Raul vividly remembers the day the girl ran away.

The girl greeted Raul and innocently promised,

⟨I'll definitely come to meet you again. Then, I'll teach you my name.)

And then, for the first time since his birth, Raul experienced a prophecy.

Behind the girl's departing figure, a majestic sunset poured down. And in Raul's head, it seemed as if someone had rung a bell. He felt a shudder and stood still.

Destiny flowed over his shoulders.

*'-You will love only one girl throughout your life in this world.'*

Raul immediately realized whom the prophecy was about.

Not now. For now, they were both just children.

But someday, he was destined to love that girl for sure. N. He only knew the initials of that child.

⟨Why did you let that child escape? Why!⟩

When his father, Curtis, stared at Raul with bloodshot eyes and demanded, Raul replied softly,

〈Because I am destined to love her. I saw the prophecy. The one you saw, father, was wrong.〉

They say revealing a prophecy is a breach. Those who experience a prophecy feel an urge to confide it to someone.

Even Raul, who was well-trained emotionally, couldn't avoid it. It was his first experience, after all.

〈Raul, if only that girl had died and you had obtained the jewel, you could have had the world. You ruined your future with your own hands.〉

Raul furrowed his brow at his father's absurd words.

〈It seems you, too, have a broken part like me. There was a defect.〉

Curtis continued to look at Raul with a strange expression, then tilted his head.

For the first time, Raul felt a sense of rejection, strangeness, and ultimately a bit of fear towards his father.

〈You did not take after me. You resemble my mother and father who used to flog me directly. I thought you would become like them: stronger, smarter, and more cruel than anyone else—a perfect ruler.〉

He pressed hard on his shoulder for a moment before whispering.

〈Don't worry. I will correct you. You won't even know what happened. Everything will be alright... Through you, I will be

able to fulfill my father's will. He said to always protect and enrich our family.)

And then Raul experienced 'that incident'.

Grace told Raul about the incident, that his father had planted something in his mind.

Raul did not want to remember it no matter how many times he heard about it. Strangely so.

He knew that Curtis had finally succeeded, and that something had gone wrong with his emotions as well.

He had eventually reached the state his father wanted.

As the year came to an end, Curtis, who had been suffering from an unknown illness, died. Raul still suspected that his father's death might have been a suicide. The cause of Curtis's death was not illness but a heart attack, and there were no signs of assassination.

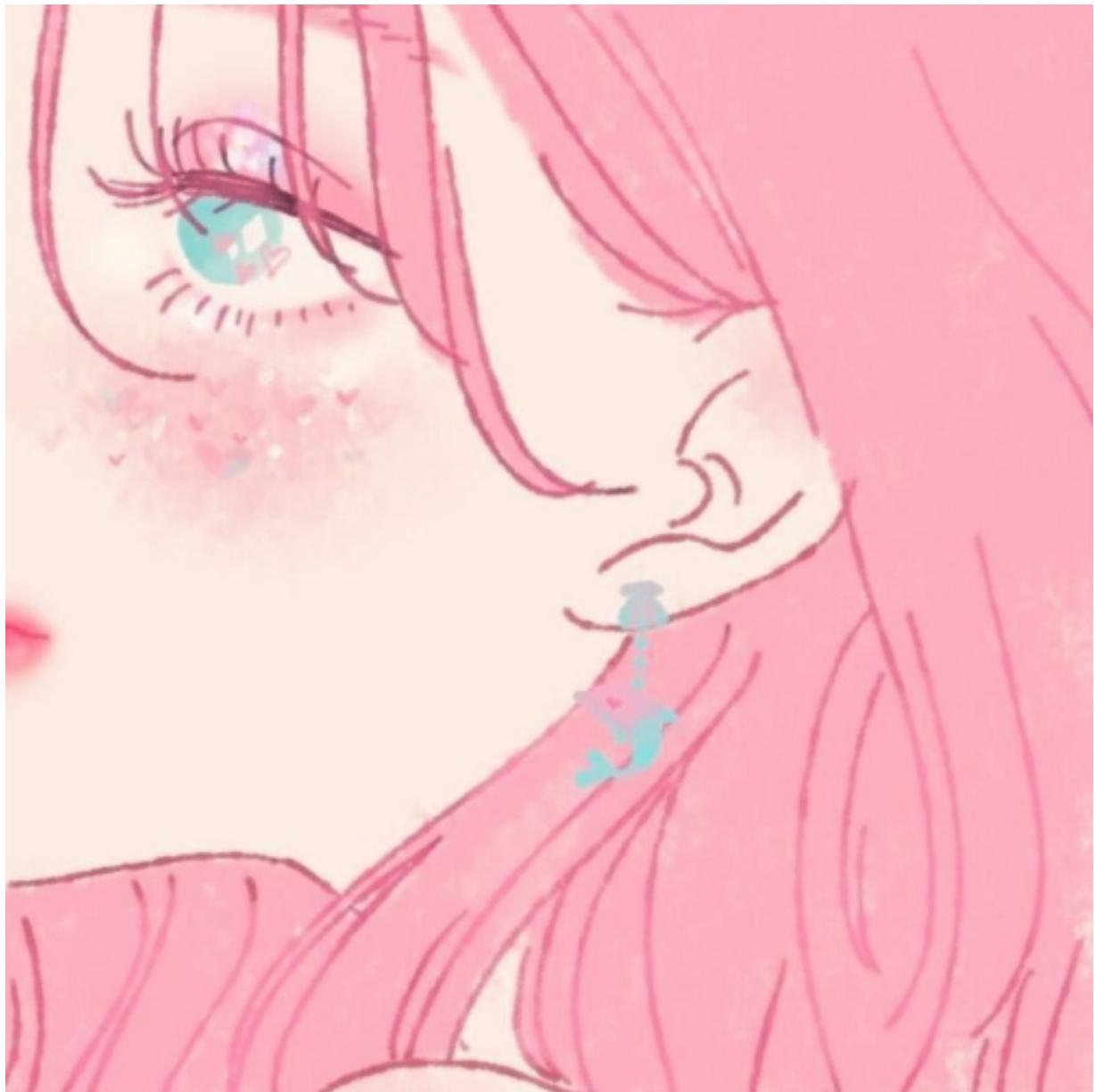
Raul grew up slowly. And like all Grand Dukes, he became unhappily serene and calm, and that is how he survived.

Having heard the whole story of that day, Bastard said softly,

⟨Please be a little more generous and kind to Miss Karen.⟩

Raul did not know why Karen's name suddenly came up. He did not ask anything more.

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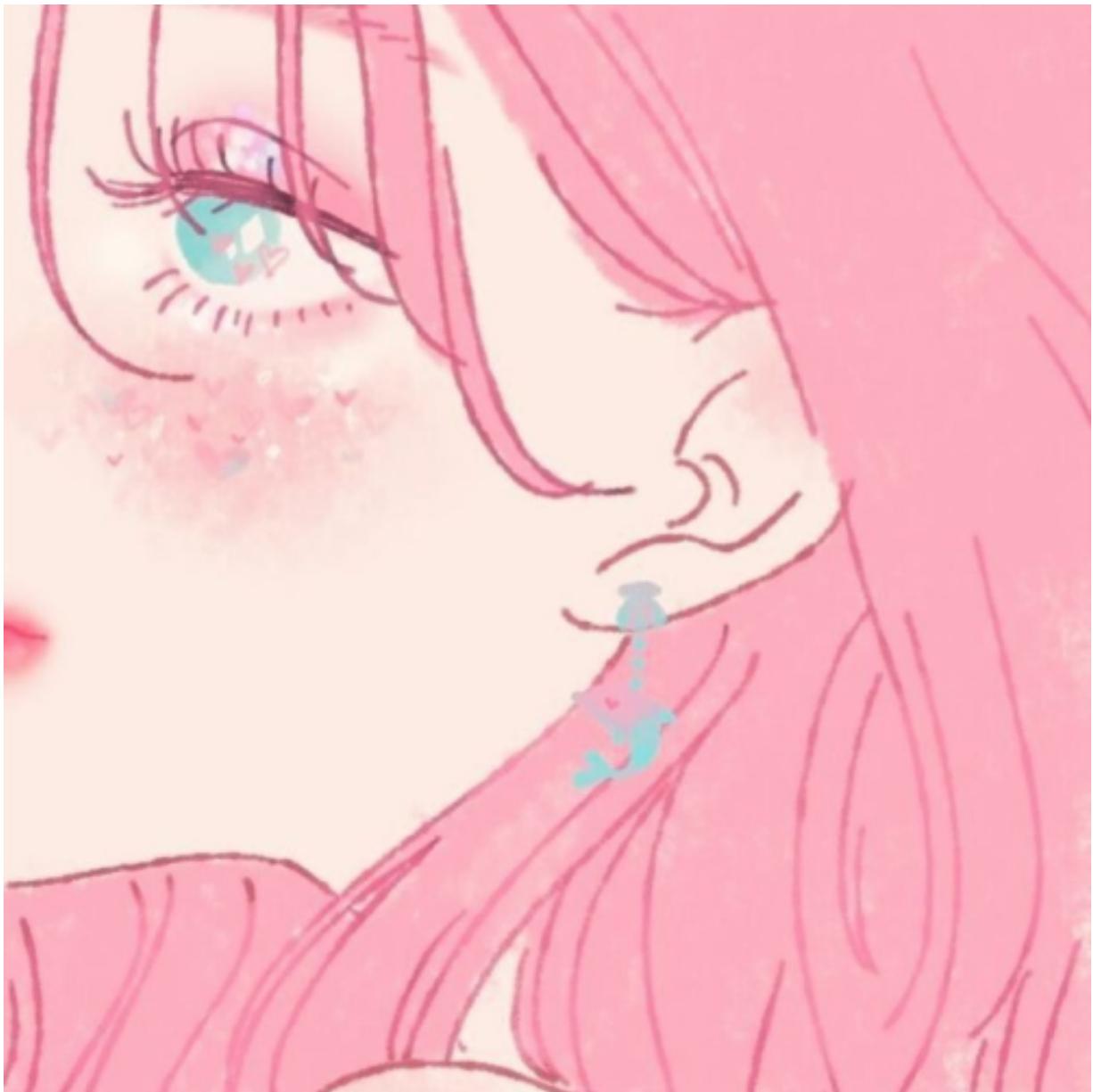


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# Chapter 168

Upon returning home late, Scimitar was waiting to give a report.

Raul had instructed Scimitar to keep an eye on Grace. Recently, Grace had been recklessly trying to uncover the royal family's secrets.

Serving a master who acted as if she had a death wish was not an easy task.

Scimitar briefly reported on the situation. When no order to leave was given, she calmly looked at Raul.

"Do you have anything else to tell me?" (Raul)

A subordinate who could speak objectively and calmly without judging their master's personal affairs was rare. For that reason, Raul sometimes sought advice from Scimitar.

"It's nothing. How's your family life?" (Scimitar)

Another trait that Raul highly valued in Scimitar was her quick perception. She was insightful yet not servile.

A faint sparkle passed through Scimitar's eyes.

"I'm doing well. And how is Miss Karen?"

"You're too perceptive."

Raul responded nonchalantly.

Raul had been avoiding Karen for two weeks now. She was too much of a turmoil for him.

At times, Raul wanted to dismiss her, and at other times, he wanted to keep her in his arms forever. It was complicated.

Perhaps this was the curse-like thing Grace mentioned—the one his father had cast. It might be its effect.

His damned biological father might have been afraid that Raul would end up like him, driven mad by the loss of his wife and consumed by grief.

“Is there anything I can do for Miss Karen?”

“Take your husband and go to antique shops and jewelers, buy anything. And send it to my mistress. Make it ostentatious if possible.”

Scimitar’s husband ran an antique shop and repaired magical tools. He had a good eye for this work, so Raul occasionally sent him on errands.

It’s always better to buy rare accessories or jewels. The whole capital must know that Raul has sent her a gift.

“The entire capital talks about Karen. The world is very interested in the Grand Duke’s woman.”

“That’s why she must become a favored mistress.”

“That will be Karen’s way to survive.”

Scimitar was very understanding.

If she were a disposable mistress, the royal family would somehow meddle with Karen.

If she openly flaunts that she is favored, the royal family cannot touch her. They fear turning their backs on the Grand Duke entirely.

“What do you think of Karen?”

“Do you suspect her?”

“Sometimes.”

Scimitar fell silent for a moment.

“May I give my personal opinion in response to your question?”

“Just this once.”

Scimitar nodded and then spoke.

“Sometimes I pity Karen. There are times when you treat her too harshly.”

“Bastard often says something similar. I do not starve or beat my mistress.”

“But Karen is clumsy, isn’t she?”

“Clumsy at what?”

Raul recalled the many things Karen was clumsy at.

How to place her hands when moving her tongue. How to control her breath and hide her reddened eyes from him. How to endure pleasure in his arms...

His mouth watered, and he wanted to find her and bury himself in her bed right away. Lately, he couldn't control himself when he thought of her.

"She shows with her whole body that she loves the Grand Duke. I know she's quite good at her job, but it's sad to see how much she must like you to act that way."

Raul doubted his ears for a moment.

"Does Bastard think the same?"

"Everyone knows it. Even Estock is aware."

Raul rubbed near his throat, feeling anxious again. He recognized this sensation.

It was like a dark red snake coiled tightly. A myriad of violent desires, impulses, aversions, and loathings boiled up from within him, interspersed with faint tremors.

A mysterious feeling, like a beam of light, seeped into him.

That woman was his possession. He was angered by the mere fact that others knew of the emotions she clumsily spilled everywhere. All her feelings belonged to him. Karen had to be obedient and loyal to him.

She was both a displeasure and a delight to him, a sparkling light. That single strand of emotion gradually tightened like a rope. A familiar headache began to set in.

"Then I should fire that woman. What use is she if she harbors personal feelings towards her superior?"

"You've already fired her from the Sith. And rehired her as a mistress."

“She wasn’t great even when she doubled as my mistress and agent.”

“Not so,” Scimitar said softly.

“How would you know that?”

“She’s alive, isn’t she? That’s the proof that Miss Karen miraculously managed both roles. When Sienna died, you were not particularly disturbed. Now it’s different.”

This time, Raul fell silent. Part of him reveled in the fact that she loved him so clumsily. At the same time, he desperately wanted her.

“Scimitar, you are prudent. Why then do you offer such advice?”

“90% is loyalty offered as a subordinate. You will regret it if you lose Miss Karen like Sienna... or someone else. It’s better for you to know before you use her as a discardable card. The master’s risks become the subordinate’s fate.”

“And the remaining 10%?”

“The remaining 10%, for a reason similar to Bastard’s. I am Karen’s colleague, so I sympathize with her. It’s okay if the Grand Duke slaps me for giving frank advice. The Sith are close enough that losing one or two is alright.”

“I must be careful not to be stabbed in the back by that strong camaraderie.”

“The only thing we have in common is serving the same lord. I have enough patience to remain loyal even to a lord who makes such poor jokes.”

Raul sneered. Once or twice a year, Raul liked Scimitar. Just as a human being. And as a subordinate. And she was a decent advisor.

“Private time is over, go back. And I need to meet with Grace myself.”

\* \* \*

The outing the next day was not pleasant. Raul went to meet Grace. Reluctantly, Grace greeted Raul in the drawing room.

“What brings someone as noble as you? Have you come to mock me?”

“That’s a persecution complex,” Raul said softly.

Grace twisted her lips in response.

“You ordered Karen to stay away from me. Are you satisfied?”

“That woman’s obedience always satisfies me.”

“My disciple’s obedience is not part of your collection.”

“Unfortunately, she is already part of my collection. Moreover, the royal family is taking notice of you. What are you digging into?”

“The pseudo-religion that the prophets worship. The royal family’s taboo.”

Grace answered, glaring at Raul.

“The royal family used to be a group of shamans serving various gods, not the main god. Some were even classified

as demon gods. Digging into that part won't make an impact. And if the royal family has a separate weakness, that's for me to touch upon."

Raul said softly. Besides Marquis Saratheve, there were still demon and devil worshippers among the high nobility.

Those who belonged to the previously powerful families were especially obsessed with it. There are likely traces of it within the royal family as well.

"Are you telling me to back off because it's dangerous?"

"Since you understand, you're not completely senile yet."

Grace scoffed briefly.

"Raul, let's talk about your weaknesses instead. How long do you plan to torment Karen? She doesn't suit you, so let her go."

"Everyone says I'm tormenting that woman, as if the whole world is on her side."

Raul retorted sarcastically out of habit.

At the same time, he thought that sometimes he wanted to make everything in the world turn against her, as if he wanted to become her entire world.

Then that woman would have no choice but to depend on Raul, both body and mind. It was already the case, but he wanted to make it more desperate.

To feed her, confine her, bind her within that protection. Then perhaps she could feel a sense of fulfillment close to happiness.

That would be a fruition he had never felt before and a hope in a bland, gray world.

“She loves you.”

Grace said, sounding tired.

“To the extent that I can’t do anything about it. Do you realize how desperate that is?”

Raul looked at her for a long time.

“Don’t do anything reckless anymore. Next time, even I won’t be able to save you.”

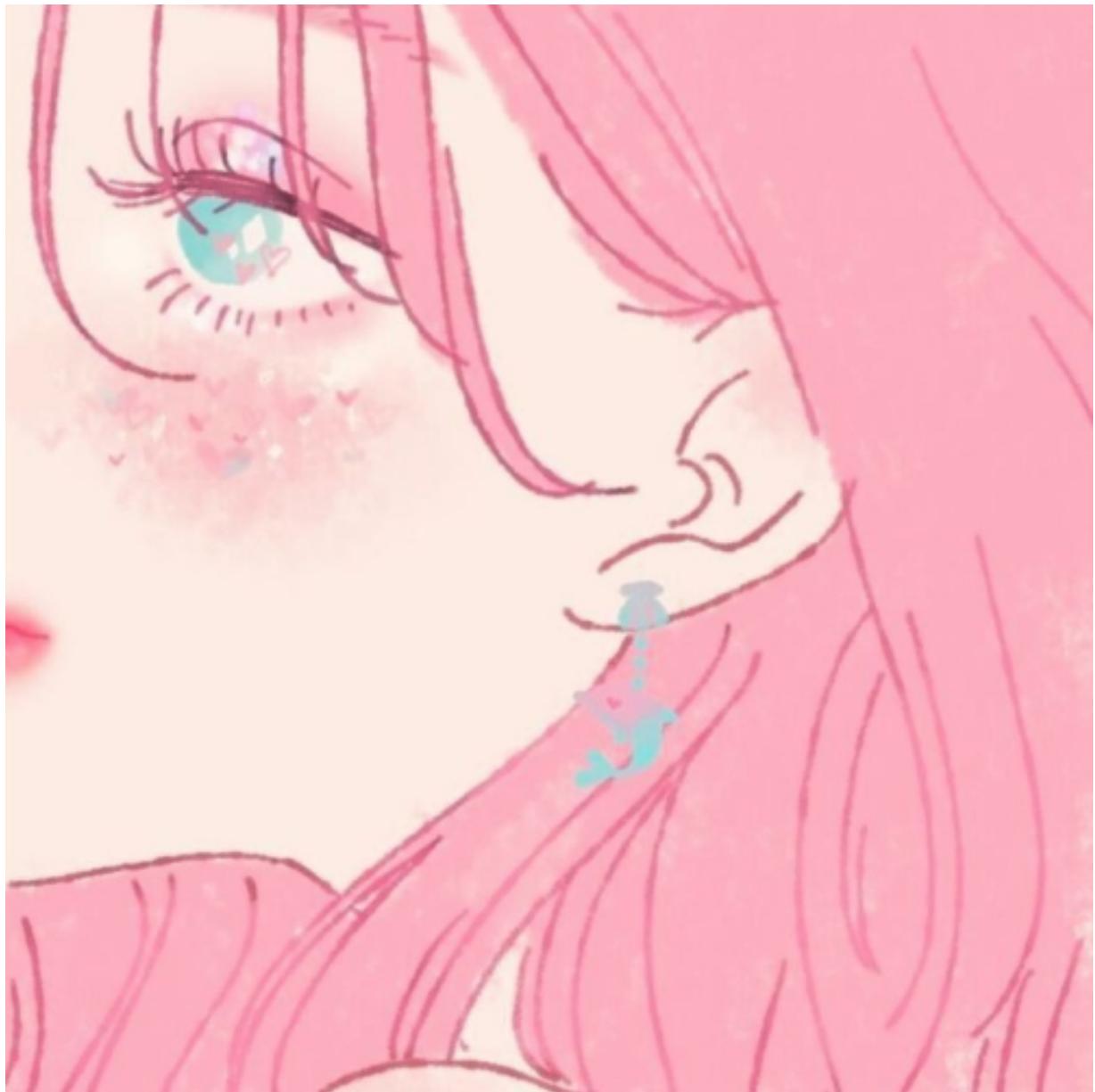
“If you spy on me one more time, I’ll stab myself in the neck in front of your parents’ altar. You’ll know I’m serious.”

Raul wondered whether all the women around him were crazy, or if he was the one driving them mad.

Those akin to corpses were completely at odds with him, just like Raul’s father had been.

Grace seemed like someone who had accepted her dying day.

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# Chapter 169

Raul decided to obey his mentor's teachings for the first time in a long while.

He was to distance himself from Karen and return to his mansion quietly, finding a way to calm Grace's frenzy.

He would also manage the internal affairs of Sith, coordinate relations with the royal family, and contemplate how to quietly eliminate the princess to break off the engagement.

His tasks were mountainous, and his world was calmly miserable today as well.

However, Grace's words kept coming back to him.

Karen loves him. That woman loves him.

And when he came to his senses, he had arrived at Karen's house and easily opened the back door.

After all, he had the keys to every mansion, which were his own - now only in name - Karen's house.

The walls surrounding the small mansion's garden were blooming with winter roses, white and red.

The gazebo where he once roughly embraced Karen was still decorated with twinkling lights.

He walked slowly through the dim mansion, knowing he should stop these steps.

But he went deeper and deeper into it.

Eventually, when he felt the light early winter rain on his shoulders, he discovered a woman standing near the entrance.

It was Karen, staring blankly at the garden. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Raul?”

He approached her without a word. Raul expected a familiar expression.

Karen would get noticeably nervous and show a scared face when he came near.

Then, as if putting on a face, she showed an expression mixed with joy and stiff beauty.

It was horribly clumsy, reminiscent of a drab country girl mimicking a courtesan.

He remembered every subtle change in her expression, every flicker of her eyelashes, in fine detail.

But there was something different about Karen today.

“I heard you wouldn’t be able to come for a while...”

She spaced out for a moment and then blushed, like someone unsure of how to handle her emotions.

Raul recalled the one or two times she had been like this. It was very rare. She looked shy and truly... happy.

Raul's heart began to beat slowly.

She loves him. He couldn't escape that thought.

"Were you waiting for me?"

Without realizing it, Raul took a step towards her. Karen's toes pointed straight at him as she took a step closer.

"Yes... a little."

Karen nodded obediently. Small sparks of joy kept shooting up in Raul's heart.

Even though it shouldn't be this way. Even though it was impossible.

She reached out and grabbed his sturdy upper arm.

The touch of her small, white hand was always a new sensation.

At the same time, unabashed emotions overflowed from her eyes.

"Seeing you come all of a sudden, I must have done something right or wrong, one of the two."

She smiled faintly, shy and lovely.

"The right thing."

"What did I do right?"

"You obeyed. You stayed away from Grace, just as I commanded."

Raul was satisfied that Karen had temporarily severed her relationship with Grace, following his order.

A fleeting sorrow crossed Karen's eyes, but she pressed her lips together and endured.

"Raul, I love Grace. But on the other hand... there's nothing more important to me in this world than you. I don't follow others' orders. I belong to you."

Raul had said it once.

They are more equal than she thinks.

A woman who has no choice but to approach a man who might be her downfall.

A man who knows he shouldn't keep her by his side, yet despite all acts of disobedience, he can't let her go.

They were the same. Raul tried to control this relationship completely, but he knew the truth.

The inseparable threads between them. The ends were held by each other.

Raul kept saying he owned Karen, but each time, she owned a part of him.

"I am yours."

"Even if I live twice, thrice, it would be the same. Even without reciprocation, my feelings will not change."

Raul shuddered at her words. His anxious feelings calmed down. An acknowledgment that she was his.

Desire, submission, and possession. Those were the emotions he had allowed himself to feel.

"That's right, what I give you is not comfort."

Raul's voice lowered an octave, his words sly and cruel.

Yet his eyes grew increasingly excited. He felt relieved and even in this moment, his desire for her grew.

"I need you to live, but that's not all there is to it. And don't try to control me by saying things like 'don't meet Grace'..."

She rested her forehead against Raul's chest.

"I've tried to do as you wished, but I can't follow everything."

"What couldn't you obey?"

Karen was silent for a moment, then slowly lifted her head.

"You told me not to love you. I'm sorry, but I can't follow that. Even if not in body, my heart is beyond my control. It seems I don't have the qualities of a good subordinate."

Raul's chest tightened. She looked at him with her hand on his chest, her blue eyes gradually deepening with moisture.

"I love you. Even if you hate me ninety-nine times, are annoyed by me, and despise me, just love me once. That's enough for me to sincerely love you."

It seemed as if the whole world had stopped. This woman had finally moved his world.

He was supposed to despise her, to be angry at her. But he couldn't.

Raul stood frozen, unable to move, just looking at her.

“I know. Everyone knows it except me.”

“Then everyone must know I’m a bad subordinate.”

She lifted the corners of her mouth in a faint smile.

Tears scattered from her eyes. She seemed unable to control the overflowing emotions, the love.

The thumping now spread to Raul’s head. Soon, a fullness of sensation he had never even imagined enveloped him.

Raul’s hand touched the corner of her eye. He looked down. In the next moment, their lips softly overlapped.

Silver rain poured faintly from the pitch-black night sky, and in the same rhythm, the small droplets at Karen’s eyes also scattered.

The kiss that started gently became intense in an instant. Karen gasped and clutched Raul’s arm as if the kiss would consume her.

“I don’t expect any answer. I just... wanted to confess.”

She opened her eyes and looked at Raul. But Raul couldn’t stop the cruel answer.

“All I want is your body.”

“I know.”

“I can’t marry you.”

“You’ve already said that.”

“What’s the point of unrequited feelings?”

“For now, giving is enough for me. I love you sincerely.”

“Alright, then,”

Raul said.

He needed to stop her, to calm her down.

But suddenly, the words burst from Raul’s throat.

“I love you.”

Raul was startled. It was as if something had leapt from his heart.

“I want you too much.”

Raul confessed, with a soft breath.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Her sobs grew stronger, and she threw her arms around his neck.

Her legs nearly lifted off the ground. The lights twinkled. He pulled her in with strength.

“I truly love you, in this life, like never before.”

She whispered breathlessly. And when her body fell away, Raul felt an intense guilt and revulsion.

And a feeling of violence arose. He didn’t know whether to strangle himself or push Karen against the wall and drop her.

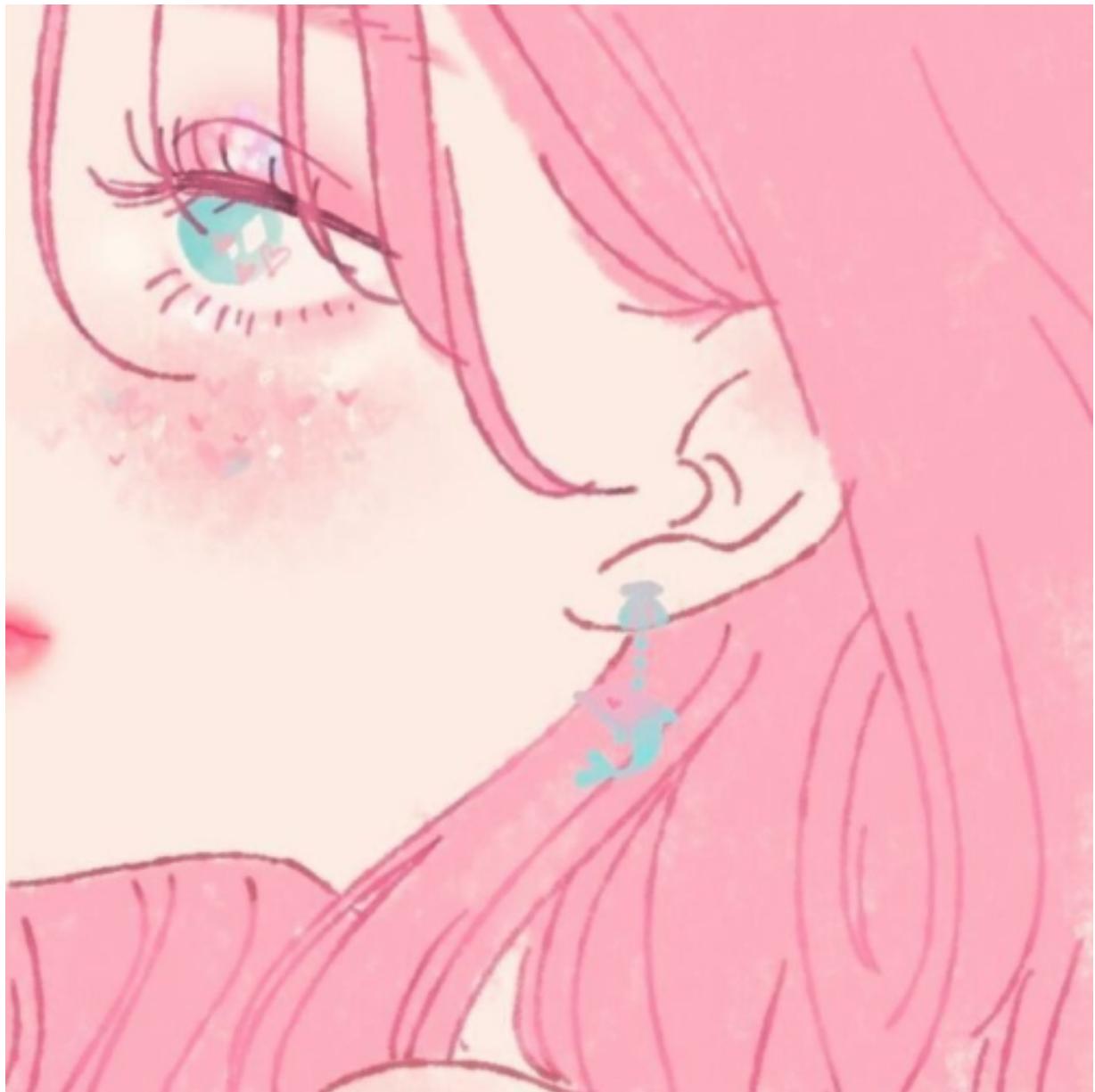
Karen caressed his upper body as if searching for something within him.

“Don’t worry. It’s okay. I will find a way. For today, this is enough.”

Karen smiled and kissed his cheek. Raul’s heart slowly calmed down.

He loved this woman, much more desperately than he had ever imagined.

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# **Chapter 170 - R19**

Raul led Nicole to the room.

As soon as they entered, he began to undress Nicole. Nicole tried to help but her hands were trembling and kept slipping.

Raul silently gazed down at Nicole, whose heart was racing so fast she felt like she might faint.

He laid Nicole on the bed. There was nothing but the lamp and moonlight illuminating the room.

However, Nicole's soft white skin and pointed nipples were enough to be revealed before Raul's eyes.

"You're beautiful,"

Raul whispered.

"You're perfect."

Nicole now understood the meaning of his words. It was not just a simple compliment about her body. It was about the breath between them, the heat when their skins touched, and his desire for her. All of that was entwined in his words.

Nicole wanted Raul so much she was on the verge of tears.

"Raul, I want it quickly,"

Nicole whispered into Raul's ear. Unable to hold back, Raul breathed hotly as he pressed his lower body against Nicole's.

His thick, hard rod was already swollen beneath his trousers like a solid baton. As soon as Nicole touched it, she involuntarily clenched tightly.

Nicole's shoulders, which had momentarily tensed up as if scared, slowly relaxed. She carefully began to undo Raul's clothes.

Raul quickly removed his shirt and his clothes scattered on the floor.

Raul finally removed Nicole's thin undergarment, leaving her bare. Raul pressed his lips to Nicole's lower body.

"Huh, uh, mm, ah..."

Even before Raul's tongue touched her, Nicole's lower body was already drenched. Nicole tightly closed her eyes, feeling embarrassed.

"I can do it right now."

Raul climbed on top of Nicole. As his messy tongue moved and fell away, Nicole's love juices flowed down thickly with a lewd sound.

Raul, with his muscular body, got on top of Nicole and played with her earlobe with his thick fingers.

"Please do it..."

Nicole said, turning her head.

"Look at me, Karen,"

Raul whispered.

Nicole looked at him.

“You’re mine. My own. Only mine...”

As Raul moved his hips as if to enter her, he rubbed against Nicole, and as his engorged tip pressed against her swollen lower lips, Nicole let out a pained sound.

“I am yours. We are unique to each other. I don’t want to give you to someone else either,”

Nicole also whispered as if enchanted to him.

“I hope I’m the only one for you...”

Nicole continued, her voice quivering as if she was about to cry.

“You will be the only one. I need no other woman but you,”

Raul replied.

Nicole felt a sense of satisfaction filling her chest.

Eventually, Raul surged up in one powerful motion.

“Huh!”

As his too-large member entered her, Nicole’s breath caught in her throat for a moment. Soon, her body softened, and she took him in completely.

Raul placed his arms beside Nicole’s face and began to move his body flexibly.

Thud, thud.

A soft splashing sound was heard. The bed began to sway.

"Uh, hnn, Raul... Raul..."

Nicole trembled with the lingering pleasure, panting. Her nipples hardened and her lower abdomen lifted upwards.

Her hips heaved, swallowing him deeper as he thrust forward.

"Ah...ugh..."

Raul leaned into Nicole, and reflexively, she wrapped her arms around his body.

His tightly wound muscular body pressed against Nicole's palms. As Raul moved more violently, Nicole's moans grew louder.

Squelch, squelch...

Raul pulled away Nicole's arms and kissed her.

Intertwined and slick with movement, Nicole breathed hotly, raising her pitch.

"Say it one more time, Raul."

As their lips parted, Nicole looked into his eyes and spoke. Her lips trembled and her body vibrated with intense pleasure.

"Tell me you love me."

Raul placed his hand above Nicole's head and whispered in her ear.

Words that would absolutely delight her. Nicole's toes curled. A sense of oneness, a sensation close to fullness pierced through her body. Nicole turned her head away.

They were one. And soon, an orgasm close to a blank slate arrived.

\* \* \*

It was dawn before Raul let Nicole go. He left early in the morning but whispered to Nicole that he would return soon.

⟨What about Grace? Is she... all right?⟩

⟨Not good. She wouldn't listen to dissuasion.⟩

Raul briefly explained the situation in response to Nicole's sleepy question. Grace had been showing a tendency to run wild lately, and Raul seemed worried.

Even while having a late lunch the next day, Nicole felt as if she was dreaming. Her body tingled and the places with kiss marks ached, but her heart was still fluttering.

'I can't believe you love me.'

Nicole's guess was correct. The Glassworm implanted inside him had taken itself as its master.

The strong implications would certainly trouble him.

However, he found a way. He acknowledged his love for her.

And it wouldn't stop at once. He would make himself say he loves her twice, thrice.

Nicole smiled broadly.

"Are you feeling alright? Please eat some more."

After Nicole had finished about half of her meal, Bluea came in with dessert and tea.

"I'm fine. My stomach is just a bit queasy."

It must have been quite an overexertion.

Bluea seemed to think so, making Nicole's face almost flush anew.

"Still, it's a relief. You wanted to see him, didn't you? You've... reconciled, right?"

Bluea spoke cautiously. Nicole shook her head.

"We did not fight. More importantly, have you seen Grace recently...?"

Nicole's two confidants, Redia and Bluea, were sent by Grace.

They were loyal to Nicole but also seemed to visit Grace occasionally to report various matters. Grace wouldn't do anything to harm Nicole; it was merely out of concern that she reported back the situation.

Bluea's face darkened, and she shook her head.

"Lady Grace... refused our visit. She said that now our mistress is you, we should devote ourselves only to you."

"She said that to you as well?"

Nicole's relaxed expression sharpened. She fiddled with her teacup.

"I should contact her after all. I'll send a letter. There are medicines made for her, right? Pack them well in a basket."

But Grace returned all the letters and gifts Nicole sent.

On the seventh day, Nicole personally took a letter and visited Grace. Grace rejected Nicole once again.

Since then, she visited Grace's house several more times, but she was consistently turned away at the door.

Raul had come to see Nicole a few days ago. After that, he said he would be too busy to see her for about a week.

On the day she first visited Grace's house in person, she immediately received a note from Raul.

(You were listening well, and now another twist? You mustn't do anything unnecessary.)

Nicole felt sorry, but this time she decided not to reply to the note.

She was worried about the prophecy, but if Grace was truly in danger, then the prophecy was a secondary concern. She didn't want to ignore her benefactor because of a vague prophecy.

Fortunately, this time Raul did not confine or force her.

On her fourth visit to Grace's house, Nicole quietly entered through the back door as always. She always used the back door when visiting Grace's house.

The butler of Grace's house, now familiar with her face, greeted Nicole who was wearing her hood low.

“I’m sorry, young lady. It would be best if you returned today.”

“Is she unwell by any chance?”

“She is out at the moment. The timing is not good.”

Nicole had heard the same response every time she visited: that Grace was out.

“I don’t plan to stay long. I just want to know if she is safe.”

Had anyone seen Grace recently? Nicole was truly worried about her.

“She is safe, so please do not worry. It would be best to take your belongings and go back.”

“I always prepared her headache medicine. She must have run out by now.”

The butler simply smiled an awkward smile without a word. Nicole had no choice but to turn back.

On the matter of Raul, Grace was inflexible. She pressured Nicole to choose just one of them. Nicole couldn’t choose either.

‘If it’s really just because of that, then perhaps it’s a relief...’

“I will take my leave now. Please convey that I came here in secret.”

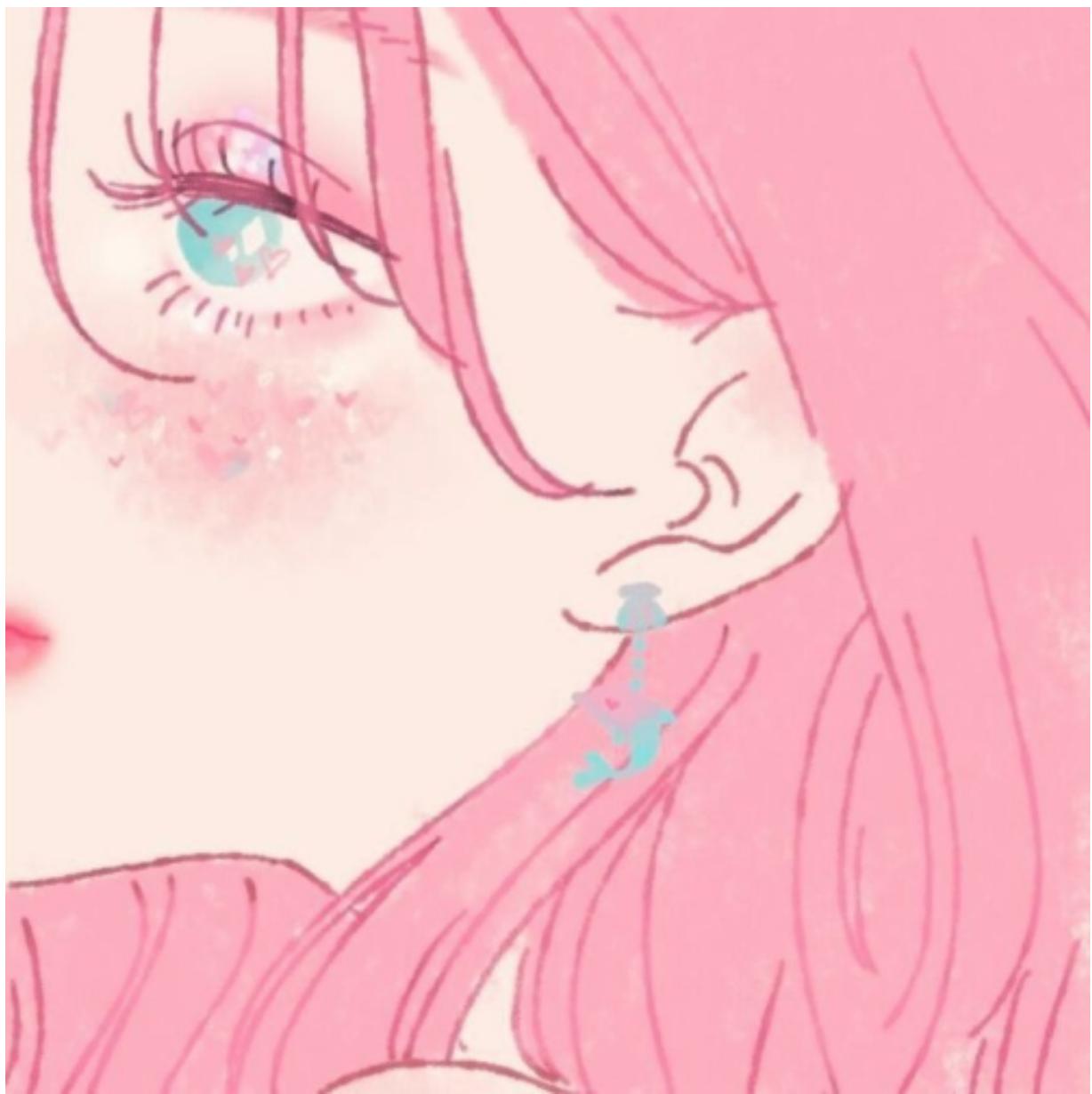
Nicole quietly slipped out the back door. She pulled her hood down low and walked to the carriage she had waiting a few blocks away on purpose.

“Hello.”

“You startled me. Estock? Why are you here?”

The person who appeared before Nicole was none other than Estock. Estok looked at Nicole with a chuckle.

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# Chapter 171

“You know, that person is watching you.”

“Raul calls it protection. Besides, Estock is a valuable Sith. Doesn’t he have better things to do than follow me around?”

“Ah, of course... It’s not an official escort duty! I volunteered because I really wanted to take on the important task of protecting the Grand Duke’s precious lover. I know my boss’s intentions very well.”

“That’s not volunteering, that’s desertion. So you’re just following me around for fun?”

Nicole chided Estock, knowing full well that Estock wouldn’t take offense to such treatment. Instead, Estock approached Nicole with a sly smile.

“Let’s not do this. It’s been a while since we’ve met, how about we go somewhere nice for a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

Of course, Estock didn’t listen at all and started rambling on about what he wanted to say.

“The capital is abuzz with talk about you. The Grand Duke is planning to buy the most expensive painting from the gallery for you, and it’s said he ordered the most expensive diamond necklace as well—a rumor has it that it’s even larger than the one given to the Empress twenty years ago.”

"I thought Estock wouldn't be interested in such matters."

"I am interested because I know what it means. Now, if you're not interested, shall I tell you a story about Lady Grace?"

Nicole's ears perked up. She turned towards Estock.

"Have you seen her recently?"

"No. But it seems she's been poking around everywhere. What Lady Grace is delving into is a secretive religion revered by the royal family. It's a derivative of the Southern Temple religion, a kind of cult. They claim that their ceremonies enhance the royal family's prophetic abilities. The revelation would cause quite an uproar, wouldn't it? The royal family has reigned with the symbolism of being chosen by the Southern Temple deity, right?"

"...It's absurd. That it's not just the commoners, but the royal family themselves who have fallen for a cult."

"The Marquis of Saratheve was involved in a cult, wasn't he? They say the water is only as clean as its source, so think about where he could have learned such things."

Estock chuckled before speaking.

"And here's a tip for you. Lean in closer."

Nicole leaned towards Estock, who whispered a few words into her ear.

After finishing his words, Estock disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

Nicole shook her head in disbelief.

‘He’s truly an enigma.’

Estock had spouted all sorts of cryptic remarks before rolling up his sleeve to show his wrist again.

⟨By the way, remember which number I am, won’t you?⟩

Nicole climbed into her carriage, which was disguised as an ordinary public carriage to conceal her identity.

Nicole’s maid, Redia, was also very skilled with horses. At times like these, Redia would cover her face and dress as a boy to drive the carriage.

Meanwhile, the carriage slowed down in front of the bridge. Redia was heard calming the horses.

“What’s the matter, Redia?”

Nicole opened the partition to the driver’s seat.

“Well, there’s Grace’s carriage on the other side. It’s coming from the opposite side of the bridge.”

Redia quickly turned her head and whispered,

“She really did go out.”

Nicole felt a surge of longing for Grace. She was already like family to her.

Grace’s carriage was gradually approaching on the narrow bridge. Nicole’s carriage stood at the entrance of the bridge on the opposite side. It was a situation where one could not avoid the other.

Nicole got out of the carriage. It was proper etiquette to disembark and greet her mentor upon meeting.

“Lady Grace.”

Nicole calmly walked to the middle of the bridge. Grace's carriage came to a halt.

For a while, the carriage simply stood still. Eventually, the door of Grace's carriage slowly opened. Grace was dressed like an ordinary noblewoman.

She approached Nicole.

“Karen.”

Grace spoke, and a faint smile formed on Nicole's lips.

Nicole had imagined how Grace would greet her upon their reunion, thinking she would be angry or scold her sternly. However, the expression on Grace's face upon actually meeting was more generous than she thought.

‘She must not be too disappointed in me.’

Such hope welled up within her.

“Grace- I have something to say-”

That was the moment. The bridge swayed and shook violently. The world in front of her seemed to warp like a mirage.

Nicole quickly looked around. The surroundings were eerie, and not a soul passed by.

Until just moments ago, the sky had been clear, a rare occurrence for flames, but now clouds covered the sun and the day had darkened. Flames drifted here and there around her.

‘Oh no.’

Nicole bit her lip. Her pupils dilated. Before she knew it, flames had surrounded them. The growing flames resembled a scene from a ghost story.

“No, Grace. Get in the carriage!”

Nicole shouted.

“Karen!”

Grace called out to her too. Then there was a flash of white followed by a bang, and Nicole collapsed to the ground.

It was a Flame explosion.

Nicole reached out her hand towards Grace.

But once again, a flash erupted, and Nicole lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

Knock, knock, knock.

The sound of knocking on a wooden board was heard. Nicole slowly opened her eyes.

‘Where is this...?’

Her whole body was sore and in pain, but it seemed there were no severe injuries.

‘My body... won’t move.’

She could open her eyes wide and lift her head ever so slightly. But she couldn’t muster any strength below her

neck.

The same went for her tongue. Nicole saw herself in front of her, reflected faintly by a large mirror on one wall of the room.

The mirror was so large it seemed it could reflect several people at once.

Through the mirror, Nicole could catch a glimpse of where she was.

The ceiling was quite high, and Nicole was on something like a low stage.

Specifically, she was sitting in a large chair placed on that stage, with her entire body fixed in place.

"You're under anesthesia, so it's natural. You can only move your head, so don't strain yourself. Your tongue must be paralyzed, so you can't respond, can you?"

Someone said.

The voice came from behind Nicole.

The person approached Nicole with the sound of clicking footsteps.

It was the Empress.

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Catrell."

Catrell gave a wry smile and stared at Nicole.

'Grace and I... have been kidnapped by the royal family.'

Nicole wanted to bite her lip, but she couldn't.

Her vision cleared completely and more things came into view.

Below the stage where Nicole was placed, there was a long table. In front of it, several people were standing or sitting. At the end of the table sat Grace, bound and gagged.

Grace was glaring at someone with wide eyes.

The person Grace was glaring at was none other than the Emperor, Nerus. He sat across the table with a pleased expression on his face.

On either side of Grace's chair stood two men.

'The Crown Prince, and... who is that man?'

Crown Prince Martes had a frightened look on his face. He rubbed his arm, muttering, 'My arm will be alright, won't it? It mustn't break. I am precious.'

"Martes, be quiet. Grace is our vassal; you must show dignity."

"Yes, Father."

Martes said, sweating. The man he saw for the first time had an elderly face with nothing particularly special about his appearance, except for a large scar on his face.

"Grace, this man must be new to you as well, so an introduction is needed, right?"

Catrell said with a benevolent expression that didn't suit the occasion.

"He is our loyal retainer."

Crown Prince Martes muttered. He looked like he wanted to rely on anyone, trembling as if anxiety had been creeping up on him for a while.

"We usually call him a priest. Our hands and feet, as well as our servant. And he is very close to Grace."

Catrell picked up the fan on the table and leisurely fanned her face, then gestured with her chin towards the man.

"He has graciously disposed of Sienna for our family's sake, that wretched bitch who coveted what belonged to the royal family. Grace, she was truly a significant person to you, so I wanted to grant you at least one meeting."

Devils.

Sparks flew from Nicole's eyes. But she was powerless to do anything. They were thrusting in front of Grace the very person who had killed Sienna.

"Did Sienna find her mother before she died, Fron?"

The man known as the high priest was named Fron. Fron stroked his chin and spoke.

"Hmm, your daughter begged me to leave a will to you before she died. But that was impossible. Where in the world is there an assassin who delivers wills to the bereaved? It was pitiful indeed. She said, 'Please tell my mother to forget me.' Your daughter is known to have accidentally fallen from the rooftop of a local office while conducting an illegal investigation. In truth, I dragged her up to the rooftop myself. It was both ridiculous and pitiful how she worried only about her mother until the end."

Grace, gagged, could not respond at all. She just looked at her opponent calmly.

But Nicole could see the veins in Grace's eyes and her hands twitching. Nicole wished she could close Grace's eyes and make her unable to hear instead.

"It's such a shame. If only she had met her mother properly, she wouldn't have ended up like this. I will not become a mother like you, Grace."

Catrell approached Grace as he spoke.

"Why do you think Raul vehemently denied that Sienna's death was an assassination? Sienna didn't truly love Raul. She was one of our own kind. She thought that by bearing the child of a man with superior abilities like Raul, she could satisfy her mother. Sienna had one or two trustworthy friends, and those friends... you know? Many people are agents of our royal family. We specialize in this kind of thing, digging into the heart. Those friends reported to us all of Sienna's innermost thoughts."

Catrell gently stroked Grace's shoulder.

"Sienna was fanatical. She thought she was a disappointment to her mother for being born almost powerless and as a daughter. Grace, you spurred your daughter on, didn't you? Didn't you educate her to restrain her emotions? Didn't you force her to be overly good? You controlled every single move she made, didn't you?"

Nicole's body stiffened.

'No, Siena loved her mother. Even if Grace had excessive expectations for Sienna, they have no right to give such a punishment.'

On the other hand, Nicole could finally understand Grace.

Grace was generous to women of Sienna's age. But she loved none of them as much as a daughter as she loved Nicole.

Nicole resembled Sienna. Not just in appearance but more so in personality.

She too had been educated from a young age to restrain her emotions and had lived under her mother's excessive attention.

Nicole projected the affection she couldn't express to Freya, while Grace projected the guilt she felt for not properly confessing to her daughter.

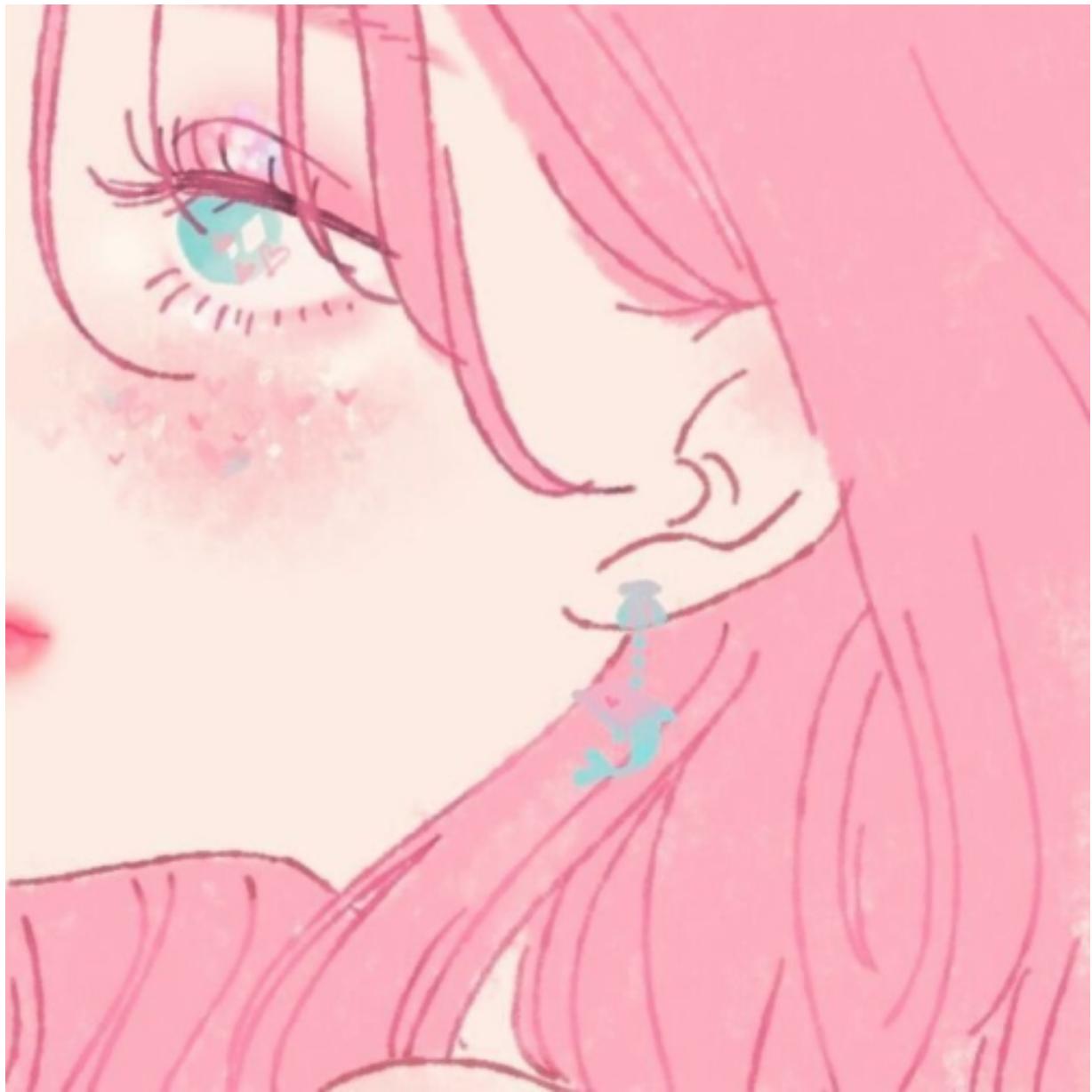
"Your daughter died because you were a bad mother. Raul must have been desperate to hide that fact, fearing that you would commit such madness and cross us. He must have only thought about protecting his mentor. But now it seems even Raul's goodwill has reached its limit. You are the one who has crossed the line."

Catrell laughed out loud. Nicole came to truly despise the royal family.

"That will be enough for the story, Your Majesty the Empress."

High Priest Fron opened his mouth to speak.

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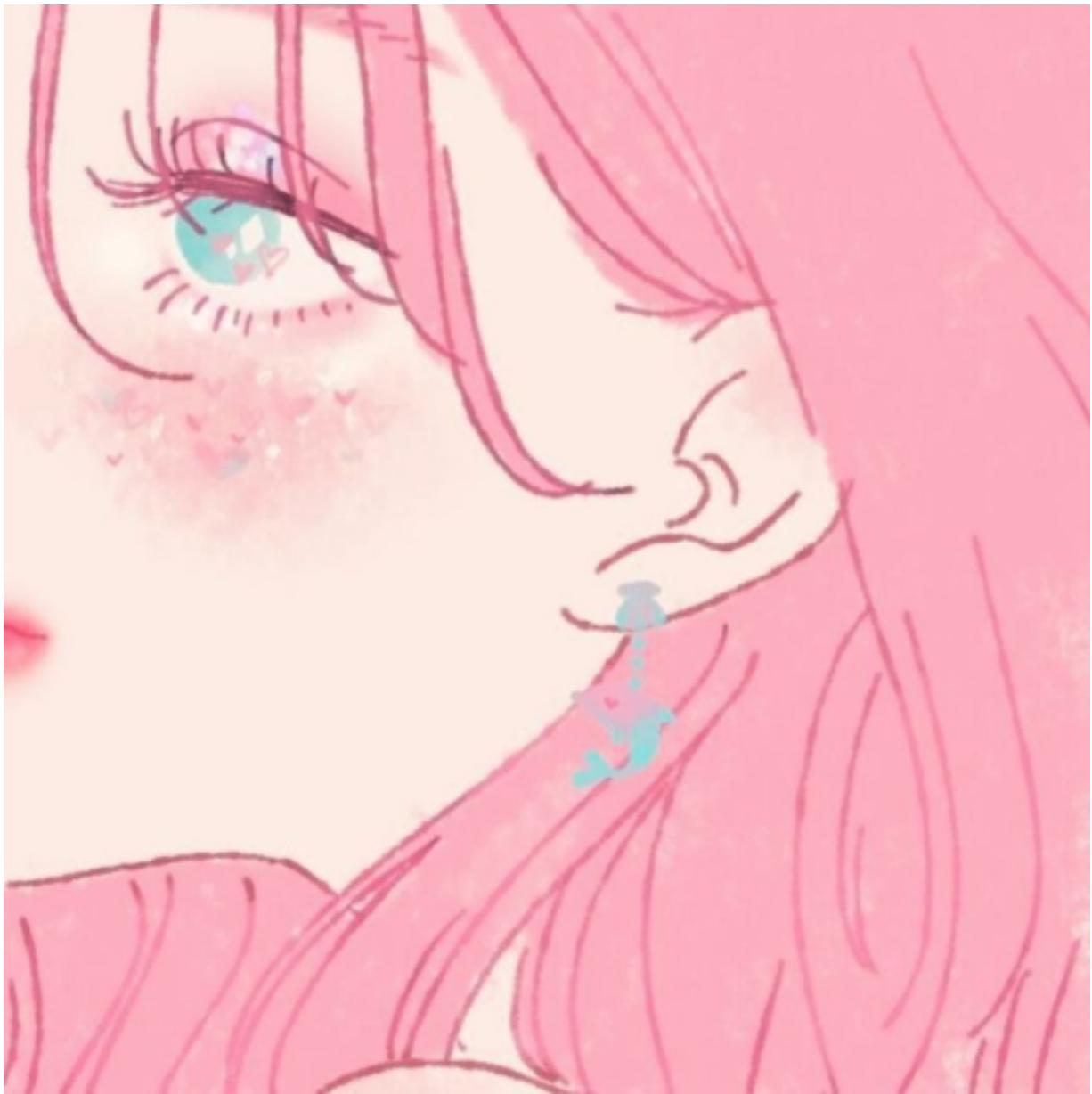


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# Chapter 172

“Ah, right. Let’s get to the point.”

Catrell nodded.

“Your Highness, the Crown Prince, are you prepared?”

The warmth vanished from Catrell’s face as she looked at the Crown Prince impassively and asked politely.

“My son will do well.”

Nerus nodded with satisfaction.

“For this task, we had to sacrifice as many as ten numbers, even the green sacrifices. It’s difficult to find talents who emit a green light in the magic circle.”

Catrell trailed off.

“Catrell, shut your mouth.”

Nerus said in a warning tone, but Catrell did not stop talking.

“My daughter could handle the Flame better. Sylvia is strong and resilient. If it were Sylvia...”

“Sylvia is merely a spare at best. This country can only be inherited by men. Families like YvesChapel are the only ones

where the female head system is revered. As long as I live, Sylvia can never touch the authority of the royal family."

Nerus scolded.

"Of course, Your Majesty, you are absolutely right."

Catrell forced a smile and flattered him.

The Emperor's family gathered like this, looking like country folks in their garishly fine clothes. Nicole thought beyond her hatred for them for a moment.

She had to protect Grace. But now, there was truly nothing she could do.

"Before we proceed, let it be known that Grace dared to provoke our royal family's taboo and must be punished."

Catrell said.

"The royal family weeds out like this every few years, dealing with the disloyal. I would like to kill both thorns in our side, but I cannot kill either of you. You two are the only ones who mean anything to Raul."

"....."

"Why should we care about that? Because Raul holds military power. We can kill many with flame, but we can't annihilate them. If Raul gets angry and raises an army, we'll take a big hit, and the royal family's dignity will shake."

The Empress muttered. Soon after, a fierce look crossed her face.

"So, I'll let Grace choose which one of them will die."

Martes stepped forward.

"Can't I just take that woman, Raul's concubine?"

"No, not her, Martes. She belongs to the Grand Duke. Why her among so many women in the world?"

Nerus said with discomfort. Martes looked angry, but he nodded obediently as if he had no choice.

Now Nicole had recovered from the anesthesia enough to turn her head completely. She looked down at the floor.

On the stage where Nicole was, there lay a red carpet. It was like a narrow path in a straight line.

Nicole was sitting at the right end of the carpet, and below on the left side of the table, Grace was tied up.

"Release Grace."

Nerus commanded. Catrell willingly untied Grace's gag and then freed her legs as well.

Grace stood up from her place.

Smack!

She swung her hand fiercely and slapped Catrell's face. Catrell crumpled to the floor from the force of the blow.

"Know shame, you lowly and corrupt worms of the royal family."

"Y-you!"

The Empress rose from her seat.

“Let her be. Just let her be.”

Nerus restrained the Empress, who had her claws out, and then called for the Crown Prince.

“Martes.”

Martes gestured. He was frowning, sweating profusely.

The next moment, on the opposite side of Nicole, a small circle appeared at the end of the left side of the red carpet.

It was a flame exactly the size of Nicole’s body. Nicole could feel the power of the royal family. Martes had truly summoned the flame.

“This flame must consume one person to disappear. It will slowly approach that woman, Raul’s concubine. If you want to stop it, you have to jump into the flame yourself. A very long time ago, the previous Grand Duchess also faced this trial with Raul when they were young.”

No. Nicole wanted to scream, but she couldn’t speak.

“I understand that Raul’s mother was found dead?”

Grace smiled faintly as if she had expected this, then she became serious and asked,

“Ah, you had a deceased younger sister. Do you remember Philomena?”

Nerus let out a snicker and began to speak.

“The princess who died from poison?”

“Philomena was in love with Raul’s father, Curtis. It seems like a destiny of the royal family to be drawn to the Grand

Duke. Curtis was gentle and thought to marry Philomena, but then he suddenly married a low-born woman he brought from somewhere, a tutor's daughter or something. So Philomena nearly went mad and pulled that woman out just as she was about to willingly walk into the flame and stabbed her to death. For that and other acts of disobedience, Philomena was poisoned."

"Lies. Philomena was killed for prophesying that the next emperor's marriage partner would come from YvesChapel, wasn't she?"

"Impure prophecies are also a crime, aren't they?"

The Emperor said.

"Instead of solving the root of the problem, you kill those who speak of it. It's a bad chronic illness. Even if one points to the sky with a finger, you attack the finger, not the sky."

Grace continued coldly.

"You concocted a mad plan to capture Freya, have her bear the Grand Duke's daughter, and then unite the child with the royal family, all because they feared the prophecy might come true. It was disgusting to even hear. You also planned to mix the Grand Duke's lineage with the next Emperor's, since YvesChapel and Valentine were the strongest existing bloodlines. That's why Raul despises you. It's a good thing the plan was discarded."

Then, with a whoosh, the flame began to move, drawing closer to Nicole.

Grace. Run away. No.

Nicole desperately sent such glances to Grace, who looked back at Nicole and smiled.

She slowly approached and gently caressed Nicole's cheek.

"Karen, look into my eyes."

Grace gazed at Nicole. The flame was moving very slowly.

"Do not be deceived. The royal family intended to kill me one way or another today. They are playing word games. And you will probably be released. As per the royal family's methods, some of your memories will be erased. If you're lucky, you'll forget about my death as well."

"The Grand Duke's house has a drug that erases people's memories. I heard about it when I took the Sith's Shadow initiation test. So, it wouldn't be strange if the royal family had one too."

"Karen, I have no regrets at all. Remember who you are. You are the best student I've ever taught."

Grace whispered softly into Nicole's ear.

"Now, at last, I am becoming a good mother because I can save you. Remember how much I love you."

Grace smiled and slowly walked into the flame, her steps soft and elegant as if she were taking a stroll.

And so, Grace disappeared before Nicole's eyes.

Nicole could neither speak nor move her body until the moment she was transferred.

Nicole was trapped in a dark room. It was a shabby place with old furniture, but it was at least suitable for imprisoning

a noble prisoner.

⟨Ah, that woman is so beautiful. She lacks nothing to become my spouse.⟩

Crown Prince Martes incessantly muttered to himself as he looked at the fallen Nicole.

Fron, the assassin from Sienna, soothed and dissuaded him like calming a child.

⟨That woman is too young for Your Highness. Please calm down. There are plenty of women in the world; there's no need to meddle with the Grand Duke's possessions.⟩

⟨Can't we undress that woman to check if she's made of glass?⟩

⟨Even if memories are erased, traces remain on the body. There will be much pain in the process of verifying if that woman is made of glass....⟩

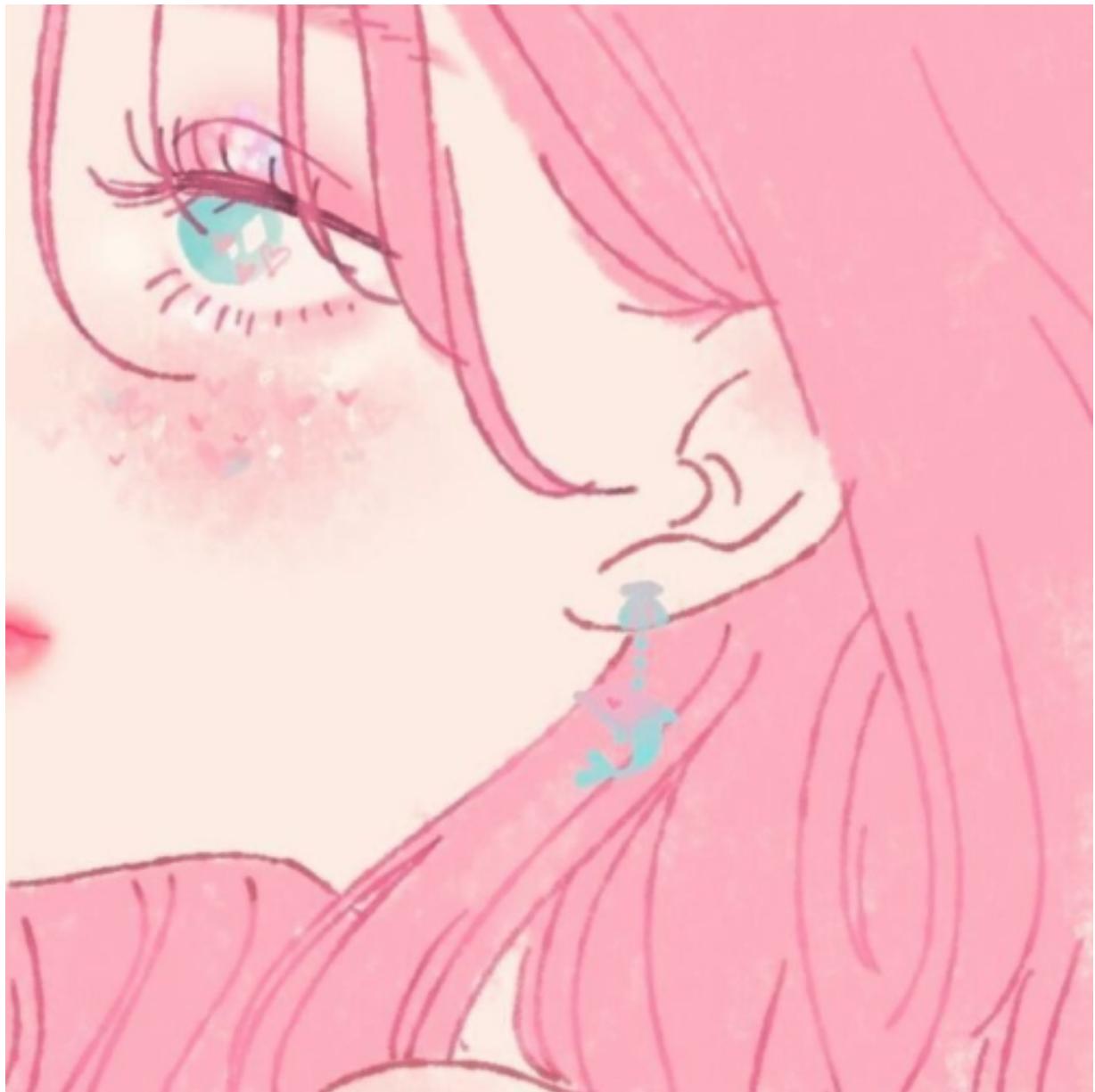
“Grace!”

Nicole opened her eyes. She looked around the space she was confined in.

A space that was half dark.

The entrance was a huge iron door, and there were iron bars separating it from the detention space—a typical detention room with several lamps lit near the door only.

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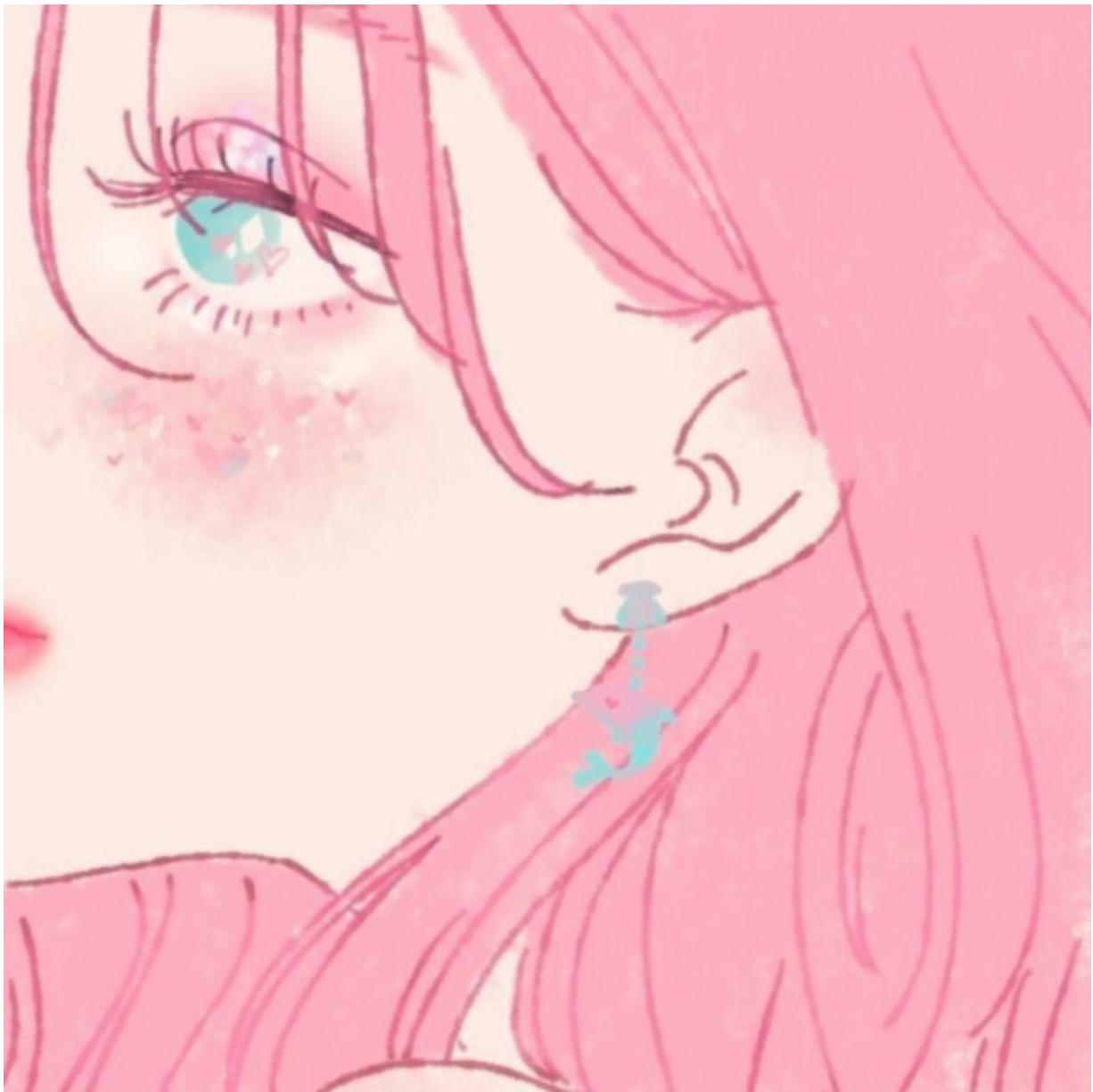


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# **Chapter 173**

‘How many days have passed?’

Her throat was terribly dry. Nicole couldn’t grasp the passage of time. They kept administering large doses of sedatives to her.

When she barely regained consciousness, Nicole would sob, recalling Grace.

During that time, Nicole dreamt. It was a memory left inside her by the Glassworm.

‘Memories of my past life keep surfacing, in no particular order.....’

Nicole was happy during her first year of marriage. At last, an emotional exchange had begun between the two.

But Raul found it painful. He couldn’t figure out what to do. His implication to his own mind was too strong.

At that moment, Isabel saw her opportunity and took it. Isabel first commanded Nicole to hate and despise Raul.

Initially, Nicole acted normally. Raul didn’t notice because he was managing his own emotions.

Gradually, Nicole began to hate and despise Raul, and started to manipulate her own memories. As her attitude slowly changed, Raul finally noticed her problems.

However, he only knew that Nicole had changed her heart, not the exact reason why. Isabel had hidden the existence of the Glassworm and the fact that Nicole had changed for a very long time.

Time was needed to strengthen Isabel's manipulation. But it was also because Isabel had truly fallen for Raul and believed she could seduce him.

Therefore, for two years, Isabel restrained herself and refrained from evil deeds. She was deluded into thinking she would become the Grand Duchess. Isabel was truly enchanted by Raul.

However, when Raul never succumbed, Isabel began to reveal her true nature.

One day, in their fourth year of marriage, Nicole's madness reached its peak. Raul finally realized that Isabel had done something to Nicole.

He made plans to send Isabel to a convent and completely separated her from Nicole.

It was a very bright and beautiful day. Guests gathered at the mansion. It was a service event like any other day.

That day, Nicole, who had been hating and despising Raul for some time, returned with a bright and lovely demeanor.

⟨I have been quite neglectful for some time. I'm sorry. I've come to say good morning after a long while.⟩

Raul looked at her expressionlessly.

⟨You are a madwoman.⟩

Raul whispered in her ear.

⟨But you still like me, don't you?⟩

Nicole said softly, from her lines to her actions, all had been instructed by Isabel.

The service event took place in the garden. The trees cast their leaves over the garden, and the flower beds were more beautiful than ever.

And Nicole wore the thinnest summer dress she had. It was a white dress with puffed sleeves and a low-cut neckline. Her hair was braided back, adorned with a silver pin in the shape of a leaf.

During the height of the event, she climbed up to the third-floor balcony. The wind blew, making Nicole's thin dress flutter like a ghost. Her pale knees were exposed, and Nicole looked down at Raul with a wide smile.

Raul slowly lowered his glass as if he had seen a ghost. Nicole stood upright as if she were an actress on stage.

And then, Nicole threw herself off the balcony.

People screamed. That day, Raul's ability was telekinesis.

Fortunately, before Nicole hit the ground, Raul altered her trajectory. Nicole crashed between the trees, but one arm was broken.

Isabel clicked her tongue as she watched. In a gesture of approval, Isabel smiled with her eyes and raised her glass to Nicole.

At that time, Nicole was blindly obedient to Isabel's commands to that extent. It was the effect of the Glassworm.

That night, Nicole looked into Raul's eyes and said,

⟨If you separate me from Isabel, I will die. I can't live without Isabel. She is my only hope. I adore Isabel.⟩

Isabel's departure to the convent was canceled.

The moment Nicole recalled that memory, she wept.

The sorrow of losing Grace and the muddled past weighed heavily on Nicole.

\* \* \*

‘Ah, Isabel. I don’t want to know. I’m so tired of your past misdeeds.’

When she was half-conscious, someone spoon-fed soup to Nicole, although Nicole mostly refused it.

“You should eat, you know. You’re going to be here for quite a while.”

One day, her body felt completely fine. How much time had passed? Nicole looked beyond the bars of her window.

Sylvia stood there with a tray of food. As usual, she wore a dress that covered almost her entire body and looked pale.

She placed the food through the gap in the window.

“Don’t worry. Your body is fine. And even if my brother does something crazy, that bastard is impotent; he can’t lay a hand on you.”

Sylvia crossed her arms.

“Shut up.”

Nicole said quietly. She was not in the mood to deal with Sylvia.

Sylvia grabbed the bars. She looked at Nicole with a strange expression, furrowing her brows.

“Why didn’t you speak honestly about the Grand Duke?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You two were in love, weren’t you!”

Sylvia burst out angrily.

“You should have been honest from the start. Do you know how surprised I was by the way that man looked at you? He was crazy about you!”

Nicole couldn’t understand. What did that have to do with anything now?

“I don’t want to marry a man who loves another woman. Besides, if my family kills you, he will hate me for the rest of his life. I don’t want to live being abused by a man who hates me. I hate being hit.”

Sylvia muttered.

“Do you know that the Grand Duke is going crazy looking for you? He seems ready to do anything. I’m afraid of him. My family doesn’t understand. They think you’re just the Grand Duke’s pet.”

Sylvia now began to bite her nails.

“That’s right. I’m nothing but his pet.”

Nicole said calmly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m different from my family. The Grand Duke is not someone who forgets grudges. I know what you mean to him.”

Sylvia immediately retorted. Nicole was inwardly surprised that Sylvia would say such things, and at the same time, she laughed.

Everyone in the world knows that she loves Raul. But why didn’t Raul know for so long?

Sylvia provoked her at the wrong time. If a royal was in front of Nicole now, she would risk her life to slap them, no matter who it was.

“If he loves me, what will you do? Even if you alone know the hell that’s coming, your family doesn’t. What can you do?”

Nicole said expressionlessly.

Sylvia’s whole body began to tremble.

She swallowed dryly.

“Why, why do you look at me with that same expression as... him?”

“What?”

“Why does it have to be you?”

Sylvia seemed to panic and was no longer listening to Nicole’s words.

"Are you crazy? Well, I hear all the royal family members are mad."

"That's not the problem! You... You... If something happens to you... It's not just Raul that's the problem. He will... he will really hate me. Why does it have to be you who is his... Did you come to take everything away from me?"

Sylvia took a step back.

'Him?'

Nicole furrowed her brow.

'Could it be...?'

But the tone referring to 'him' was somehow familiar.

Jay's tone was gentle, but he had a habit of using certain consonants and vowels in a unique way.

Aaron, that guy-

Jay had definitely said it like that. Sylvia's tone was exactly like Jay's.

And another thing.

'Why do Sylvia and Aaron look so alike?'

It was the first time the thought occurred to her. Is she going mad too? But the two were different in gender, build, and even their features were subtly different. They only resembled each other.

"Who are you thinking about right now?"

Nicole asked. Nicole approached the bars closely.

And she grabbed Sylvia's wrist.

Sylvia twisted her hand away. She was wearing a deep purple shirt that perfectly covered her wrists.

Then a button came undone, revealing part of Sylvia's wrist.

Nicole saw the end of a black tattoo and the number 0.

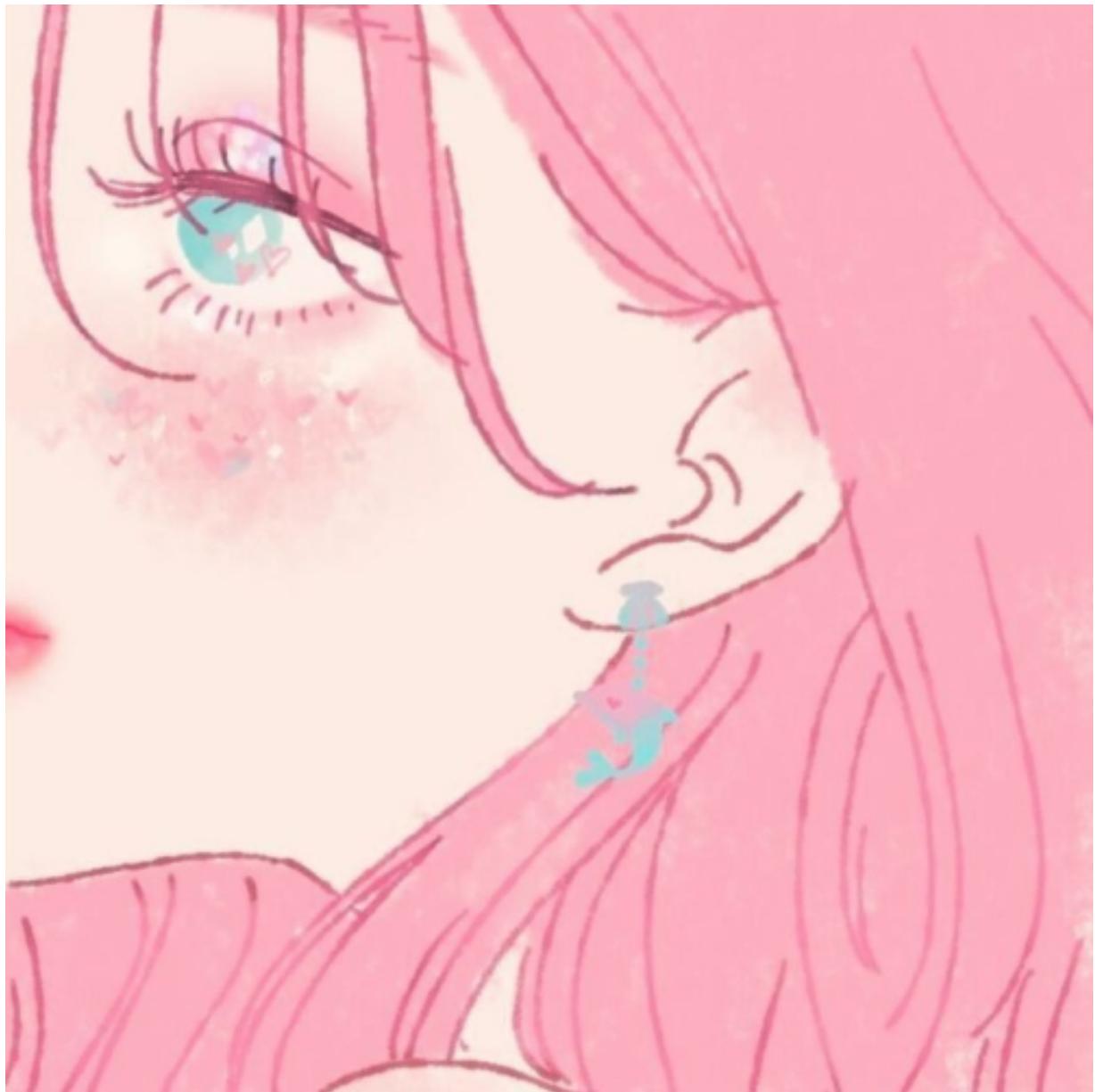
'What is this...?'

Nicole couldn't take her eyes off it for a moment.

"What are you doing! Don't touch my body!"

Sylvia's face turned pale, and then she disappeared as if fleeing.

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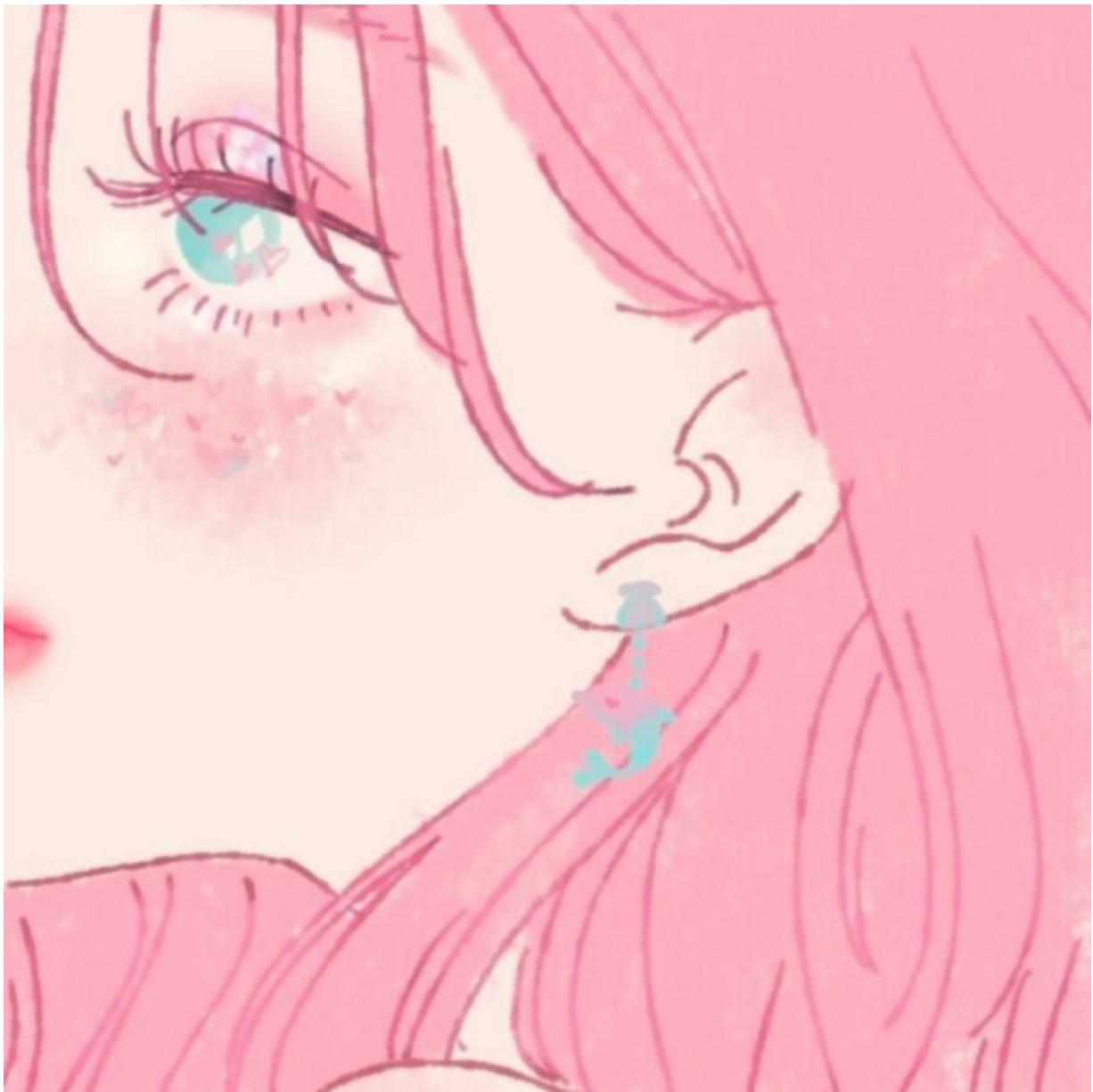


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# Chapter 174

From the next day on, Nicole realized that Sylvia had been coming in every day to take care of her.

This place was madness. A princess attending to the mistress of a Grand Duke.

Nicole realized that day that this was an underground space. No windows, not a single ray of light, a place without distinction between night and day. It was the perfect condition for someone to go mad.

'Indeed, it's not strange that the royal family has such hidden spaces.'

The Grand Duke's family also has the secret headquarters of the Sith underground.

The problem was that even maids were extremely rare in this place.

A space only accessible by the royal family and priests.

'This place must be related to secrets that the royal family wants to hide, like an illegal religious group, for example.'

Nicole closed her eyes. Raul had expelled her from the Sith, but her work was not yet finished.

Even Grace had died at the hands of the royal family.

To avenge them, she must uncover as many secrets as possible.

About ten days later, they stopped administering the medicine on the day she felt most normal. Nicole got up from her place.

Nicole remembered the last words Estock had said.

⟨Remember. Which number I am.⟩

⟨Have you come to say that again?⟩

Just before being kidnapped with Grace, Estock came to Nicole and spouted nonsense.

Estock, who had been giving her various pieces of information, whispered in Nicole's ear.

⟨I remember, you are number 239. But what does that mean? And what about the tattoo on your wrist?⟩

⟨A spell of magic. When captured by evil and wicked people, saying this might just save your life at least once. Who knows? 'I am number 239.' If you say it like that, it might just work unconditionally, like a waiting number at a popular restaurant.⟩

Nicole recalled that memory.

Estock knew Nicole would be captured and brought here. That's why he kept stalking her strangely, emphasizing that number.

Nicole decided to trust his words.

And she began to throw all the furnishings in the room.

The clanging noise was loud. Grace's assassin, Priest Fron, and Sylvia rushed in with astonished faces.

"What's going on?"

Sylvia exclaimed.

"I am number 239."

Nicole said.

"I said I am number 239!"

Fron's face went pale, and Sylvia froze.

"Are you talking about number 239 who escaped from here?"

Sylvia muttered.

"She does seem to be of similar age. The color of that girl's\* eyes... What was it? I only remember her hair was dark. But this woman's hair is golden brown, isn't it? Damn it, who remembers the face of a sacrifice anyway?"

Nicole instinctively clenched her wrist.

Clang, the bars opened.

\* \* \*

"Follow me."

The priest tied Nicole's wrists and dragged her out.

The royal family was gathered together. Unlike the room where Nicole had been imprisoned, that place was very luxurious.

The Emperor sat in the seat of honor, with Crown Prince Martes and Empress Catrell standing beside him.

Fron threw Nicole in front of the royal family.

“Handle her more carefully, Priest.”

For some reason, Nerus said.

Nicole glared at them, lifting her head while on her knees.

“Fron, I had something to say anyway.”

Martes said hastily.

“It seems the Grand Duke has lost his mind. He sent someone first, saying he would pay a hefty price if this woman was returned. He’s willing to do anything.”

“He seems ready to even return military power. But tell me, why did you bring this woman here?”

Empress Catrell said, looking down at Nicole as if she were an insect. Nicole wanted to grind her teeth but suppressed the urge tightly.

“There’s been a problem. This woman claims she is number 239, the one who escaped long ago.”

Emperor Nerus’ pupils shook.

“The tattoo on her arm?”

“I will check now.”

Fron lifted Nicole’s wrist, but of course, it was empty.

“There’s no tattoo.”

"There are many ways to remove a tattoo in the world. Perhaps Grace removed that insignificant one,"

Nicole said nonchalantly.

"Did you really think I wouldn't know the secrets of this place?"

She added with a lift at the corner of her mouth, which turned the onlookers even paler.

"Number 239 is the only escapee. We must examine this closely."

"You're taking this woman to our temple? That's absurd. Sybil is a sacred place,"

Nerus said, frowning.

"We must check. If this woman really is number 239, then the Grand Duke will learn our secret,"

Sylvia said in response.

"Go and verify if this woman truly descends from those with abilities, and if so, erase her memory. We can't send her back to the Grand Duke in her right mind."

The people exchanged glances. Nicole couldn't understand what was happening.

However, she clenched her fists tightly, making sure not to miss a single thing as she watched them.

\* \* \*

Nicole was dragged back to the place where Grace had died. One wall was still a huge mirror. The mirror was not clear,

and it distorted everything reflected in it.

“Enter,”

They commanded.

‘Through this mirror?’

Nicole was momentarily confused by their words, then she immediately realized.

‘This mirror is the gate itself.’

Nicole had used a gate to the holy land before; it was literally a portal situated in the middle of the road.

It was her first time knowing that a gate of such scale could exist inside a building.

Fron pushed Nicole’s back. When Nicole opened her eyes, she was met with an unfamiliar corridor.

It was a corridor made of marble, brightly lit throughout. She could intuitively tell that this place was also underground.

“Walk,”

Fron commanded. Everyone began walking with Nicole in the lead.

Along the corridor, bizarre demon statues were placed intermittently.

‘The stories about the imperial family worshiping a demon god were true.’

Nicole shivered as she looked at them. Inside, the structure was like an anthill with winding corridors following one after another.

Eventually, they arrived at a massive hall with a ceiling so high it was hard to believe it was underground.

‘People...’

Those in the same white clothes, both men and women, wore long tops covering their thighs and trousers. At a glance, there appeared to be more than thirty individuals, all with short hair and similar expressions.

It was the most bizarre spectacle she had ever witnessed in her life.

They looked at the imperial family and quietly bowed their heads.

“We greet the family of the prophet.”

“For our god.”

“We pledge allegiance to the priests.”

They kneeled in unison. Among them were adults, the elderly, and even children.

All of them had vacant eyes, looking at the imperial family with adoration as if they were seeing a deity.

Nerus spoke with a voice feigning dignity.

“A new offering has come to the gateway to heaven.”

They extended their hands, overlapped in a gesture of reverence. Nicole was disgusted by their synchronized

movements, as if they were one entity.

"Take her to the altar to verify the sacrifice. If the chosen sacrifice is worthy of heaven, the altar will shine gold. If there is a talent greater than that, it will shine crimson, and then green."

"I hope your journey to heaven is short, sister."

The girl in front of Nicole said with a bright smile. She appeared to be about thirteen years old. Nicole, at a loss for words, could only stare at the girl with wide eyes.

'Why is such a young child here? What exactly is this place?'

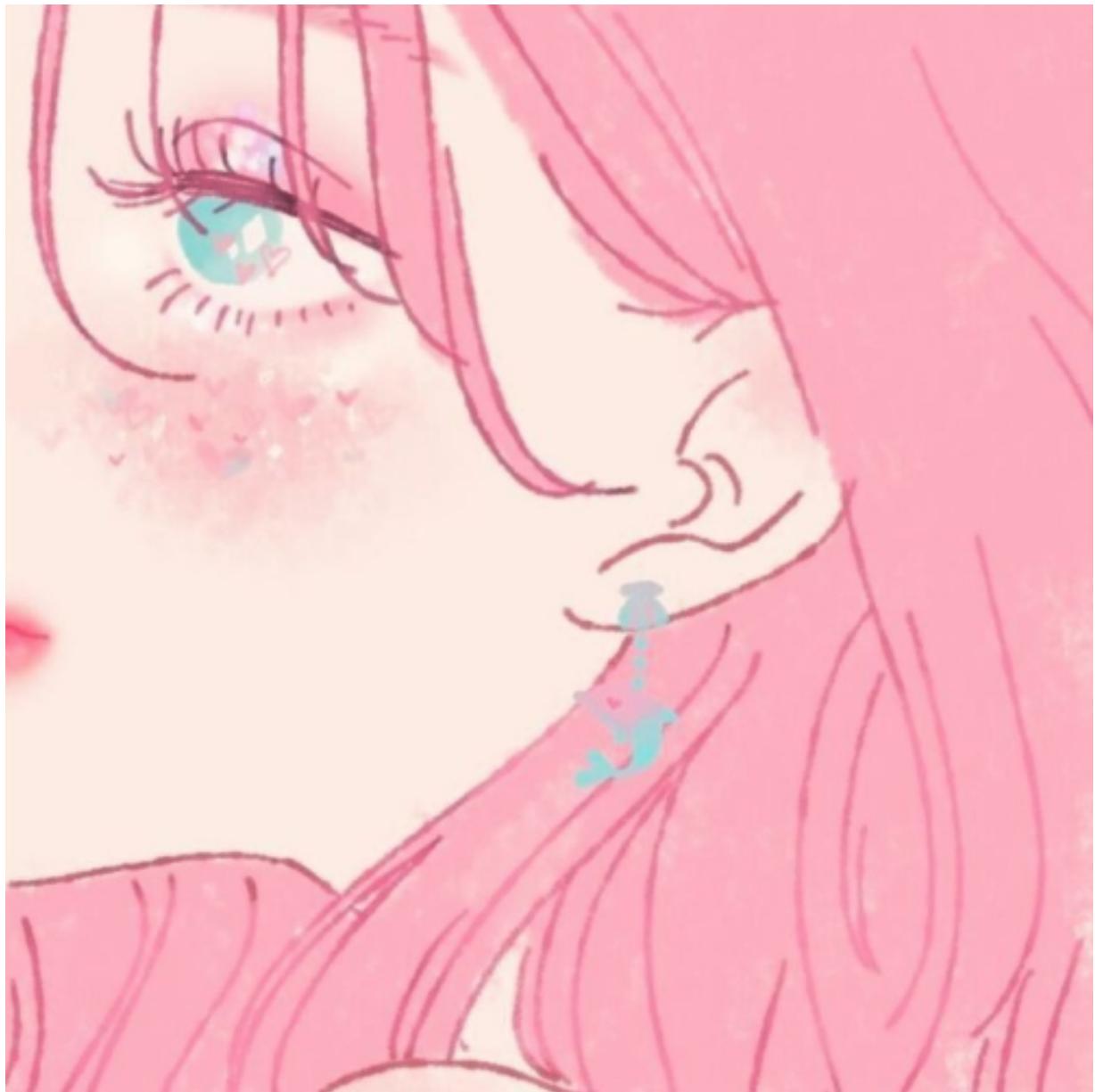
The way to heaven? At that moment, Nicole saw the girl's arm. There was a tattoo on it as well—number 290.

"Place her upon the altar to check the color. Number 239 was an offering of exceptional ability, one who turned the altar a brilliant green."

Nerus said. The sacrifices knelt around the altar in unison. Their eyes gleamed as they looked at Nicole.

**[\*]** Wait, apparently Estock is a girl?????? All along I thought Estock was a man. Did I forget something?? From past translations, i swear there's no indication Estock is a girl!! Author-nim why you do this to me ග\_ඡ

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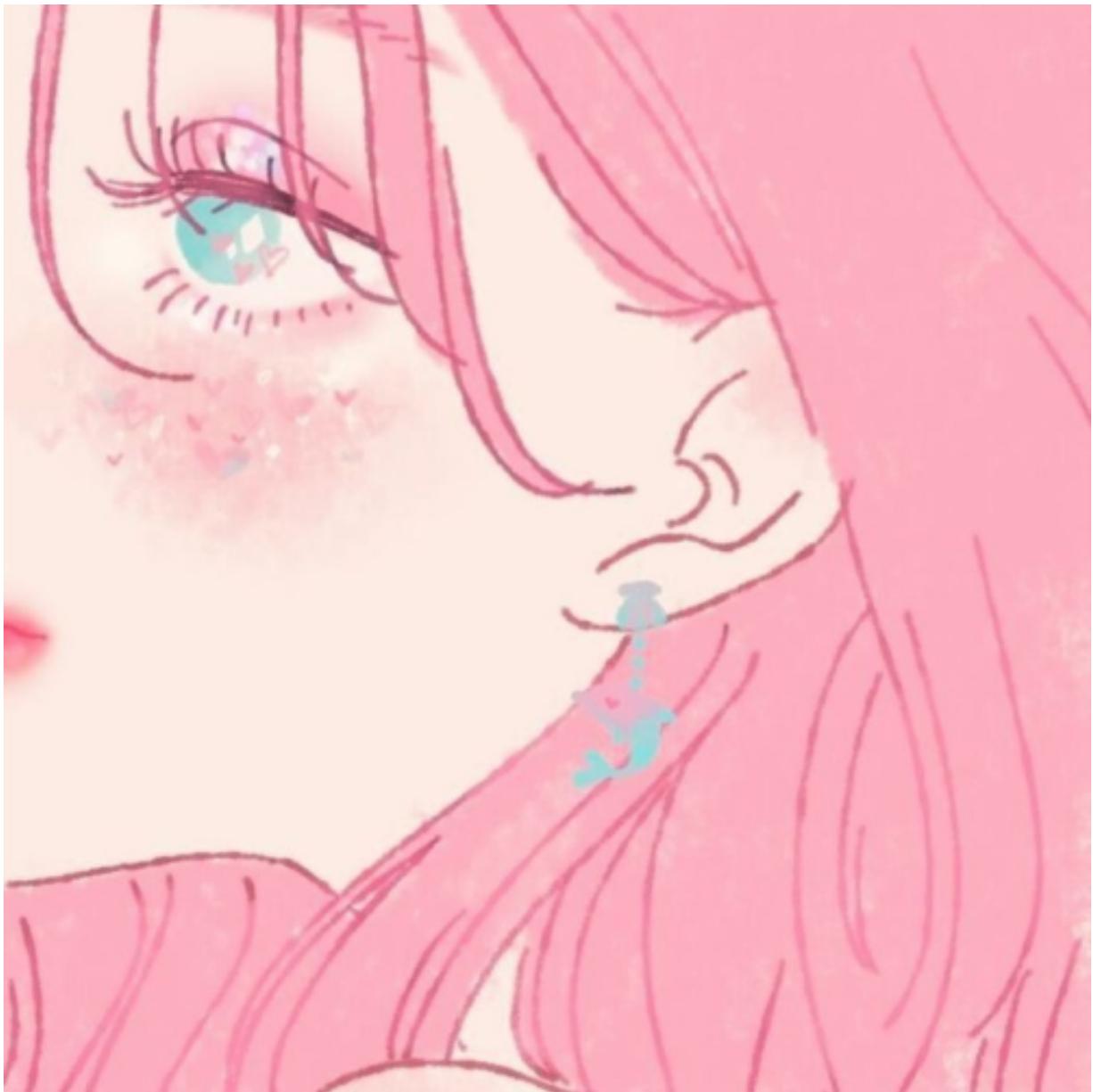


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# Chapter 175

Nicole remembered the shape of that altar. There was such an altar in the basement of Marquis Saratheve as well, along with live offerings to be sacrificed. It was a typical trace of demon worship.

Those dressed in white, those people were the same. They were offerings raised by the imperial family. And Estock was the only one who had escaped from this place.

‘The reason this place has not been exposed is really because of the thorough control over people.’

Nicole was trapped underground. That place was already a secret, but this hidden temple could only be accessed through a secret gate via a mirror within it.

“Not long ago, a daughter of YvesChapel died over there,”

Catrell muttered.

“She had considerable power, so the entire altar glowed crimson.”

Nicole was pushed by them to the center of the altar. The oval-shaped altar was surrounded by statues of demons. Below that...

“Ah, aah!”

Nicole screamed. The floor was made of transparent glass. Beneath that glass, water was filled, and someone's body lay submerged.

After observing for a while, Nicole realized that the body was Isabel's. It had been so mutilated that she hadn't recognized it immediately.

Although submerged in water, Isabel had not decomposed. Her body was simply full of wounds. Isabel had been sacrificed here.

"Do not be afraid. All the offerings dedicated here go to heaven. In a few more days, the body will naturally disappear, and both body and soul will go to heaven,"

Shouted the child who had smiled at Nicole earlier.

"The clan of prophets is merciful, so they sent that sinner to the altar as well. She would have gone to heaven."

Nicole now understood everything.

So, they imprison people from the seven great families here and regularly make them into sacrifices.

Religion was the most appropriate means of controlling people. They were offered as sacrifices, but they possessed an absolute belief that they were going to heaven.

"Nonsense. To die is simply that—death. You are all being deceived!"

Nicole raised her head and shouted. At that moment, the altar glowed faintly with a deep green, akin to the leaves of poisonous plants, intense and ominous.

“It’s really green. Is that woman truly number 239? Green has been exceedingly rare in the history of this place!”

“Does Raul know about this place?”

Martes muttered, pale with fear.

“No, he wouldn’t have said anything. If that woman is a sacrifice from the royal family, do you think a man like the Grand Duke would have fallen for her? He must have suspected that she was sent by the royal family. Don’t you know the Grand Duke at all?”

Sylvia spoke to Martes as if he were a fool, and Martes shut his mouth.

“Everyone out, it’s time for the afternoon prayer,”

Fron announced.

The sacrifices obediently filed out of the hall like a flock of white sheep. The door to the hall closed.

Nicole glared at them from the altar.

“You have continued to kill innocent people. Where on earth did you gather them from?”

“Foolish girl. You may not know, but there are many bastards in this world. Or the method of kidnapping a child from that family. Our ancestors have been kidnapping them since the empire was being built. There’s no need to bring anyone else anymore. They have lived here for a very long time, giving birth and dying within these walls.”

Cartrell scoffed.

“What will you do if that woman is really number 239?”

Sylvia asked quietly. Nerus pondered.

“That woman is the Grand Duke’s weakness. It’s an opportunity to extract something substantial from the Grand Duke. I need to think about how to handle this.”

“Let’s think about it for a moment,”

The high priest said.

Just then, someone came running. They were dressed in white, but their eyes were different from the other sacrifices.”

He approached and whispered something to Nerus. Nerus’ pale face turned red and then white again.

“The Grand Duke says he’ll give half of his military authority if this woman is returned.”

Catrell covered her mouth. Everyone looked incredulous.

“Then we have no choice but to send her back.”

Martes said softly.

“Yes, but since she has already seen too much, we’ll have to erase part of her memory.”

“It will take some time. It has to be done delicately. The drug that erases memory has severe side effects. It may even affect her childhood memories if this woman is really number 239...”

Sylvia said.

“Stop talking nonsense. Even if she becomes a bit foolish, there’s no problem in her relations with the Grand Duke.

Such a woman just needs to spread her legs well, right, Sylvia?"

When Catrell rebuked her coldly, Sylvia's shoulders shrank.

"Let's negotiate over a few days. It's been a long time since we've had the upper hand in our relationship with the Grand Ducal family. Half of the military authority is not enough,"

Nerus said with a smirk.

"Arrange a betrothal with Sylvia!"

Catrell whispered excitedly.

The Emperor nodded.

"The Grand Duke is more obsessed with that woman's well-being than I thought, so we should take all his promises now. Let's start by interrogating whether that woman is really number 239. Start tomorrow morning. Use a confession drug."

\* \* \*

When Nicole was imprisoned again, she was quietly absorbing the shock of the facts she had learned.

'I must find a way to reveal these things.'

There was a reason they killed Grace. It was truly a taboo that should not have been touched.

Like Marquis Saratheve, the royal family was also engaging in human sacrifices.

And they wanted to erase this secret from Nicole's memory. How on earth should she go about it?

That's when it happened. Nicole found Sylvia standing blankly in front of the bars.

"What are you trying to do....."

As Nicole was about to say something, Sylvia put her hand to her lips.

"Shh. Keep quiet and follow me."

Click, Sylvia carefully opened the iron bars.

Sylvia looked at the pocket watch strapped to her waist.

"It's now 8:05 PM."

Sylvia said softly and then closed the pocket watch.

"Listen to me first. I mostly live inside here. You saw earlier, right? Our temple, the Sybil I mean. This place is a midpoint connecting that place and the imperial palace. The exact location is the royal family's secret underground space. Except for me, my family members commute between the imperial palace and here, and I manage this place. I can hardly ever leave."

Nicole recalled the rumors she had heard about Sylvia in her past life. The royal family's cherished princess, too precious and thus kept hidden away and raised in secrecy by the royal family.

"Sometimes the high priest or Martes barges in, so quiet your footsteps and follow me."

Sylvia gestured. Nicole decided to follow for now. Sylvia didn't seem like she was going to administer a confession drug or try to kill Nicole right away.

“This is my room. Go in.”

Sylvia opened the door at the end of the hallway and pushed Nicole inside.

The room was excessively girlish. The floor was covered with a pink carpet, and it was full of cute trinkets. Flower paintings hung on the walls.

Upon closer inspection, there were strange things as well. Like a dwarf ceramic doll with a smiling face.

The strangest thing was that a whip and a dagger were hanging on one side under the wall. The room was very spacious and full of items.

“This is a strange room,”

Nicole muttered to herself amidst it all.

“My mother’s bizarre taste. I can’t even take down a single painting here as I please,”

Sylvia said with a sense of defeat. Nicole stared at her intently.

The enemy who killed Jay in her past life. Why is this woman saying these things to her?

“Why have you brought me here?”

“You’re not really number 239, are you?”

“No,”

Nicole admitted honestly.

She had the intuition that lying would be futile.

“I thought so. I remember number 239, that girl. She wasn’t small and pretty like you. I remember all those people who regularly become sacrifices and die. They even appear in my dreams sometimes...”

“Are they descendants of the powerful families?”

“Yes,”

Sylvia said.

“Our family is losing power—the power to handle flames, the power to control this country. That’s why a ritual to regularly dispose of live sacrifices is necessary. Did you know? Those poor souls, they think they’re going to heaven. They believe they’re in purgatory, just living temporarily at the gateway to heaven. When it’s confirmed they’ll be sacrificed, they receive congratulations. They never doubt it for a moment.”

“Is that possible?”

“Because they’re drugged and brainwashed! Since birth, they’ve been indoctrinated with religious doctrine,”

Sylvia said.

“I know it’s madness. But I keep forgetting. I have to remind myself.”

“Where did they collect them from?”

“They weren’t collected. They’ve been there from the start. Remember what Mother said?”

“You mean they kidnapped the bastards and descendants of the gifted families?”

"Yes,"  
Sylvia said.

"Those inside were gathered through repeated incest. They don't even think of escaping because they believe they are happy here. Since number 239 escaped by accident a long time ago, no one has been able to leave."

"Since when have they been gathering them?"

"A very long time ago. Since 300 years ago,"  
Sylvia said in an empty voice.

"There were about thirty people in the hall. Considering that..."

"The underground is wider than you think. There are more people in the living quarters. What you saw is just a fraction."

This was a long-standing atrocity. Nicole felt a shiver of rage.

In the outside world, the people of the seven great families were gradually declining, to the point where there were no longer any descendants left.

The Sotia family, for example, was certain to end with Grace being the last. Not to mention the extinct YvesChapel family.

But inside, there were descendants of the gifted families raised like animals. How absurd was the concept of bloodline?

"Are there people from the Grand Duke's family too?"

“Could there be? That family hardly has any children born. There’s only one Grand Duke.”

Sylvia shivered.

“So, it’s precisely the heirs of the six great families.”

Sylvia did not deny that the royal bloodline, that of Hyperion, was also among the sacrifices.

“But why them? Because they are suitable sacrifices?”

“You know well. Marquis Saratheve foolishly offered just anyone as a sacrifice. But the altars left by the demon race prefer people from the seven great families, those with abilities. Offering them as sacrifices is what yields great power in return.”

“It’s really strange. You’re acting as if you’re trying to help me, even kindly explaining things.”

“I told you, my family won’t understand. If your memories get all mixed up, you’ll become someone else. You know that, right? Just like a carriage rolls differently when its parts are changed. If the Grand Duke finds out your memory has changed, he will be furious. And if I marry him on that pretext, he will seek revenge on me for a lifetime.”

“...You want to find a way to save yourself.”

Nicole said coldly.

Perhaps Sylvia had a conscience. But her disdain for the entire royal family was too deep to make a lenient judgment.

Moreover, there was the matter of what Sylvia had done to Jay in her past life.

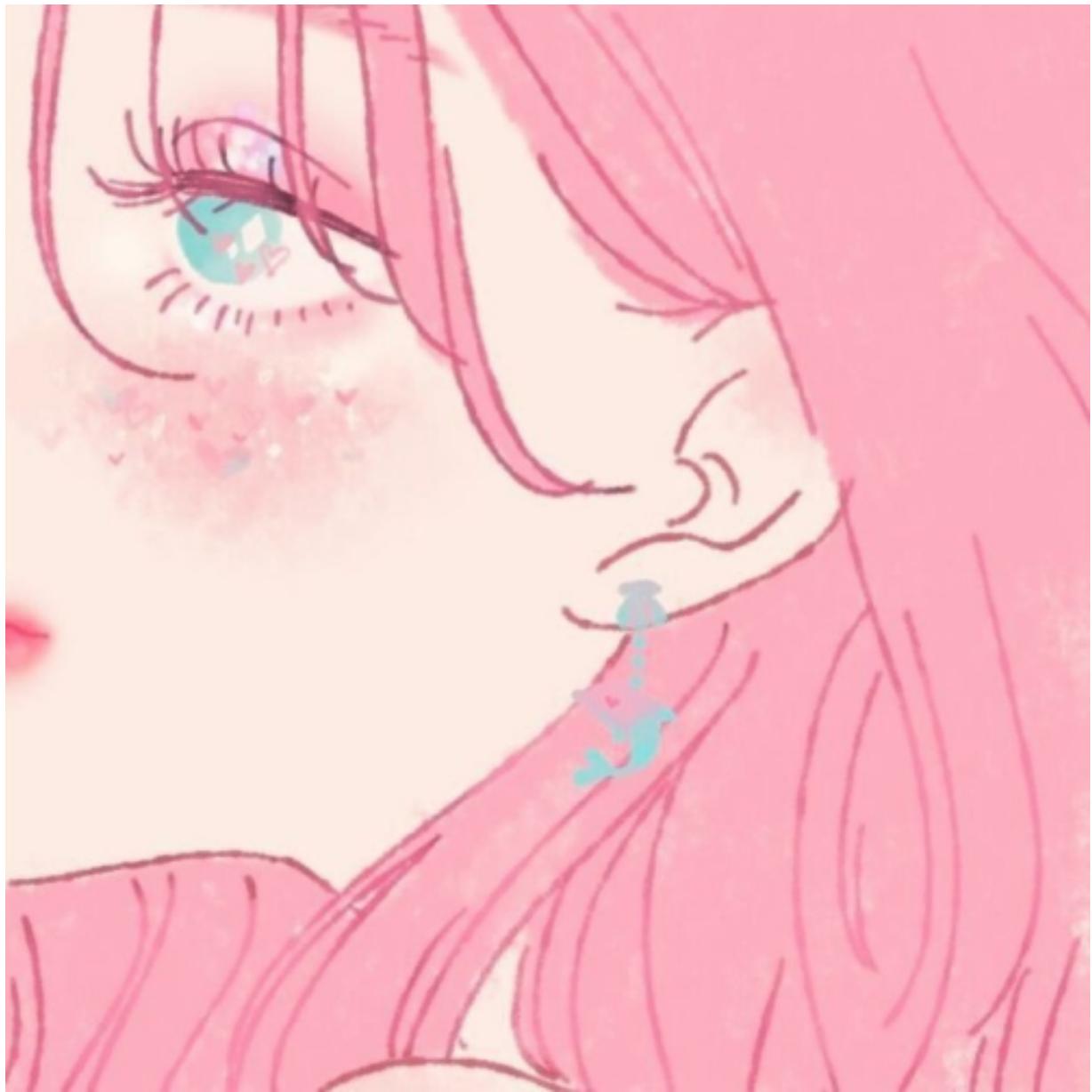
However, Sylvia's torment was not a disadvantage to her.

"Right. I'll find a way to save myself somehow. Once something is done, it can't be undone."

Sylvia ruffled her hair and paced around the room for a while before speaking as if she had made up her mind.

"I'm going to help you escape."

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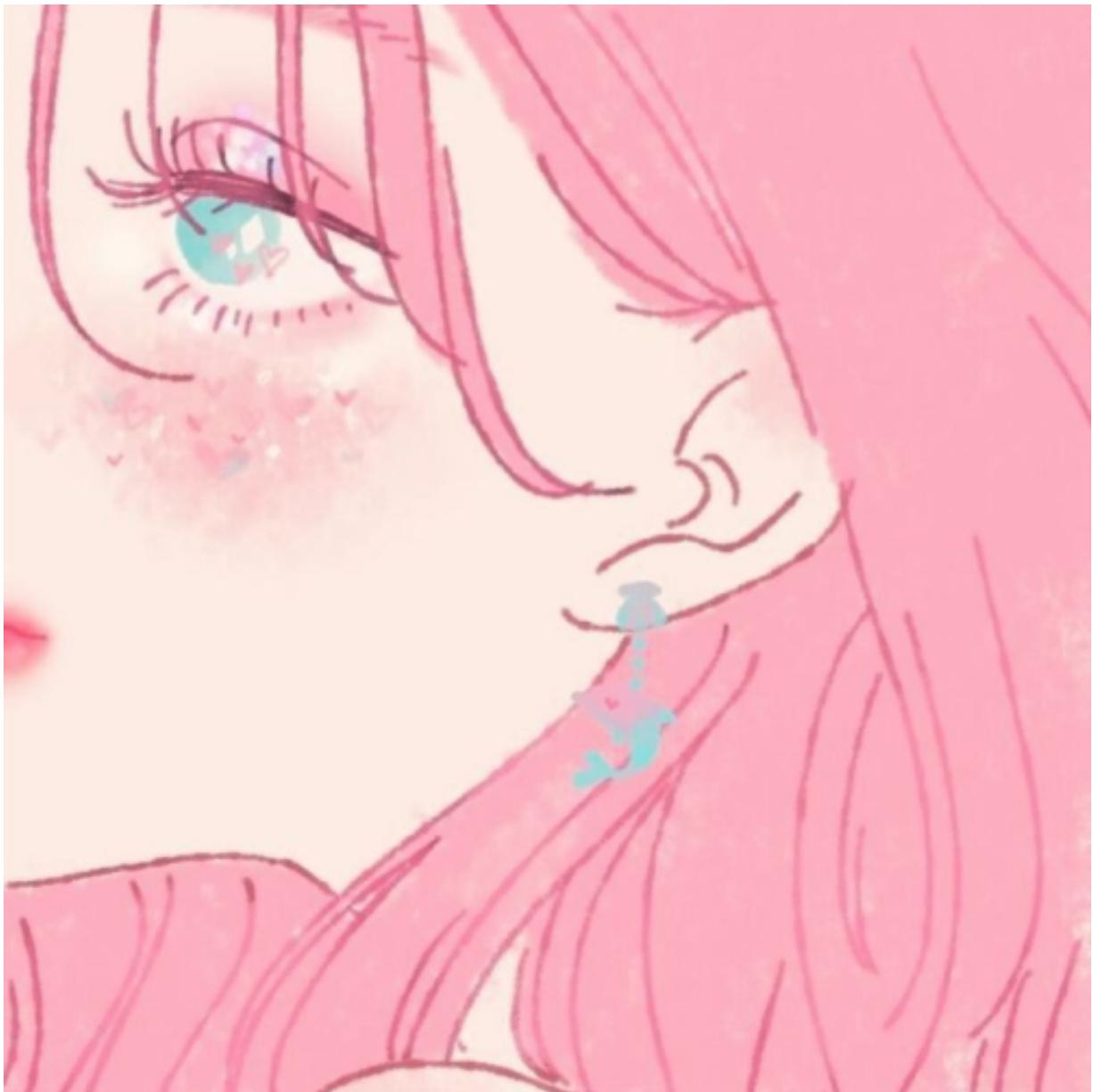


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# Chapter 176

“How so? It seems you are also not in a position to be free.”

“There’s one way. It’s my own secret...”

Sylvia took a breath. She led Nicole along.

“Remember the mirror from before? There’s a secret gate installed within it that leads to Sybil’s temple. To get here, you also need to use a mirror. I... I’ve lived here for a long time. That’s how I discovered another secret mirror passage.”

Sylvia passed through the dressing room and entered the innermost part of the room. There, a small mirror was attached to the wall.

“This is the gate? You’re going to let me use this?”

“There’s a condition. I want no one to know that I did this. Take this medicine.”

Sylvia handed Nicole a small vial of medicine.

“It’s now 8:36.”

Sylvia whispered, and Nicole quickly understood what Sylvia said.

“This medicine is for memory loss, isn’t it? It will probably erase about an hour’s worth of memory, right? With that

dose, there should be almost no side effects. That's why you told me all the truth."

Sylvia nodded her head.

"Even if I take this, the memory of seeing the temple won't disappear."

Nicole said.

"I will tell Raul everything I have seen and heard. Raul will learn the secrets of the royal family. Do you... want this place to be revealed to the outside world? Like a whistleblower?"

Nicole observed Sylvia's complexion.

"If this place is exposed, it's over. The imperial family will not be able to ignore the impact."

Sylvia's eyes wavered.

"But Raul can't act rashly, not if it means losing you. And once you leave this place, you must keep your mouth shut. You know the secret of Flame. You wouldn't want to be taken down by Flame without anyone knowing, would you?"

"So you understand that as long as Flame remains intact, this imperial family is not finished."

Nicole realized that this princess was quite intelligent.

"Though who knows how long that will last,"

Sylvia gave a bewildered smile. Nicole struggled to suppress a sudden surge of strange sympathy.

“But if you erase my memory, I’ll also forget the debt I owe you for helping me escape. No memory, no debt. Won’t you regret it?”

“Look, if you speak out of turn, it’s not Raul but my own family I’ll be killed by. Is that what you want? Make your decision quickly. Will you take the medicine or not? Only the royal family can activate the gate.”

“Why do you act like you know me?”

At those words, Sylvia’s hand trembled once.

“Who is this ‘guy’ you’re talking about? The only men close to me are Raul and my younger brother.”

Younger brother.

At that word, Sylvia flinched.

“Take the medicine. Otherwise, I can’t let you out. If you keep talking, I might change my mind.”

Nicole hesitated for a moment with the medicine in hand. What if it was poison?

“What difference does it make if it’s poison? If you have to take it, you have to take it.”

Nicole closed her eyes and swallowed the medicine. Her head began to spin.

“In 1 or 2 minutes, you’ll feel the effects. Stand in front of the mirror.”

Sylvia said. Then Nicole saw the built-in wardrobe next to the mirror. It was a wardrobe, but there was no door, just a curtain drawn across it.

"This gate is connected to the sanctuary. You will end up at the academy."

The academy?

'So, there's a small gate in Princess Sylvia's room that's connected to the academy?'

At the last moment, Nicole turned around and reached out to sweep aside the wardrobe curtain with a swoosh. Inside was a jacket Nicole had seen once before.

A red jacket. Luxurious embroidery. And boots.

"Aaron?"

She had seen a boy dressed in such splendid clothes before. It was definitely Aaron.

"Princess Sylvia, do you know Aaron? Or, are you... Aaron? How can that be?"

Sylvia bit her lip.

"Forget everything."

Sylvia pushed Nicole. Nicole felt her body falling backward. At the last moment, Nicole grabbed something from the shelf in her hand.

Nicole glanced at it. It was a sturdy ring. Nicole remembered this ring on Aaron's hand. Aaron had moved his hand while tied to Jay, and on that hand was a thick silver-rimmed ring.

'Sylvia is Aaron?'

That was the last thought Nicole had.

\* \* \*

"Where is this?"

Nicole slowly opened her eyes. Her body hurt. She was lying on the floor of a dark and small study.

'I think I was holding something in my hand?'

Nicole opened her hand. There was nothing in it.

'The last thing I remember... I saw the royal family's mad temple, and then...'

And then she was imprisoned again. It seemed someone had come looking for her. She couldn't remember anything after that.

'Descendants of the seven great houses who live to become sacrifices. Or rather, six houses.'

It seemed someone had said that. Nicole continued to touch her throbbing head as she thought.

"Aaron... I feel like Aaron was here."

Why does that kid come to mind so unexpectedly? The boy, Jay's friend. I'm certain I've seen that boy, but I can't quite remember.

"More importantly, this place... Why am I here?"

Could it be that the royal family has moved the place where they're holding me? The surroundings were cramped and filled with books. It was a typical study.

Nicole carefully got up and opened the door. At that moment, her eyes widened.

“Nicole? Why are you here?”

What Nicole found was Jay looking at her with eyes as if he'd seen a ghost. Jay was standing in the middle of the hallway.

“Jay? Why are you here... Did I escape?”

Nicole realized that she was now... in the academy of the sanctuary.

The structure of the corridor, and the view outside. It was a place she had already visited.

“Jay. I...”

Wondering if she was seeing things, Nicole reached out her hand to Jay.

“Sister!”

And then, overcome by a sudden dizziness, Nicole lost consciousness in Jay's arms.

\* \* \*

“Nicole.”

Nicole opened her eyes to the sound of someone calling her name. She was gasping for breath.

“Jay, Jay...”

Nicole clutched Jay's arm.

“After your last visit, when you didn't contact for a while, you suddenly appeared in the academy hallway with an

expression like a mad person. What on earth happened, sister?"

"I need to contact Raul. To the Sith, no... to Dagger..."

Nicole rambled on, waving her arms at Jay.

Jay gently detached Nicole's hand and sat her down on the bed.

Nicole looked around. A small dormitory room. This was Jay's private room. It seemed that while she was unconscious, Jay had secretly moved her here.

"Don't worry. I've already sent a telegram."

"A telegram, to whom?"

Nicole was startled.

Jay said softly,

"To the house you're living in now, and to Lady Grace's house. It was about 10 hours ago. You've been asleep for almost half a day. And no one has discovered that you're here yet."

Nicole's heart sank at the mention of Grace.

However, what Jay did was very wise. Nicole's maids were very clever, so they would have communicated with the Grand Duke's family right away.

'What if Raul has already given military authority to the royal family, or has started acting in a way that amounts to that?'

The news about Raul was also shocking.

'Why on earth are you... trying to give up military power for me? Don't you know what that means? It's like putting a noose around your neck and handing the end to the royal family.'

At the same time, her heart ached. How would she explain Grace's situation to Raul?

How could she explain suddenly appearing in the sanctuary academy after being kidnapped?

Nicole herself had no idea why she was here.

'He might suspect me, or he might be angry about the trouble caused by my kidnapping.'

She was afraid of what state Raul might be in. It was at that moment.

Knock, knock.

There was a heavy sound at the door.

"I'll go and see."

Jay put his finger to his lips to quiet Nicole, then he cracked the door open slightly.

Eventually, he looked calmly at the person on the other side.

Nicole was certain that the person outside the door was not Raul. Jay was an innocent boy. Had he faced Raul, his expression would have been more tense.

"Oh, I didn't expect you to come yourself."

Jay said to the other person in a flat tone. The door opened.

The next moment, Nicole realized her certainty had been misplaced.

The person who quietly walked into the room was Raul.

The private room used by Jay was not large. As Raul entered the small room, it felt cramped. Raul had an overwhelming presence.

Raul looked around the room once and saw Nicole and Jay. He recognized Jay as someone he had seen before.

“I have something to discuss with your sister, so please leave.”

Jay glanced at Nicole and then quietly closed the door and left.

Nicole was left in the room with Raul. She felt a tightness in her chest.

“Raul—”

Raul strode forward. Nicole couldn’t tell what kind of emotion the Glassworm inside Raul was allowing him to feel at that moment.

It was as if reaching into a box and randomly drawing out something unknown.

Raul grabbed Nicole’s arm. He pulled her into a tight embrace.

Relief flooded Nicole’s eyes, and she surrendered herself to Raul’s embrace. She had missed him terribly during her captivity.

“Ah, Raul...”

His body was still large and solid, and as he held Nicole tightly, she wanted to cling to him with her whole being.

“Never leave my side again. You are mine. You must always be under my protection.”

Raul’s deep voice resounded in Nicole’s ears.

“I will do that.”

Nicole said in a small, trembling voice.

“I will do that... Raul...”

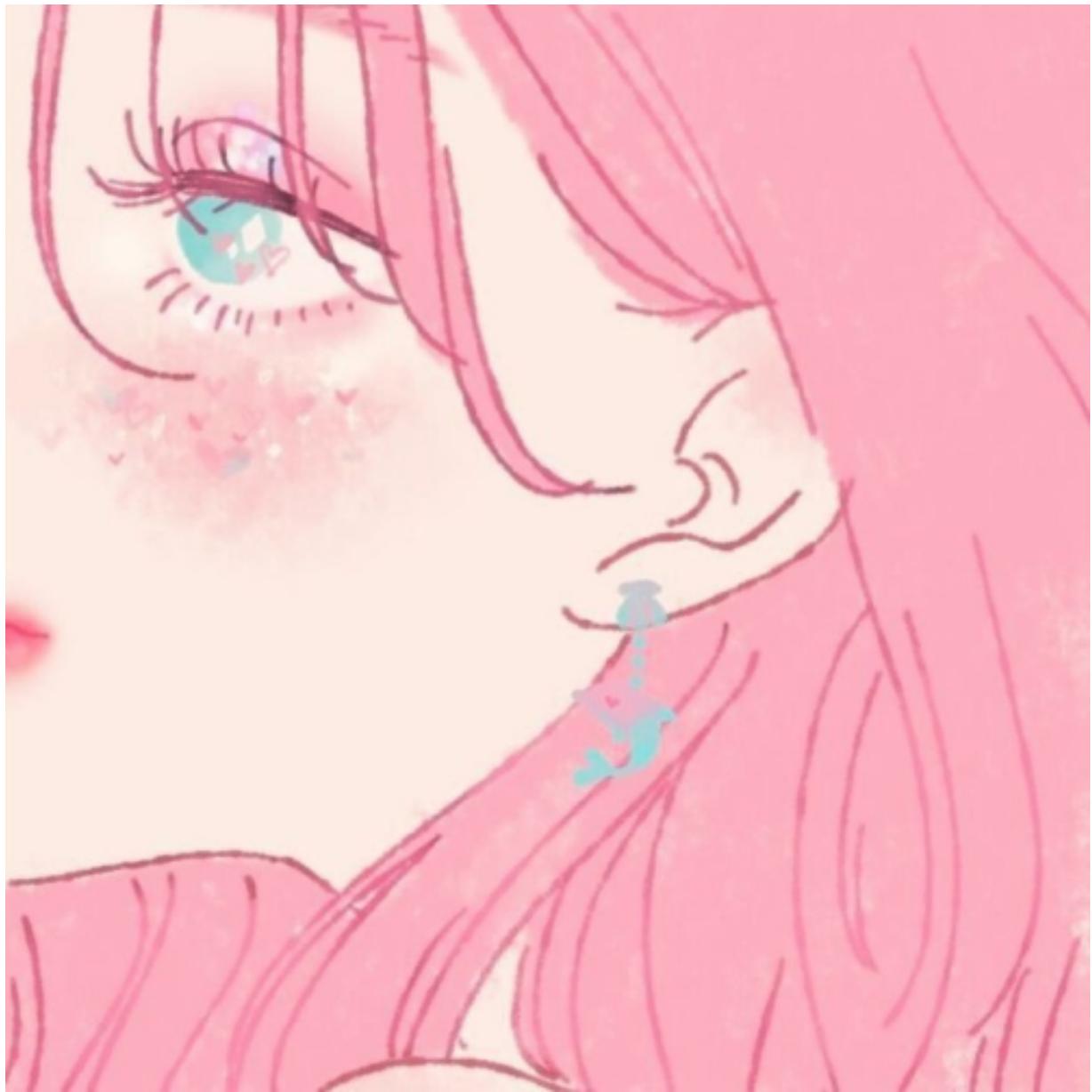
Nicole embraced him in return.

“Grace... She...”

Raul’s shoulders tensed. He slowly pulled away from Nicole.

“Tell me slowly what happened.”

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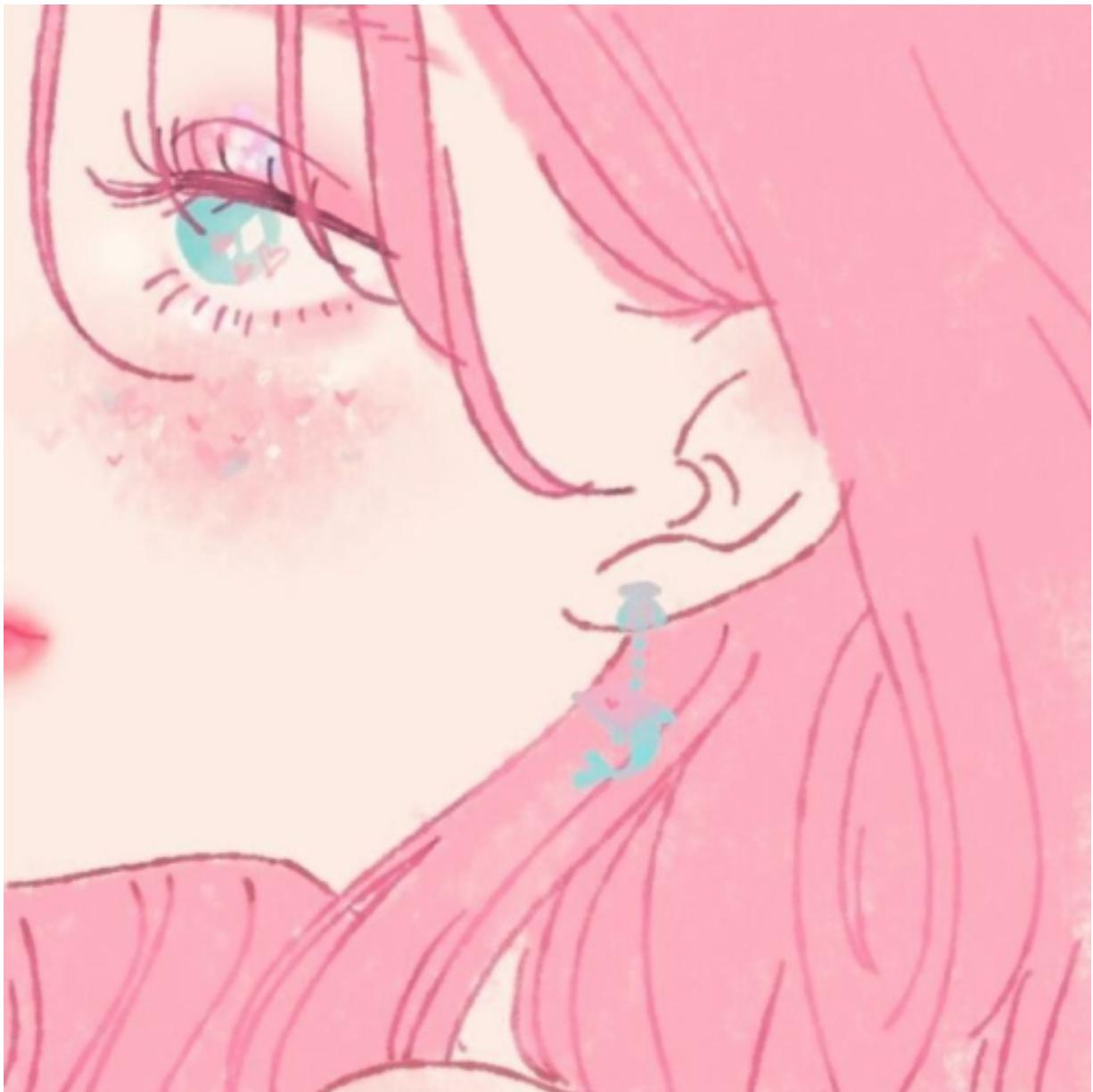


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# Chapter 177

Raul had retired Nicole, but she still hadn't forgotten her duty as a spy.

Nicole reported in detail what had happened there.

"Why didn't the royal family erase your memory? You know too much. Control over half the military would be reason enough to send you back. But it's not a profitable deal for the royal family, now that I know their secret."

Raul seemed quite perturbed by the hidden secret of Flame. For all those years, the royal family had kept their secret undiscovered.

"Now I understand how the royal family has been making so many people disappear."

Flame was nothing, something no one cared about.

"I really can't remember. It seems like someone helped me escape..."

"If you've escaped, that's all that matters."

Raul lifted her hand and gently kissed the back of Nicole's hand.

Nicole felt a relief so profound it was almost painful.

"Will the royal family kill them and cover it up?"

“No.”

Raul said firmly.

“The royal family is desperate. In theory, with Flame, they could wipe out all humanity, but they can’t do it.”

“Because they are losing power? To the point of clinging to a terrible ritual of offering sacrifices?”

“The ritual is likely real. The demons set up altars long ago that would grant power in exchange for sacrifices. However, only those with abilities, like the descendants of the seven great families, would be effective as sacrifices. And there are more limits to wielding Flame than one might think. There must be specific conditions to use that power.”

“What happened while I was gone?”

Nicole looked at Raul.

“Many of the Sith’s Shadows have disappeared.”

Raul spoke softly. Nicole felt as though her heart was crumbling.

“And Dagger? What about Estock...?”

“The Sith are safe. There’s no one you know among those who’ve disappeared. The royal family hasn’t completely crossed me. It’s like killing Grace but sparing you.”

Moreover, Grace had dug too dangerously into the affairs of the royal family.

Nicole now fully understood the situation. Even with Flame, the royal family would only go as far as to assassinate a few people.

However, Raul held the entire military power. Even if they decided to kill Raul, they couldn't act if the knife reached too close to the royal family's neck.

"Someone will die again, and this is a game no one can ever win. You must continue fiercely... preparing your weapons. And the royal family will make them disappear as if weeding them out."

"The royal family has never killed a Grand Duke in history."

Raul said.

"That's an unspoken rule of this power game. Moreover, thanks to the military power I hold, killing me would shake the entire nation even more."

"Are you going to oppose the royal family?"

"They've touched what's mine."

Raul gritted his teeth. His eyes flashed like a wild beast, sending a chill down Nicole's spine.

"Now it's time for revenge. Even if I can't completely destroy the royal family, they must be struck. It's also a rule of the game that someone must be punished."

Nicole looked at Raul with trembling eyes.

'I'm safe for now. But the fundamental problem won't be solved.'

Even out of fear of Raul, the royal family wouldn't dare kill her with Flame.

The royal family must also fear that Raul's anger will cross the line.

However, this too is nothing more than a temporary measure.

Nicole looked at Raul. Their lips intertwined fervently. Nicole's eyes grew cloudy.

Thoughts of Grace brought on feelings of guilt. She missed her terribly.

"You said you loved me. But you're not really sure, are you? Then why would you consider giving up half of your military power for me?"

Raul looked down at Nicole. He lifted her hand and slowly kissed each joint.

Each time his lips touched her, Nicole felt her heart soar and then plummet to the ground.

"I shouldn't love you. I'm not supposed to, and I'm not designed that way."

"Then what?"

"Despite that."

Raul spoke calmly, but Nicole could feel his emotions bubbling beneath the surface, heavier than usual, unrestrained.

"There are things one cannot help but desire. I want you so much, I can't help it. You're mine. Even if it means death, you'll die in my arms."

Nicole gazed at Raul. She reached out her arms and pulled him into an embrace.

She loved him too much, enough to make her heart ache.

"There are things I haven't told you."

Nicole listened to Raul's heartbeat for a while, then lifted her head.

"I'll tell you everything soon. Just give me a little more time to sort out my feelings about Grace. Just a little more..."

She could not hide forever that she was a daughter from YvesChapel.

Revealing that secret could mean Raul would never forgive her. Perhaps their relationship might fall apart once again.

Yet, she wanted to take the gamble. She wanted to believe in a miracle once more.

But not just yet. It wasn't right to disturb someone about to go to war.

"Are you going to confess everything? Without hiding anything? Everything?"

Raul said.

"Yes. Everything."

Nicole nodded.

"Then I'll give you a reprieve. Don't disappoint me."

Raul spoke as he gently stroked Nicole's back.

"One thing is certain. When I'm in your arms like this... I feel safe. Please don't leave me."

\*\*\*

Raul did not send Nicole back to the capital.

The Grand Duke's family had a mansion even in the sacred land. Raul judged that the sacred land, less influenced by the royal family, would be safer and had Nicole stay there.

The Grand Duke's mansion in the sacred land was desolate, but one could guess its original beauty.

There were few servants, but they were diligent and trustworthy, keeping the interior of the mansion clean.

Only the garden, long neglected and improperly tended, was utterly desolate.

"It's strange. There's no Flame here."

Nicole said, standing on the terrace. She had been assigned the largest master bedroom, which had a small terrace.

Jay was sitting at the table on the terrace.

"If the royal family wished, they could move that Flame here as well. But they won't, out of fear of the Grand Duke. This too is a chessboard and a game of reading moves. Flame is just a piece on the chessboard, albeit a rather violent one."

Jay gazed at the chessboard on the table with a peaceful expression, moving the chess pieces around by himself.

The clattering sound filled the room. Last night, Redia and Bluea arrived with Nicole's luggage.

Inside the powder room attached to the bedroom, the two were organizing Nicole's belongings.

"Redia and Bluea are slow with their hands."

Jay said, glancing around the room.

“Do you refer to them by nicknames?”

Nicole understood even if the maids were slower than usual.

Nicole had hugged the maids who arrived this morning and cried for a long time. She suggested they rest today, but both insisted on doing something.

As a result, Redia was now crying while clutching a scarf, and Bluea was fiddling with a shoe before starting to sob again.

“Apart from Grace sending me here, I don’t know much about her. But seeing my sister so desperate makes me sad too.”

Jay said indifferently. Nicole sat opposite him, smiling weakly.

“Grace was... a good person. She was like a mother to me. I’ve lost a mother twice now.”

“She must have passed away with hope because you are a lovable person, someone worth seeing at the end of one’s life.”

Nicole quietly stared at the chessboard as emotions welled up again.

“There are no positive goodbyes in the world... But thank you for the consolation.”

Raul said that since Grace’s death would be treated as suspicious, they should wait a while before holding the funeral.

By the time Nicole returned to the capital, they could hold the funeral. Nicole rubbed her eyes.

“Jay, I didn’t know you played chess.”

“What would Flame be equivalent to in words? Perhaps a Knight? If given to a King\*, it could end everything. A skilled Knight can change a lot.”

“The King already has the ability to use Flame. And he possesses that bizarre temple, too.”

“Well, are those who extend their powers by killing others truly Kings? Aren’t Grand Dukes closer to being Kings than they are?”

This was a thought Nicole had long ago. She quietly raised her eyes to look at the chessboard.

“To speak further would be treason.”

“You’re already more than a traitor, sister. The main enemy of the royal family, aren’t you? You’re going to steal the Princess’s husband-to-be, after all.”

The disgust that appeared in Jay’s eyes when he spoke of the Princess surprised Nicole.

“Jay, what’s wrong? You seem upset.”

“It’s nothing. Just... Aaron hasn’t been seen for a while.”

“Weren’t you on bad terms with him?”

“But he’s the only friend I can open up to and talk honestly with, isn’t he?”

“.....”

Jay had tied Aaron up and stuffed him in a closet. Was that what he called an honest conversation? Nicole found Jay increasingly unfathomable.

“He doesn’t even live at the academy anyway. He just comes for classes occasionally.”

“Are you worried you might never see him again?”

“I don’t know.”

Jay said.

Nicole felt as if something forgotten, then not, at the mention of Aaron. It was strange.

‘It seems like I’ve forgotten something important about Aaron...’

Nicole pressed her forehead.

“Sister, I’m curious about something.”

“What is it?”

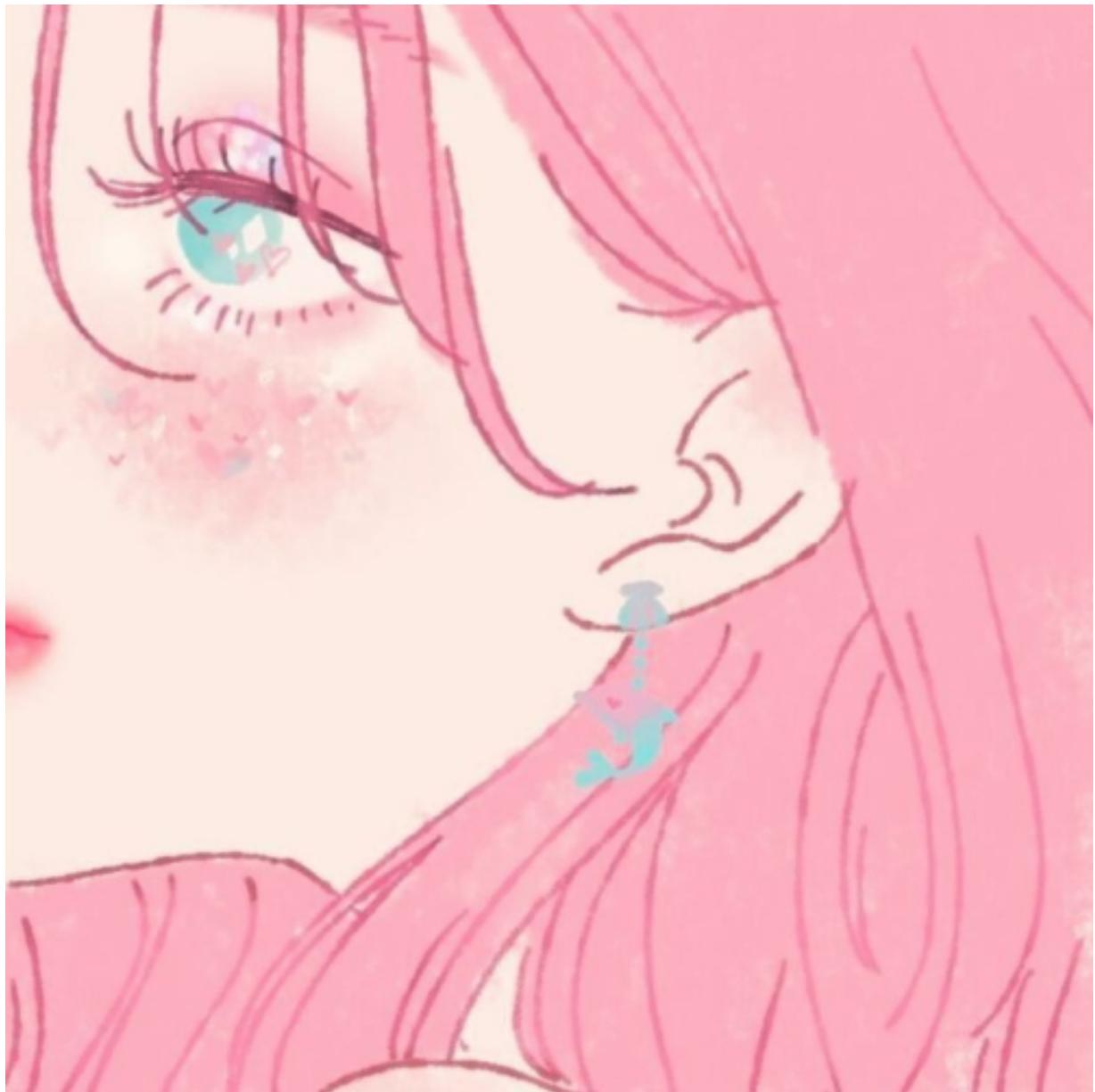
“Are you going to marry the Grand Duke?”

Nicole almost coughed.

【\*】 King as in the piece in the chessboard

[T/N: It’s so strange for me to read Jay calling Nicole by her name instead of Noona or Noonim ණ\_ඇ]

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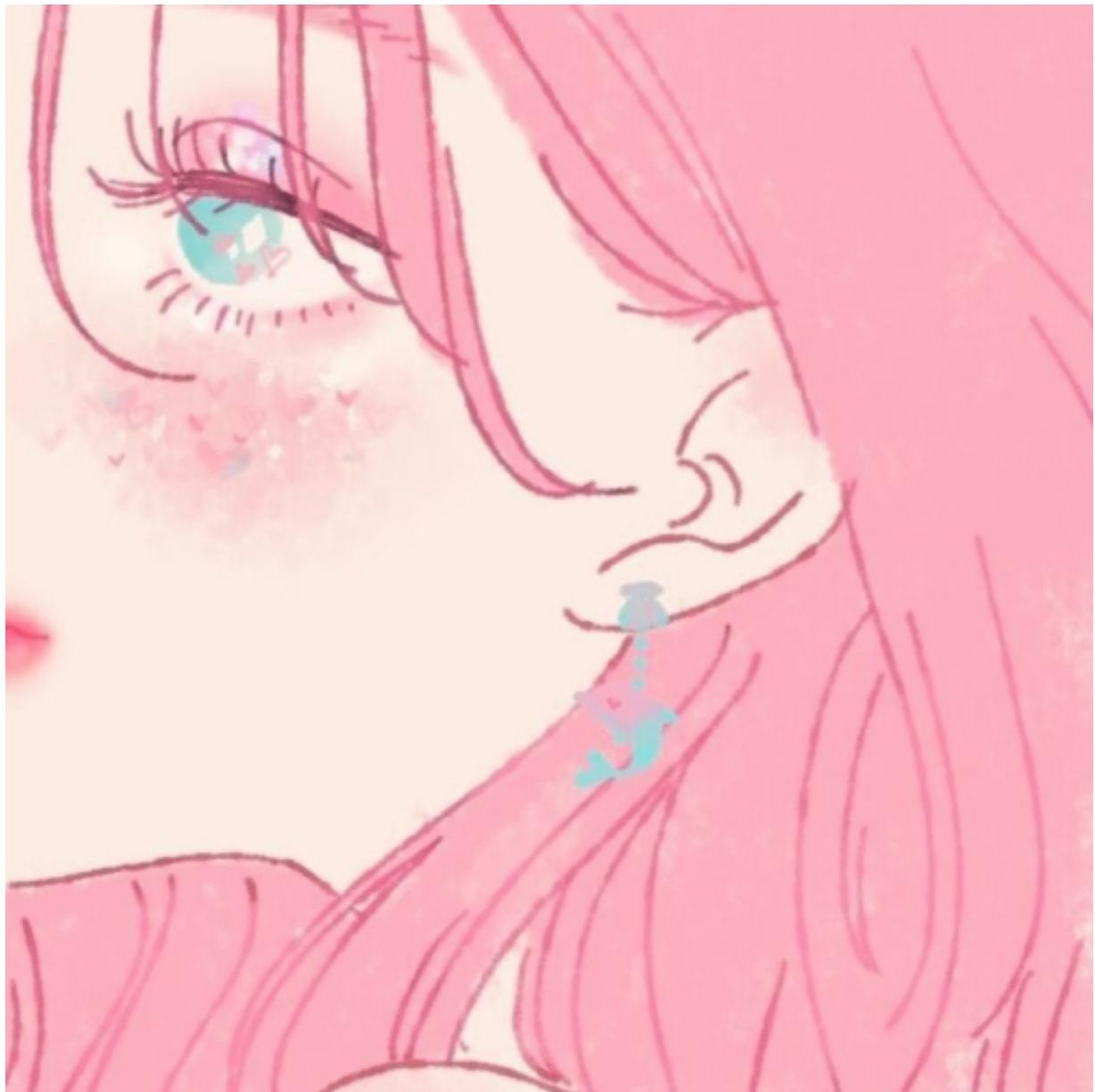


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# Chapter 178

“What, marriage?”

“I told you. I know you love him, but do you love him enough to marry him?”

“He has a critical issue. The current situation isn’t good either. Plus, there are signs of a civil war starting if Raul begins to mobilize his military power.”

“That’s irrelevant to your personal feelings. Nicole, you need to speak your heart.”

“You shouldn’t call me Nicole—”

Nicole sighed softly.

“As long as the royal family remains intact, we can’t marry. He wouldn’t think I’m suitable as a wife either.”

“Is it a matter of dowry?”

Jay looked up at Nicole with a hint of annoyance.

“Dowry... That could be an issue. After all, there is a difference in social status.”

“What if he wants it? If you could marry?”

“I...”

She had hoped that her marriage to Raul would break and crumble. She vowed never to be Raul's fiancée again. But if all problems were resolved and they could be together forever...

"I will love him for the rest of my life. I think I probably will."

Somehow, it was hard to lie. In the end, Nicole spoke honestly.

Jay nodded his head.

"Not bad. At least the choice should be yours. And that man loves you madly."

"Not to that extent."

Nicole's face turned red. Having such a conversation with her younger brother was embarrassing in many ways.

"Nicole, you've told me everything. That's good."

Jay said softly.

"I understand about the Glassworm, too. That man is trapped in a powerful curse he cast on himself. But in stories, it's always love that overcomes curses."

"That's just how stories go. That person is..."

Nicole recalled Raul's demise in her past life. He had sacrificed himself and died once for her.

'Why did he do that?'

For the wife who turned his life into hell, why.

Could it have been his possessiveness and protective instincts manifesting in a different way? Or perhaps... a shred of affection?

It was also shocking that Raul had left Isabel alone for so many years.

Nicole remembered the pitiful sight of Leos, the young man from the Rodria family, dying.

Nicole, like Leos, must have been physically linked to Isabel. When the connection with the host strengthened, if one suffered, both would feel the pain.

They were probably also mentally connected. If Isabel felt even a little pain and suffering, Nicole would have felt it too.

Nicole was also Raul's weakness in her past life. That's why he couldn't deal with a malicious individual like Isabel.

"He loves you enough to overcome self-manipulation. And then his heart falls back into hell again—"

Jay smiled.

"That's... seems beautiful."

"You don't describe such things as beautiful. It's painful."

"You suffered because of him too, sister. It's equal."

Nicole was at a loss for words. Her younger brother was growing into someone increasingly incomprehensible.

Then Jay stood up from his seat.

"Sister, can you lie to the butler of this mansion and say I've called for my personal priest? Tell him I requested

something like an admission consultation. The people of this mansion are strict about outsiders coming in. It seems like a space thoroughly controlled by the Grand Duke."

"Whom did you call?"

"You know, the person you wanted to see. It seemed urgent, so I contacted him to come."

Upon Jay's words, Nicole had an intuition. Her heart fluttered lightly. It was the moment she had long awaited.

"Could it be.....?"

"You wanted to see Father, didn't you? Let's go to meet him."

\*\*\*

Father was standing at the back door, his face completely covered in the garb of a reclusive monk. However, Nicole recognized his stature immediately.

'Dad!'

Nicole suppressed the urge to shout out loud. Raul's employees were surrounding him.

Jay skillfully claimed that Father was his personal priest and that he wanted to speak with him quietly.

\*\*\*

Nicole took him to an empty garden.

"Dad. Dad!"

As the employees stepped back, Nicole held back her emotions and hugged him tightly.

His hood slipped off, revealing a face that looked to be in its thirties.

Her father, Martin, had black hair with a hint of blue in it.

His eyes were blue-black. He still looked mysteriously young and handsome.

“Nicole, my daughter.”

Martin’s eyes were also moist.

“Sister, calm down. You wouldn’t want to be suspected by the people here, would you? Father’s identity is still a secret.”

Jay whispered. Nicole nodded.

“How have you been?”

“I can’t believe you’re alive. Have you been in contact with Isabel? Have you heard from her about where she is staying?”

Martin said, touching Nicole’s face here and there.

“Isabel is.....”

Nicole was at a loss for words. Jay lied with a sharp expression.

“You know how resilient Isabel is. You said she’s hiding with a pitiable family in the countryside, pretending to be nobility. She must be doing well there.”

Nicole nodded.

Isabel was dead. But Nicole would hide that fact for as long as possible.

Isabel had committed sins deserving of death. Above all, Isabel had no right to Martin's mourning and sorrow.

"I heard you said we wouldn't see each other for a while. That you were hiding in a monastery where not just anyone can enter."

Nicole took Martin's arm and said,

"I told Jay how to contact me in an emergency. I heard you had a dangerous experience."

"Father has been living in a monastery isolated from the world. He knows nothing of the outside news."

Jay said bluntly. Nicole's shoulders relaxed with relief.

Recently, there was an article about a traitor. A survivor of the YvesChapel was arrested and interrogated for acts that tarnished the dignity of the royal family.

Many nobles attended the trial that day. It was impossible to silence them all.

If Martin had access to outside news, he would have known that Isabel had been captured.

"But Father was curious about your affairs; I had to tell him who you were with. He rushed here upon hearing that, risking revealing his identity."

Jay added that their father knew pretty much everything that had happened to their family, including the fact that

they were descendants of YvesChapel, which they discovered around the time their mother passed away.

"To become lovers with the Grand Duke, what were you thinking, Nicole? To the YvesChapel family, the Grand Duke's family is nothing short of an enemy. The two families have been at odds for generations."

"That's because of the royal family's meddling. They have always incited the seven major families against each other. There must be some misunderstanding."

Nicole pleaded earnestly.

"Are you serious? You and that man are....."

"I know we cannot marry. But I truly love him. I'm sorry to say something so embarrassing, Dad. But he also..."

"The Grand Duke truly loves Nicole. That's why he has surrounded this large mansion with people, yet he lets Father in at a single word from my sister. It seems he is quite flustered by what my sister means to him."

Martin looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. Jay looked at Martin with a faint smile.

'So, what will you do, Father?'

That was the expression asking. Nicole realized that there was a secret shared only between the two of them.

"Freya and I have tried to hide our family's secret all our lives."

"I know, Dad ran away with Mom, who was the heir to YvesChapel. And that I am to be the next head of the

family..."

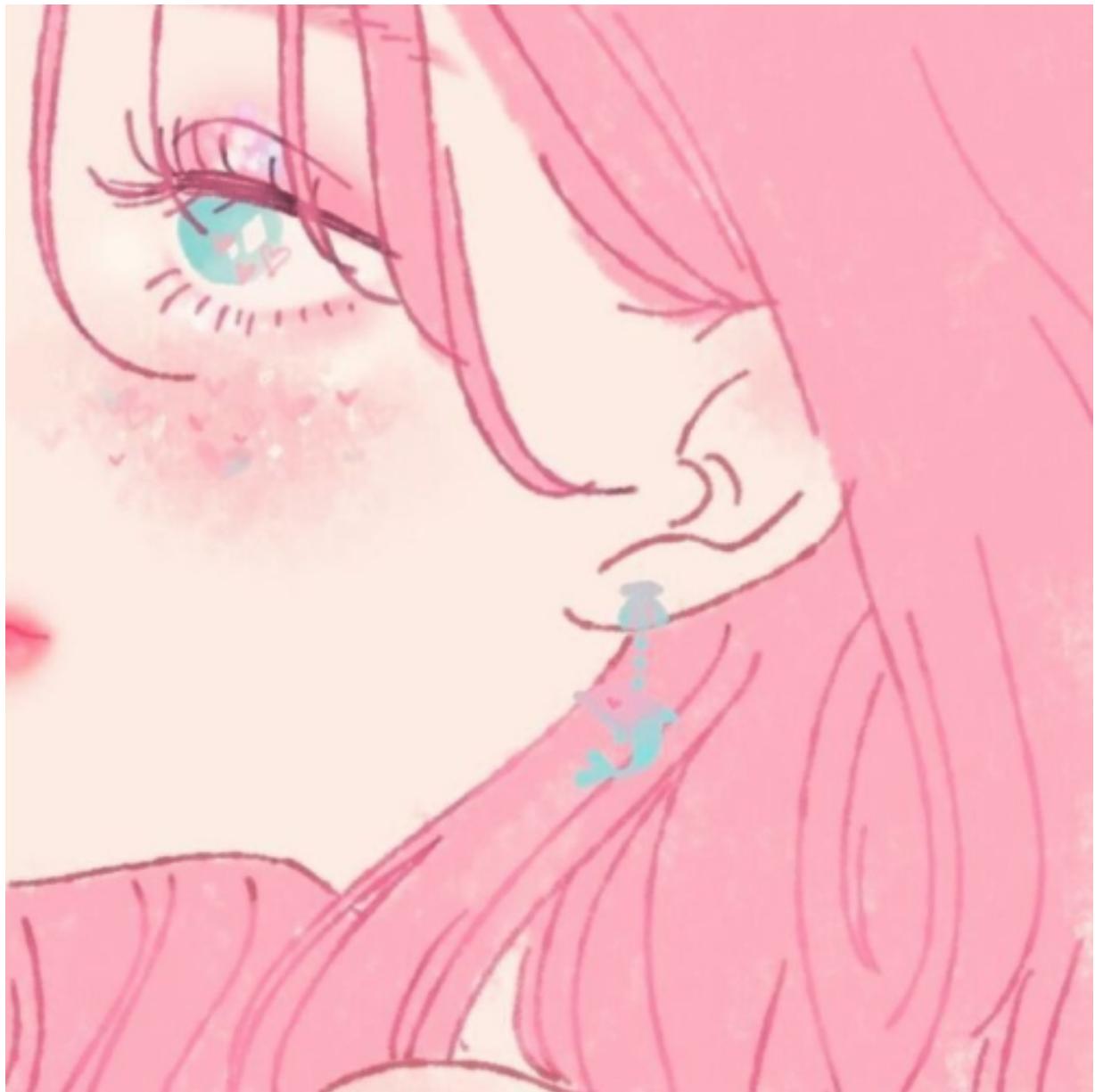
Nicole whispered softly.

"Father."

Jay said.

"Please tell Nicole about your family."

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# Chapter 179

“Father’s family?”

Nicole felt strange. Her father had said he was a commoner without a surname.

Naturally, she never asked about her father’s family. She only knew that he originally came from a holy land.

“Nicole, there’s something you should know first. YvesChapel has a matriarchal system, so if the family is still intact, you would be the next head of the household. You know that, right?”

“Yes, I know.”

“So if you become the matriarch of YvesChapel, my lineage should be passed on to Jay.”

Nicole quietly looked at her father’s face.

She knew he was unusually handsome, even aristocratic in appearance.

“I thought when YvesChapel was destroyed, Father ran off with Mother.”

“It was the other way around.”

Martin said with an embarrassed expression.

“Your mother was the one who took me and ran away with me.”

“What did you say?”

“I am the heir to a clan that has lived in seclusion, praying in a hidden monastery in the holy land all their life. Our family does not venture out into the outside world. But your mother came to me.”

“If it’s a reclusive clan, how did you come to know Mother?”

“We would sometimes sneak away. Children often do that.”

Martin whispered.

The lady of YvesChapel who frequented the holy land and Martin. That’s how their fates intertwined.

And on the day YvesChapel fell, Freya came looking for Martin.

⟨Since my world has ended anyway, won’t you run away with me?⟩

Freya proposed to run away together. Martin took her hand.

“And then, Freya and I had to live in hiding for the rest of our lives. We were the last people who should never unite in this world.”

“...Go on, Dad.”

“About my family... I’m not sure how to explain it. We can’t be called nobility, nor can we be called a family of the gifted. But there is certainly something that sets us apart from ordinary people. This proves it.”

As he spoke, Martin slowly unbuttoned his sleeve. The hem of Father's shirt was very clean.

Nicole realized that she had never seen her father's bare skin as she grew up.

Even on hot days, while working busily inside and outside the country house, her father always wore at least a seven-sleeve shirt.

On her father's forearm, starting from a certain point, faintly glowing characters were densely engraved.

"Is this a tattoo? What is this?"

"The most secret contract in the Empire."

Martin said softly.

"It was a very long time ago, about 300 years ago. I suppose I must tell a story of the past."

About 300 years ago, before the Empire used imperial power, this land was blessed by the chief deity.

At that time, the current imperial land was occupied by many demon tribes, and humans were hunted. The demons violated many important world rules in the process.

Therefore, it is said that the chief deity sent down two demigods to punish the demon tribes.

"The first demigod to descend upon this land was the progenitor of the current Valentine Grand Duke. His name was Rentan."

Rentan established this country and subjugated most of the demon tribes according to the chief deity's command.

At that time, the capital land was under the jurisdiction of a clan that served and lived under the demon tribes. They were a clan of servants who supported the demons and willingly offered sacrifices.

“Could it be that they are the current imperial family? Were they the servants of the demon tribes?”

The land where the capital of the Empire now stands was known to be ruled by a clan, none other than the Hyperion royal family.

However, it was not known anywhere that they had served the demon race.

They were disguised as a family that had struggled to maintain their lineage under the oppression and suffering of the demon race.

“The Hyperion family was quick to assess the situation. They betrayed the demons faster than anyone and came under Rentan’s command.”

Martin’s explanation continued softly.

“The Hyperion family at that time ‘classified’ some of the people and offered them to the demons to survive. Humans of the feed class were regularly sacrificed to the demons. It is a clan that has worshiped the demon gods and continued a terrible tradition for a long time.”

A special religion. Those who are bred from birth to become sacrifices...

Nicole’s head swam with dizziness.

They were still repeating that act. If this became known, the royal family would be finished.

“And what about after the war?”

“According to the rules of the world, divine beings cannot rule over human lands, but if a divine lineage continues for several generations on this land, they become fully human. However... the power only passes directly down the line. And they have fewer children than ordinary people. Most Grand Dukes are only children, and only one son manifests abilities. That lineage has continued until now.”

Nicole licked her dry lips.

“Then... the real royal family is...”

“Rentan, like the demons, could not become the first Emperor, so they appointed a regent. That’s Hyperion. Instead, they made a contract combined with a curse in the name of the gods. The contract acknowledges Hyperion as the regent and stipulates that the throne will be transferred to Rentan’s descendants within 100 years. The current royal family is a fake royal family.”

It was a foreseeable story. Hyperion betrayed Rentan, and when he had a child, he killed Rentan.

“How did he kill a demigod?”

“Humans cannot harm demigods, but demons can. Rentan was killed by a weapon left behind by demons.”

Martin continued his explanation about how the royal family could deceive about their past.

It was thanks to the rules of this world. Beings not belonging to this world are forgotten.

“What does it mean to forget?”

“Literally, it means being erased from memory, remaining only as a faint memory. It has been just over 300 years since the demons disappeared from this land, but people act as if there were never any demons. It’s a rule that clans from other worlds that have left this world are forgotten.”

Jay explained. Nicole didn’t even have the chance to ask how he knew all this.

“Then what about the current Grand Duke’s lineage?”

“The young child who existed when Rentan died was taken and raised by the royal family. That’s when the messy relationship between the royal and Grand Duke families began.”

Nicole wanted to let out a mournful groan. It was the worst.

“So has the regent royal family been deceiving the Grand Duke’s family all this time...?”

“Of course.”

“Dad knew all about it. Dad’s family – they are the ones who hide those truths.”

“To be precise, it’s a contract. The contract made between the royal family and the Grand Duke’s family is carried on through the body of our family’s head.”

Nicole finally understood the dense characters she couldn’t recognize. As Martin moved his hand lightly, those

characters floated in mid-air.

Freya had hidden an incredible man. It was amazing to think how they had managed to live without being caught all this time.

“The ancient language given by the deity, and the language of the demon race. It’s written in both. The founder of our family was the one who mediated and notarized this contract, as a representative of the priests.”

“Why have you hidden this until now? If you sell this information to the Grand Duke’s family—”

“It’s complicated. First... The royal family deliberately put us forward as the notaries of the contract because our family hated the Grand Duke’s family more than anyone else.”

“Why is that?”

“Rentan built a vast empire. At that time, there were various city-states around the capital. Some followed the demon race, while others struggled to maintain their lineage. Rentan conquered both sides indiscriminately, destroying many families and earning considerable enmity. We were a clan of priests with divine power, but our foundation was different. We were part of one of the kingdoms that had been destroyed by the Grand Duke’s family.”

“And what about the royal family? If that’s true, then your family should be part of the royal family. Even if it was 300 years ago—”

“The royal family changed their minds. They believed that killing our clan would erase the contract. The founder of my family avoided assassination by the royal family but had to live in seclusion for life. Generations passed, and the enmity

towards the Grand Duke's family faded, but unable to go to either side, we simply hid with this enormous secret. That's how our reclusive family lineage began."

As time passed, they found themselves in a situation akin to having a hot potato in their mouth.

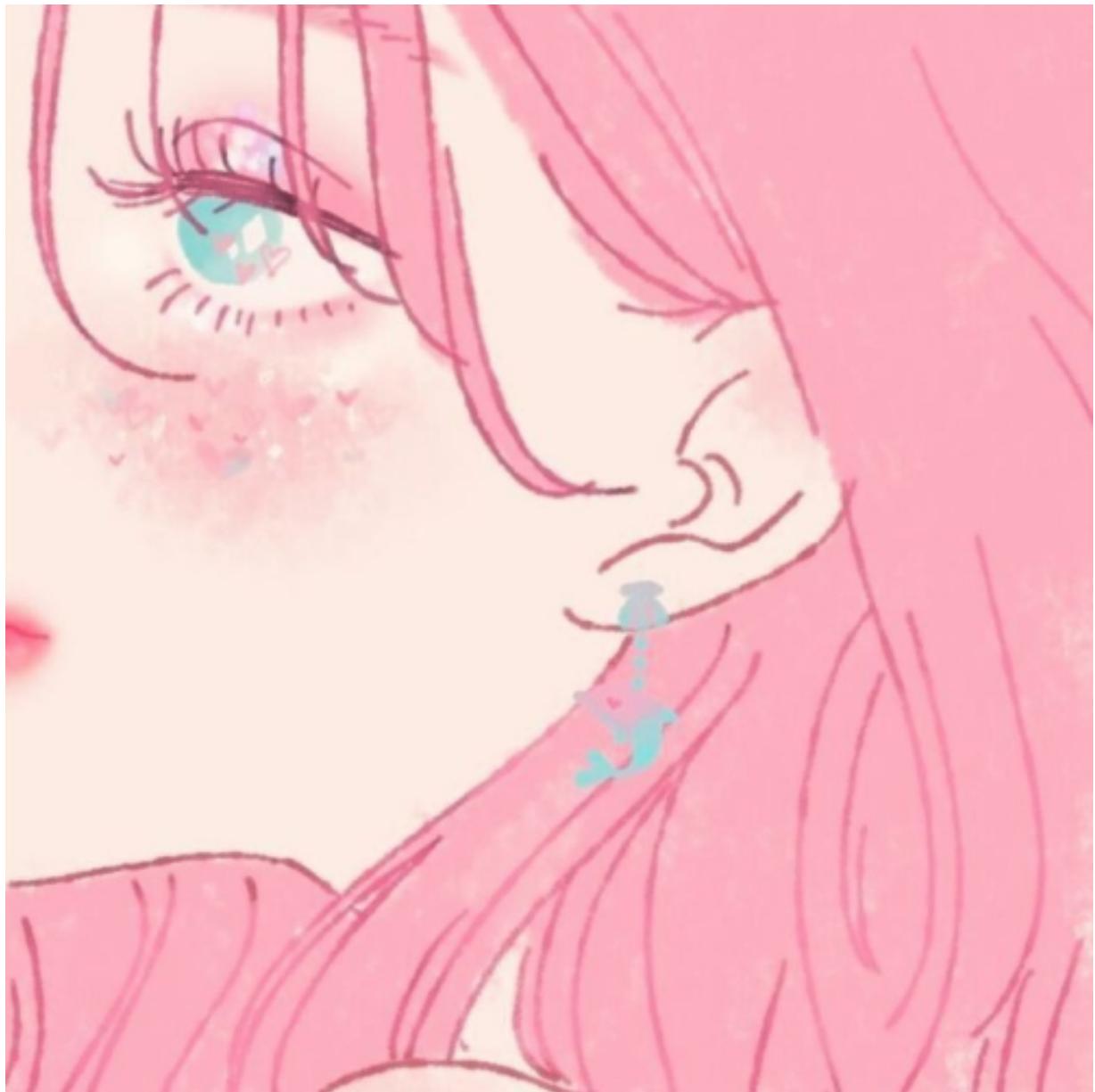
They were in a state where they could neither spit out nor swallow a secret that could potentially overturn the world.

Whether discovered by either side, they could have faced retribution. Even if they sold this information to the Grand Duke's family, there was no certainty of reward.

A pitiful victim caught in the trap of distrust.

Having fled for too long with an important secret, they ultimately became a family of sinners.

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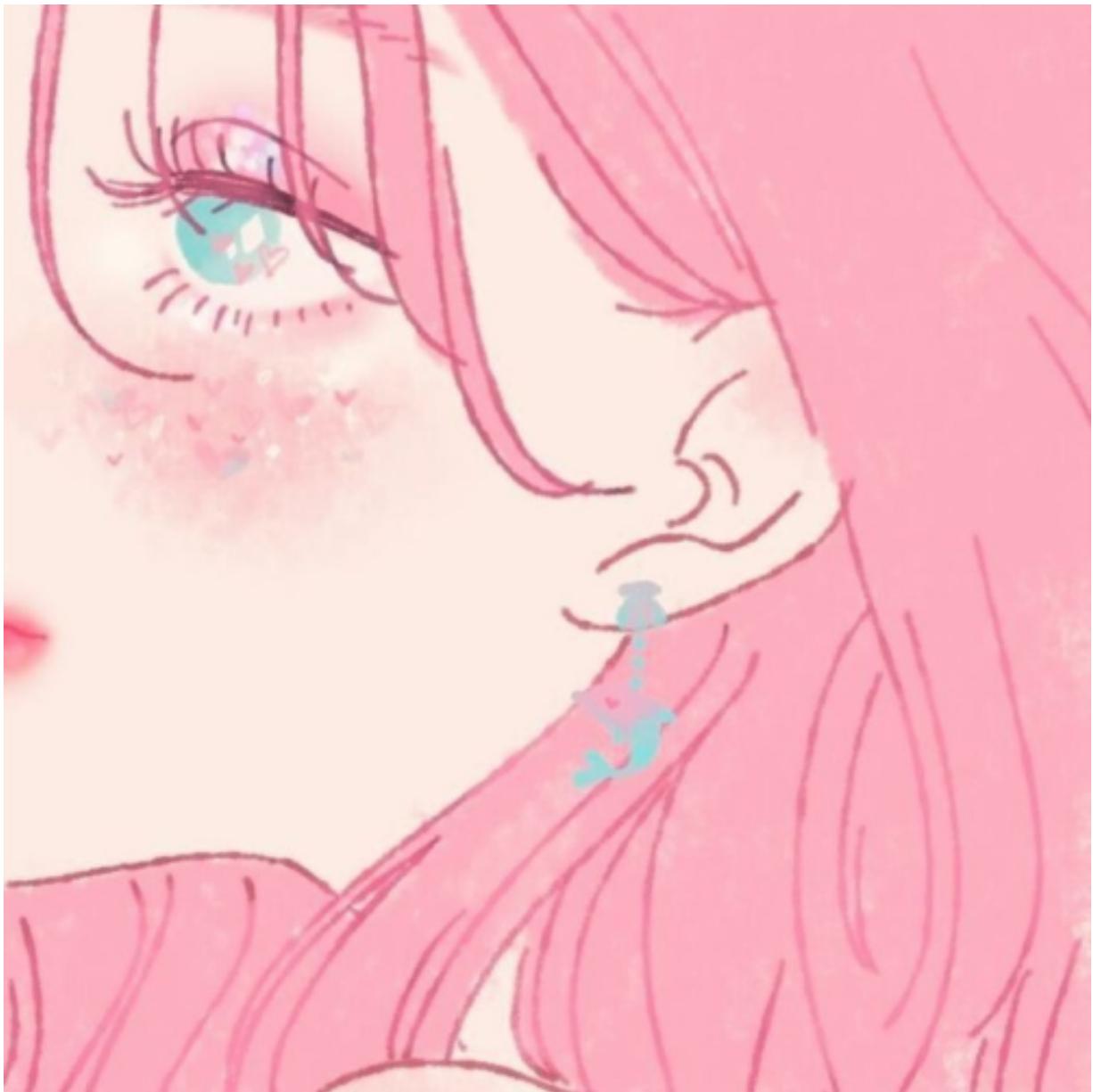


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# Chapter 180

“It was a scheme concocted by the royal family, no less than 300 years ago. They chose someone who despised the Grand Duke the most and put a collar on him. That’s always how they’ve been. Even now, nothing has changed.”

“The essence never changes, does it?”

Nicole felt a chill run down her spine. At the same time, many things became clear to her.

The will left by Martin in his past life contained the words, “I will embrace everything to take revenge on the Grand Duke’s family and die with it.”

Martin intended to conceal the existence of this contract with his death.

‘Could Isabel have discovered it? How did she find out and persuade Father to die?’

At the same time, it was frightening how much malice from one person could become such a massive boomerang. Even calling Isabel a demon seemed insufficient.

“Then why didn’t you raise us in the sanctuary? Didn’t your family have a hideout or a foundation?”

“We weren’t completely secluded. Some people knew of our existence, and our assets were tied up in complex ways.

And don't think there weren't those who pursued our family."

"Then your visits to the sanctuary?"

"The sanctuary has various factions of nobles. Among them are those who live in seclusion all their lives; we disguised ourselves as one of them and passed down the contract through generations."

"Why are you telling me this now? Is there a reason?"

"There are two reasons,"

Jay said kindly.

"If my sister is the head of the YvesChapel family, then I am the heir to Father's lineage. If something happens to Father's health, the contract engraved on his body will continue through the heir. Father is contemplating whether to pass this contract on to me or not. Or..."

"Perhaps it could also be offered up to the Grand Duke,"

Nicole murmured softly.

"Please tell me, what would happen if the Grand Duke found out about this contract?"

"I don't know exactly, but much would change. This contract is from over 200 years ago when Hyperion should have transferred the throne to the Grand Duke's family. If it comes to light that this was violated, the Grand Duke's family would gain the legitimacy to claim the throne. But what would that mean? Even if one becomes Emperor alone, they wouldn't be able to grasp any real power. It would only lead to civil war and throw the country into chaos."

“So, there was also a fear of war that led you to live in seclusion, right?”

“I am from a family of priests. Our clan adheres to pacifism.”

“You know there are various factions among the priests? Father’s clan is the most philanthropic among them. Though, it seems even those clans couldn’t endure the grudge from the war 300 years ago.”

Jay responded with a small laugh to Martin’s words.

Nicole nodded her head.

She could understand why her father and his clan had been on the run for so long.

However, there was one thing that needed to be addressed in her father’s words: authority. At that word, Nicole’s instincts were on high alert.

An assumption that should not have been completed was being revealed. This was information that could change everything.

“Father, please show me every part of the contract.”

Martin extended his other hand, and once again, letters floated in the air.

“The successor to the throne of this empire. That person shall have the authority to use all weapons left on this land by demons and gods. This is a covenant to protect the empire from external threats. It allows regents to utilize this power for a period of 100 years.”

Jay read it out clearly and distinctly.

‘When did you become so proficient in ancient languages?’

Nicole glanced at Jay.

“What do you think this means?”

“It means nothing. The demon tribe has disappeared, and the relic too—”

“Everyone believes that. That’s why the royal family has hidden the existence of the Flame.”

The power to control the Flame, meaning the authority to handle what the demon tribe left on this land, was bound by imperial power at that time.

It was frightening how cunningly the Hyperion royal family had deceived the people.

“The Flame?”

Martin asked.

Nicole and Jay looked at each other. Jay smiled faintly.

Jay had completely grasped the situation by combining the family secret he heard from Martin and the information about the Flame he heard from Nicole.

“The Flame?”

[T/N: Yes, apparently, this line was repeated, twice.]

Martin asked, puzzled. Nicole shook her head.

“We’ll talk about that later. But Dad, what do you think of the Grand Duke’s family? Do you hold a grudge like our ancestors did long ago?”

“Yes, they are the family that annihilated my wife’s lineage. But that was done by the current Grand Duke’s father, on imperial orders. If you love the current Grand Duke then...”

The humiliating marriage vow between the YvesChapel and the Valentine Grand Duke’s family.

Martin’s face clouded over as he recalled it.

However, he said no more. Perhaps Jay had done much to persuade Father in her absence.

Suddenly, Nicole thought of something else.

“Now I understand why the royal family is cursed. The reason they only give birth to children who are not of sound mind or who have various illnesses. The reason their blood is cursed is...”

“The punishment is because of breaking the contract with the demigod. And there’s also the sin of using powers that are not their own.”

Jay responded instead to Nicole’s words.

“I studied on my own after hearing the story from Father.”

When Nicole turned to Jay, he shrugged his shoulders.

“The shocking part is that the royal family’s powers were not given by a deity, but by demon tribes. I’m talking about the power of prophecy.”

“You can’t even imagine how valuable this information is, Dad.”

Nicole slumped into the chair, sweat beading on her forehead.

Jay glanced at the chessboard and flicked the king piece.

“If the Grand Duke learns this information—the throne will welcome a rightful Emperor, though it must go through the proper process.”

“What process is that?”

“A bloody process. You know it.”

Jay added by sharing all the content he had interpreted.

The new fact is that if there are no direct survivors from either family, the contract itself becomes null and void.

“That’s why they never touched the Grand Dukes. If the Grand Duke’s lineage ends, the royal family loses power too. The two families are connected by contract.”

For a long time, the Grand Duke’s family had been toyed with and bred by the royal family.

“To be precise, it was more like the royal family was parasitic on the powers of the Grand Duke’s family. They needed the Grand Duke’s family to borrow that power. Although, it seems they were obsessed with rituals offering living sacrifices because even that didn’t go well.”

“The royal family ruined Raul’s father. It’s said he was originally weak-hearted, but the royal family played a

decisive role. And they tried to breed Raul. They are repeating history.”

Nicole was talking about the royal family and thought of Sylvia. She felt like she was forgetting something about Sylvia, but couldn’t recall what it was. Instead, Aaron’s face kept haunting her thoughts.

“The royal family decided to resort to a loophole. They planned to marry Sylvia and Raul to produce a child to be the next emperor because now they are gradually losing their powers and only mad descendants are being born. That’s how they intended to fulfill the contract. They know the contents of the contract, and that they are merely regents.”

“Why didn’t they mix the blood of the royal family and the Grand Duke’s family from the beginning?”

Jay asked, frowning.

“The royal family feared being dominated by the Grand Duke’s lineage. Moreover, they couldn’t accept continuing their line through a daughter’s offspring, as the Grand Duke’s lineage is patrilineal, unlike YvesChapel. So, marrying Sylvia and Raul must have been their last resort.”

Nicole, having lived as a shadow within the Sith, had studied a lot about the royal family. She was well aware of their way of thinking.

“Hearing this, I’m thinking that the Grand Duke’s family might not have been so compliant either. They wouldn’t have wanted to mix their bloodline with the royal family’s. Three hundred years is both a long and short time.”

Nicole nodded in agreement.

"Anyway, Nicole, I told you I'd make a dowry for you. Information of this value can't be converted into money, can it?"

Jay said, stretching himself.

"What do you think? What should we receive in exchange for selling this to the Grand Duke's family? If you want to break up with that man, you can. If you want to keep seeing him, you could at least secure the position of Grand Duchess. You could make that man worship you for life. It's said that the Grand Duke is weak to indebtedness, isn't he?"

When did her younger sibling become capable of saying such things?

"I'm sick and tired of all this talk about becoming the Grand Duchess."

Nicole sat down in the chair, dumbfounded.

"Father, I'm curious about one thing. Then, the name of our family... what is it?"

"Lorsha. Martin de Lorsha is my name."

Nicole rolled the name around in her mouth.

"If you want, I will do everything I can for you."

Martin continued with a tender look on his face.

"Anything. I will give it all to you."

"I agree too. As the rightful heir to this information, if necessary, I will transfer all of the contract's contents to you, my sister."

Jay added.

“Can I really use this information as I wish...?”

“Of course.”

Martin nodded. Nicole smiled faintly.

“Then, I want to give this to Raul, just like that. Without any deal, without anything in return. I want to do everything I can for him.”

She had vowed to live and sacrifice her life for him in this life. Finally, Nicole was able to keep that promise to herself. She was happier than ever before.

“Are you sure that will be enough?”

“There will be no more negotiations between him and me. I want... to give everything I can, if you both would allow it.”

Nicole said softly.

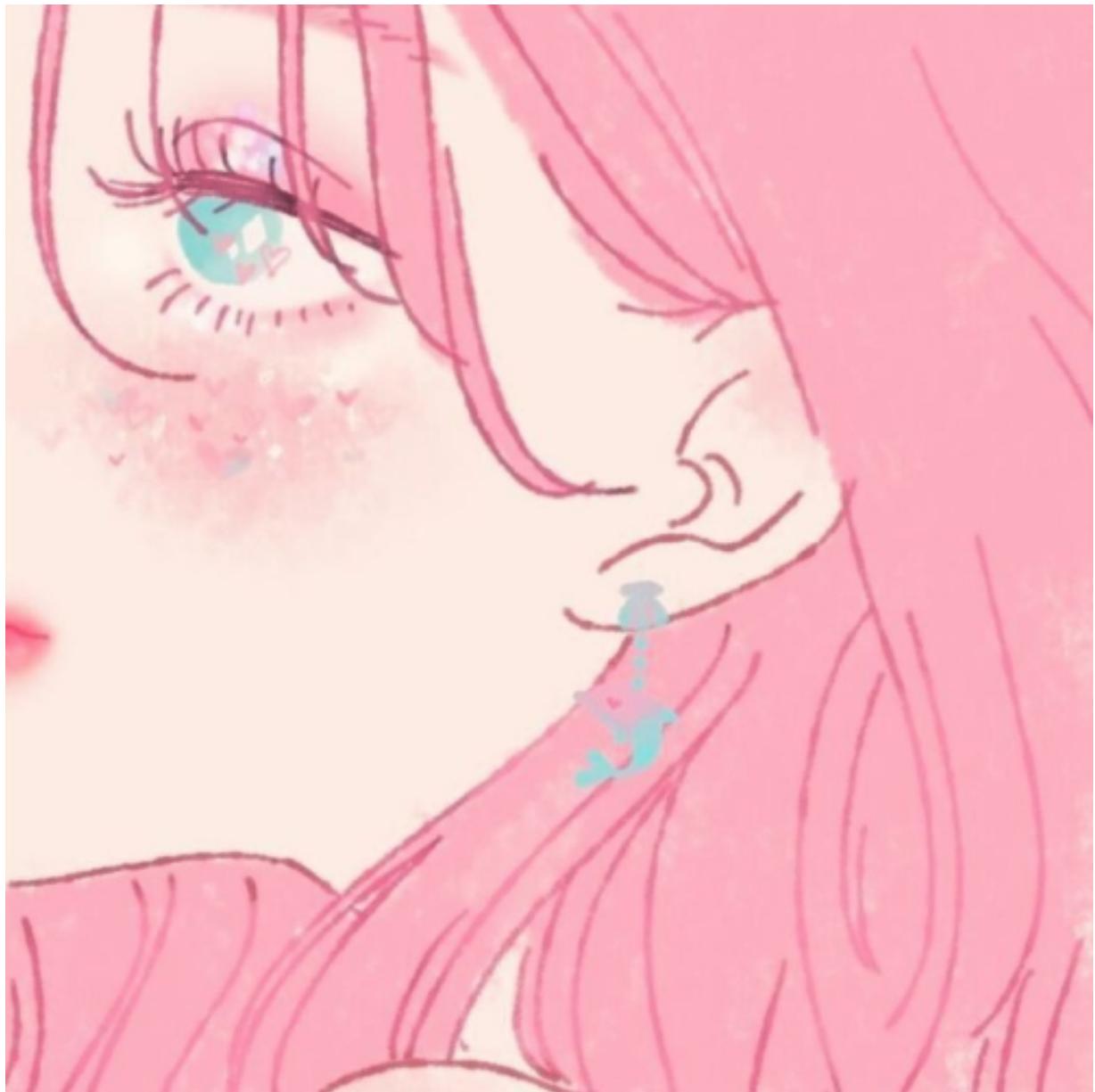
“And there’s another reason. I am his informant, his agent, his spy. By chance, but I always bring him the best results.”

Of course, Raul does not like that process.

Jay shrugged his shoulders.

“As the head of our family wishes. We will gladly dedicate ourselves to your will.”

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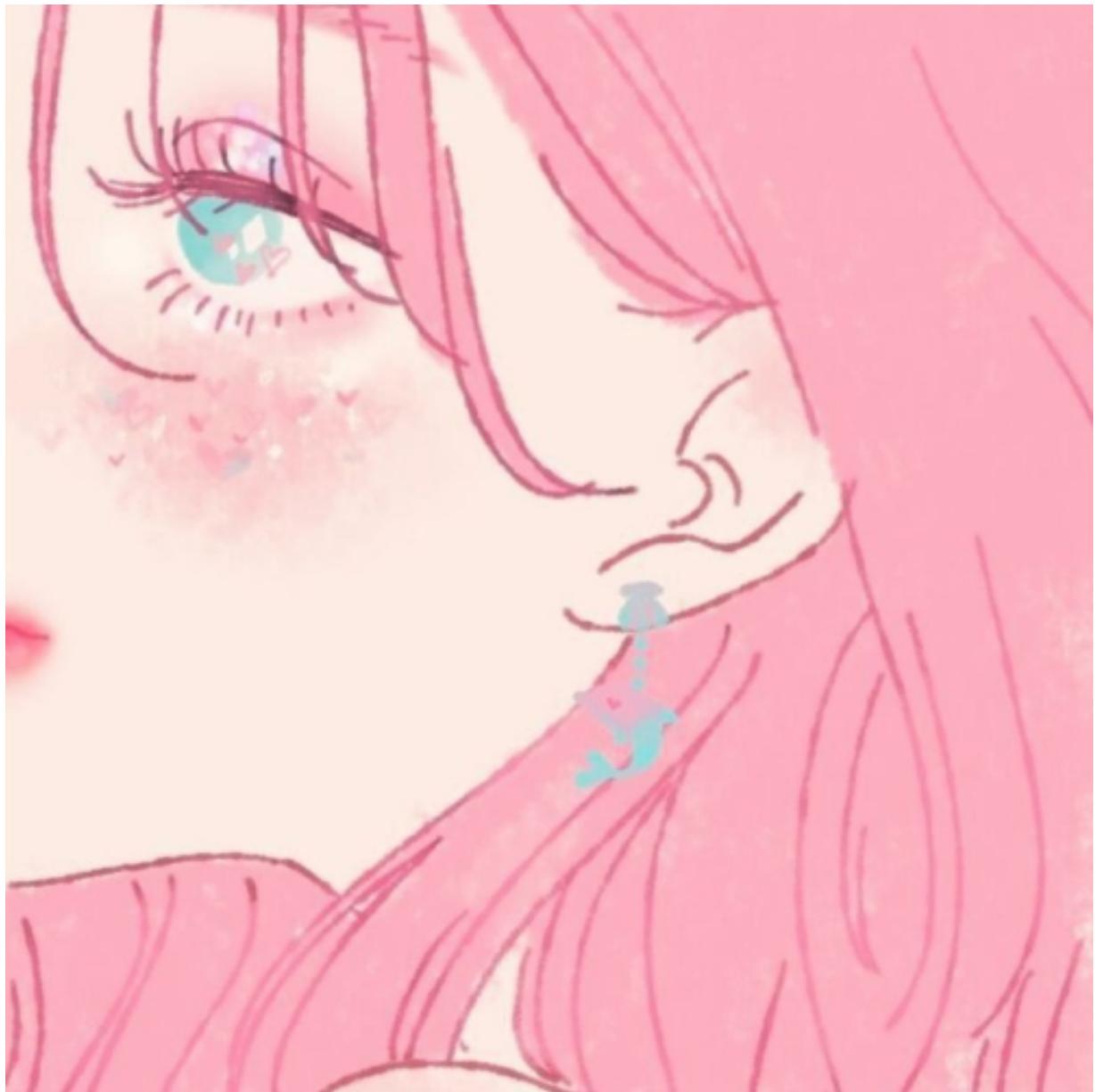


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# Chapter 181

That afternoon, Nicole urgently requested a meeting with Raul.

The servants of Raul in the holy place. Among them, the steward-like chief promised to find a way.

It was the first time Nicole had gone to see Raul. They were being cautious to avoid the royal family's notice.

The grand duke's residence, which she hadn't visited in a long time, felt unfamiliar to Nicole and was very quiet.

"He is in the office right now."

Raul was conversing with a few members of the Sith in his office. Upon seeing Nicole, he immediately dismissed them.

"Karen."

As Nicole approached, he gestured to her. He was dressed only in a shirt and black pants, his toned body visible through the thin shirt.

"Why have you come to see me so suddenly?"

Nicole slowly observed him, feeling strangely affectionate after not seeing him for a few days.

"Nothing unusual has happened in the meantime, has it?"

“Hmm.”

Raul nodded his head.

“Who was the man with you all day today? You were talking with your brother’s priest for a very long time, shooing people away. Moreover, it’s ridiculous that the report mentioned he was handsome.”

“...You really know everything, but it seems you didn’t eavesdrop on my conversation.”

Nicole felt like laughing when she saw Raul; she had been in such a state ever since they met again.

“He... has come to deliver an important message. And he will become someone of significance to you in the future.”

“Is he a lost family member of mine?”

Nicole blinked quietly. She approached Raul softly and slowly, placing her hand on the back of his hand.

Raul seemed a bit surprised and wrapped his arm around her waist. Nicole instinctively tensed her lower abdomen.

“Please tell me. When you said you loved me, was it sincere?”

Raul closed his mouth for a moment.

“I’m increasingly unsure of the context.”

“I wanted to see you, and I wanted to hear your voice. Tell me, what do you think when you think of me?”

Raul’s expression softened considerably.

"When I think that I love you, dark emotions often arise, and I become terribly violent. But amidst that, I see something like a faint light."

Raul said while gently caressing Nicole's shoulder.

Nicole recalled him saying something similar in her past life. She also thought of the secret of the white handkerchief.

Whether Nicole was the bizarre woman Karen from the streets or the Grand Duchess with humble origin.

He loved her just the same.

"You do love me, don't you."

"Perhaps."

Nicole faintly lifted the corners of her mouth. Then she stepped back from him, looking straight into Raul's eyes.

"I have something to tell you, Raul. The truth is, I'm not Karen. My real name is Nicole."

Raul's pupils narrowed slightly. Nicole hoped that Raul would not get too angry.

For a moment, she feared she might be strangled to death by his anger.

But now she decided to trust this man and confide a part of herself to him. She whispered into his ear.

"My mother is Freya de YvesChapel. I am the legitimate daughter of YvesChapel. I am your... fiancée whom you thought was dead."

\*\*\*

“You were deceiving me after all.”

Raul growled with anger, understandably furious. Nicole flinched against the wall.

His anger was immense, and she had never seen him like this before.

“Are you going to send me to the royal family? Nicely wrapped with a ribbon labeled traitor?”

“What nonsense are you talking about? I was willing to give up half of my military power just to bring you here. I’ve done the unthinkable, the one thing I shouldn’t have done. And now you think I’d send you back?”

Nicole calmed down. She looked at Raul with a touch of sadness in her eyes.

“Then is there still a glimmer of hope left?”

Raul’s anger subsided a little. Probably many people outside were trembling, wondering if their master was about to kill his lover.

“You’re wicked, insane, and cunning. You’ve deceived me all along, making me look like a madman when I suspected you.”

Raul pushed Nicole against the wall, his hand lightly touching her neck.

“It was to survive. I had no choice. Even Grace pitied me for it.”

Raul stared intently into Nicole’s eyes. She spoke in a gentle murmur.

"What would have happened if you and I had married? I would have become the human target of the entire royal family. You know? Being your lover is much safer than being your wife."

Strictly speaking, there was room for argument. But Nicole now understood.

Raul loses his composure to some extent in front of her. He is vulnerable when it comes to topics like Nicole's safety and well-being.

Nicole felt as if she had learned how to tame a wild beast. A creature that, despite its constant growling, could become docile under certain conditions.

"What about now? Will you marry me?"

"You just said it yourself. You're already a target of the royal family. By marrying me, you would only make that target larger and add a shining decoration to it. If they find out you're from YvesChapel, the royals will go mad."

Raul spoke as if he couldn't believe it. His expression was one of torment once again.

His expression was indecipherable, caught between wanting to devour Nicole or to ruin her completely.

"Then are you going to punish me?"

"Of course. But not in the way you imagine. Once things settle down, you'll find yourself trapped in my bed, unable to leave."

Raul spoke with disbelief, and Nicole bit her lip, barely managing a smile.

“In that case, Raul...”

Nicole embraced him again. Raul reflexively hugged her back so tightly it was almost suffocating.

“I trust you, and I have a gift for you. You must accept it. And even after receiving it, you must not change your mind.”

“What is it?”

“The world.”

Nicole whispered in Raul’s ear.

Nicole, shaking off her body, rolled up her sleeves. She had with her the most valuable thing inherited from her father.

The oldest promise of the Grand Duke’s family. A key that could even handle Flames. It was an unparalleled gift.

“I will give everything into your hands. I will give you the world.”

\*\*\*

A few days later.

Nicole had returned to the sanctuary and was spending some quiet time.

Martin had also left for the monastery where he secluded himself, deciding it was best to hide himself for the time being.

Jay had said he would return to being an ordinary student until the storm subsided.

Nicole hugged her father tightly, promising to meet again soon.

For now, being apart would help protect each other.

They all felt regret, but the family was capable of making such a level-headed decision.

By the time Martin emerged next, he would learn the truth about Isabel. However, by then, many situations would have changed. Nicole believed so.

“But Father, if you are being pursued, how can you come and go from the sanctuary so easily?”

“First of all, it’s not that I come and go easily; I’m hiding among a group of recluses. And... there are some circumstances.”

Martin briefly explained his situation. The monasteries where he was hiding were located in caves, inhabited by monks isolated from the world and unknown to it.

Martin had a few close friends. Among them was a friend who was seriously ill; he prayed to God until the end and passed away quietly in front of the altar.

He left a will allowing Martin to use his identity because he knew his situation.

“In the end, our entire family has been living under false identities.”

Blood cannot lie, can it? Even in her dying moment, Freya hoped that Nicole and Jay would survive by switching identities.

If there was an example from father, then it made sense that mother had shown such resourcefulness.

“The day for that is not far off.”

Jay said softly.

“If the Grand Duke is in his right mind, he would spare YvesChapel.”

Nicole imagined her identity issue being resolved. Not as a traitor, but at least as someone from a noble family.

It was thrilling. Above all, it would enable Jay to live in the world with pride. Martin would no longer have to live in hiding.

“But, I hadn’t thought of that.”

Jay said as if lost in thought.

“What thought?”

“Borrowing someone else’s identity.”

For some reason, Nicole sensed that Jay was talking about Aaron.

Jay had an odd fixation on that child. There was something strange about it to be merely a friendship with a boy from the same school.

‘But it seems there is something I’ve forgotten about Erin...’

Nicole fidgeted with her hands, feeling extremely uneasy. She thought it might be worth researching a drug that could revive memories.

And a few days later, Jay sent just a single note.

*-Aaron de Milan was a dead person. His identity had been erased a long time ago. I belatedly realized that no one knows him anymore.*

Is Aaron some kind of mysterious boy ghost?

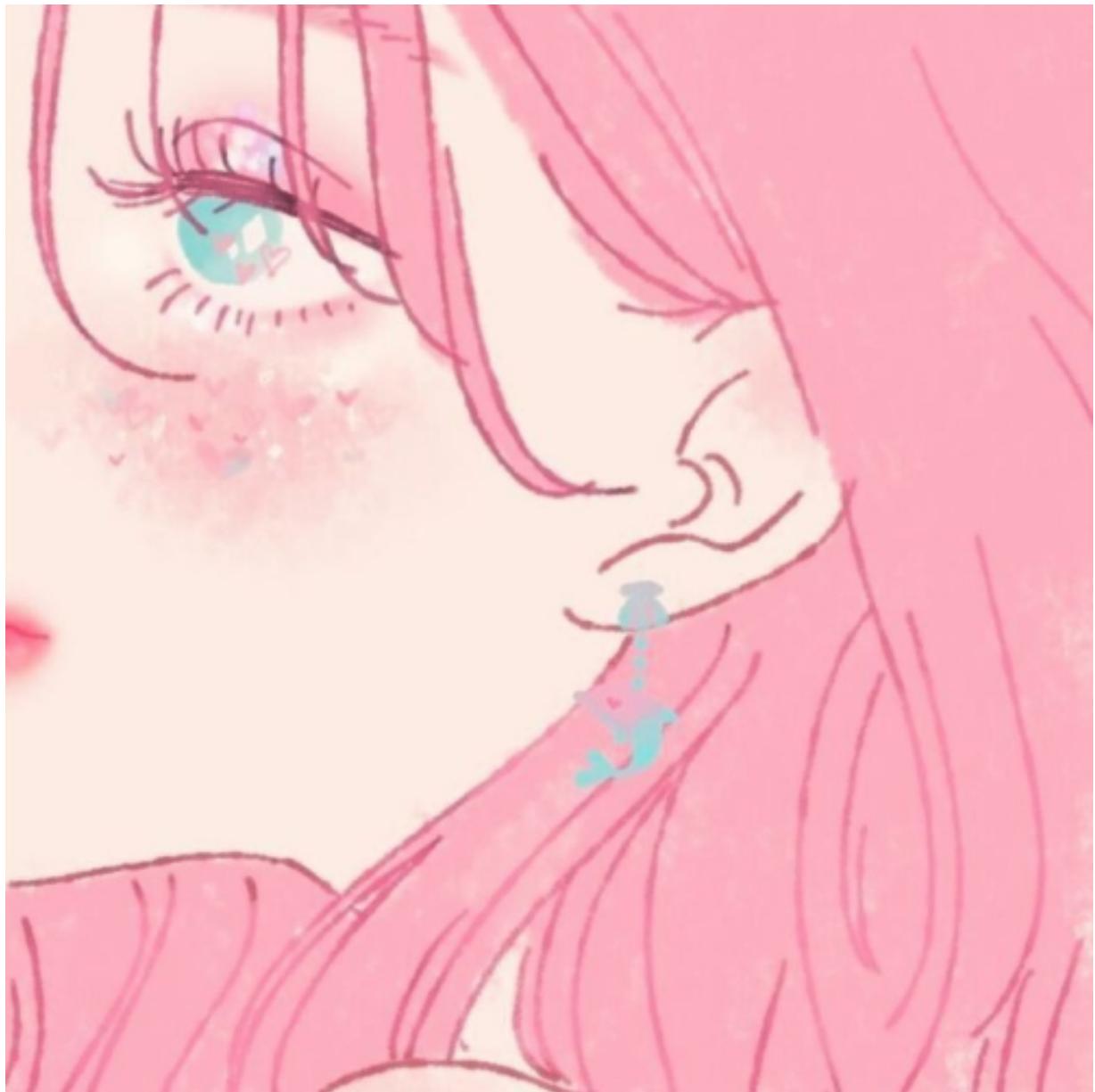
'Could Jay possibly like boys?'

Nicole's fingertips tingled at the sudden thought. However, there were many things for Nicole to ponder before delving into Jay's secret love story.

She said politely that she would ask Raul if there was anything that could be done about Aaron.

And Jay politely declined that suggestion.

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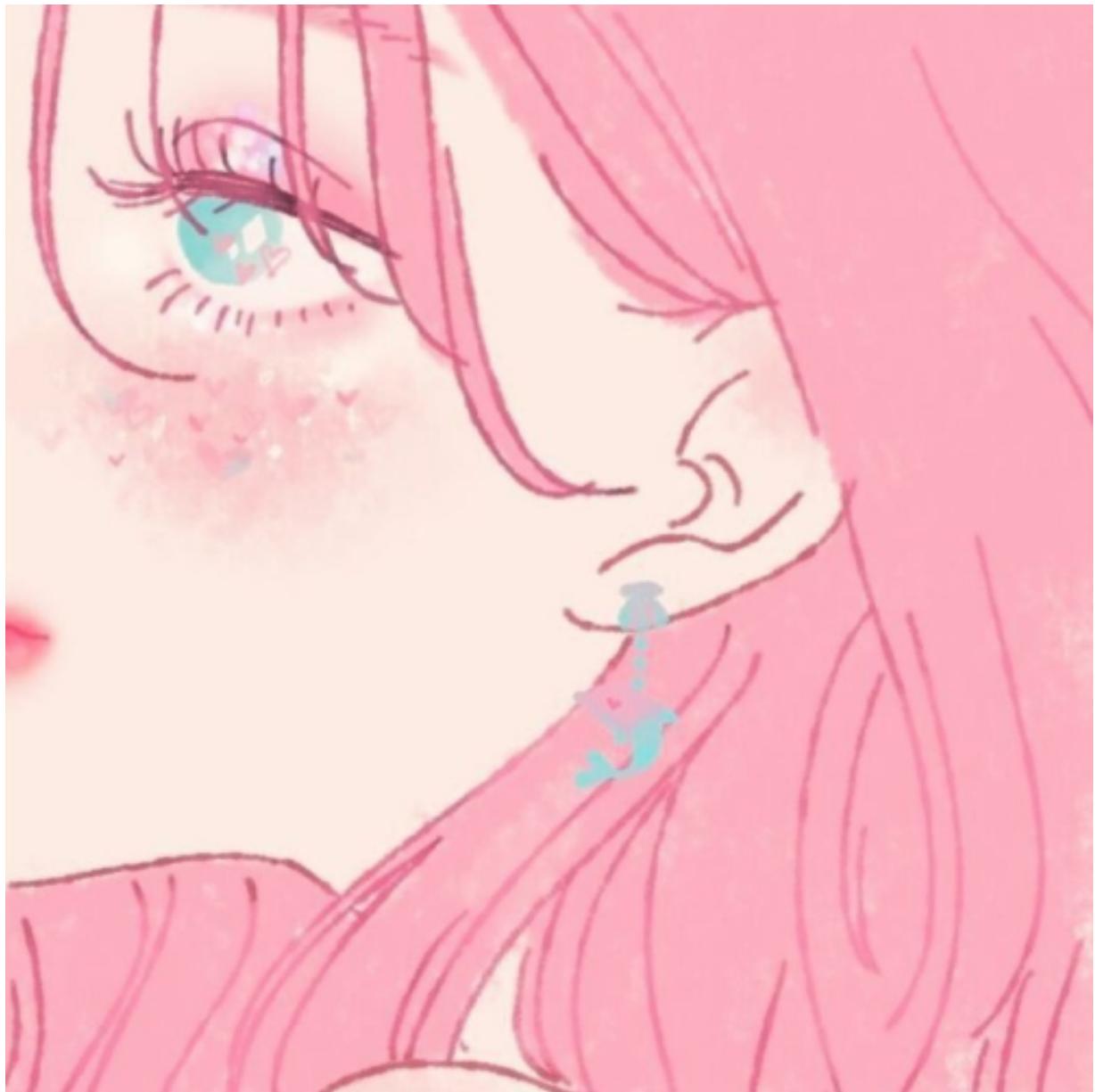


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# Chapter 182

A month later, Nicole was still in the holy land.

Nicole strolled through the garden, looking around the place.

‘It’s strange, I feel like I’ve seen this place before.’

The ancient mansion of the grand duke in the holy land. She didn’t realize it when she first walked inside.

However, the longer she stayed here, the more Nicole felt a sense of déjà vu.

An unfounded feeling as if she had been here a long time ago.

The sound of children laughing. The patter of little running feet.

⟨Find the passage you like in the book. Read it to me.⟩

And her younger self. The sound of clicking an abacus...

‘Isabel has messed with my mind so much in my past life that I doubt my own memories. What era could this delusion be from?’

Nicole really thought she needed psychiatric treatment.

Especially those strange memories intensified when she discovered the sturdy treehouse built on a large tree inside the forest connected to the garden.

'Why does this treehouse seem familiar? It's as if I have memories of playing here...'

As a child, Nicole lived hidden in the countryside, so it was impossible to have memories in such a mansion. The treehouse was like something out of a dream.

"You were here, Noona."

Then someone approached hastily, rustling through the foliage.

"Dagger!"

Nicole's eyes widened with joy. She hadn't seen Dagger or Estock since escaping from the royal family's clutches. It had been a very long time.

"Have you been well? Dagger, your coming here means..."

"Ah, the Grand Duke is looking for you. He's going to the imperial palace today."

Raul had reclaimed the contract. He had easily acquired the method to control the Flame.

The royal family was thrown into chaos and had gathered a few soldiers. However, to Raul, who had already seized military power, it seemed like child's play.

Raul would enter the imperial palace tonight. And that meant he had decided to put an end to the royal family.

"Would you like to watch this play from the front row? Just be warned, there will be quite a bit of bloodshed."

"Isn't it to intimidate the royal family? Is it a place for me to go?"

"The Grand Duke says that now there is no place in the capital where his woman cannot go. He is referring to our female lead, Ms. Karen. Moreover, intimidation is too polite a word. You seem to underestimate our superior."

Nicole closed her eyes. Yet, she couldn't bear not to witness the downfall of the royal family. It was her duty to watch over it in Grace's stead.

\*\*\*

Knights and soldiers surrounded every corridor of the imperial palace. They were all Raul's men.

Not a single one of the palace's many servants could be seen. Everywhere was quiet.

Nicole followed Dagger as if the place were her own front yard, walking slowly.

"Wait here."

Dagger led Nicole up to the front of the largest audience chamber in the imperial palace.

Nicole stood in the doorway, peering inside.

Thud, thud.

Raul was advancing into the audience chamber, his footsteps striking the marble floor.

\*\*\*

Raul looked very confident. He was dressed in black, but the usual medals were all gone.

However, true to his style, he was adorned with elaborate gold trimmings.

His tall stature stood out even more under the majestic form of the imperial palace; he seemed as though he was born here.

“Something felt strange.”

Raul approached the throne and spoke as the imperial soldiers pointed their swords at him. Flames arose around him.

“Raul, my man. Please calm down. Grand Duke... Think of our empire.”

Emperor Nerus was paralyzed, his face ashen.

He appeared to have aged decades in just a month, visibly trembling even from a distance.

His eyes were shaking wildly, and he couldn't keep his hands and feet still.

“I am very weak. My body is frail, and I, I am...”

She had forgotten that Nerus too was half-mad. The seed of the imperial family was cursed to produce only the insane.

“Father, save me. Father...”

Clinging closely to Nerus and shivering was Martes.

Martes's hair was wildly disheveled, like a madman on the streets, with sporadic stubble on his chin where he hadn't shaved.

'That disheveled appearance, it's frightening to think that the people of the underground temple might see it.'

Their religion. In the pseudo-religion exploited by the imperial family, they claimed themselves to be messengers of god.

But far from being messengers of god, they didn't even seem like sane people.

"Raul, remember your childhood. You are a servant of our family, a retainer. Remember your father's teachings. Do you want to end up like your father, who lost his wife? Our mercy in returning your mistress to you..."

As if to protect them, Empress Catrell stepped forward and shouted. Despite her delicate appearance, she was full of vigor.

Remember.

It seemed that Catrell wanted to say just that.

"Ah, ugh, ah!"

At that moment, the Empress clutched her own throat.

"I heard about what you did to Grace. You've upset my woman quite a bit."

Raul slowly approached and looked at her. Catrell was rolling on the floor, writhing.

"Hik, hu, keugh..."

She couldn't even scream, let alone breathe, but through her contorted face like that of a demon, one could imagine the pain pressing on Catrell's entire body.

"I heard you called my mentor a bad mother. Your daughter will go through hell because of you from now on. So, I'll return that title to you."

Raul clicked his tongue. He walked past the Empress, who was at his feet, as if she was nothing.

"I've been feeling very good since I got the contract back. It's like there's no limit to my power."

"Gak, guk!"

Blood flowed from the Empress's throat, and then a stream burst into the air. The Empress died with a single scream, blood pouring from every orifice in her face.

"I really like this ability."

Raul smiled faintly.

At that time, Martes, clutching his head, stood up and let out a strange scream.

"H, hiiik! Don't break me. I'm glass. I, I am... Don't shatter me..."

"Shut up."

Raul snapped his fingers. Martes's face went pale, and he closed his mouth.

Raul walked to the throne very slowly, leisurely, as if taking a stroll.

As he passed by, this time the high priest collapsed. He died without a sound.

"I didn't know he was capable of even this."

Nicole whispered, clutching Dagger.

"It seems even his power limitations have vanished. In fact, since a little while ago... Ah, no. It's better for you to see it for yourself."

Dagger shrugged his shoulders.

Then, Raul turned his head to look at Nicole. As their eyes met, Nicole found herself unable to think at all.

He was covered in blood, looking both cruel and beautiful.

"Come here, Nicole,"

Raul said.

Nicole's heart tingled. In front of the throne, she was being called Nicole by him.

She advanced with Dagger's escort.

"Whom shall I kill, and whom shall I spare? Did you suffer when you were captured here?"

Raul intended to spare only one direct descendant of the imperial family. Nicole sensed it.

At that moment, Martes knelt down abruptly in front of Nicole.

"You... Have I not been good to you? Please save me, save me!"

"Martes, I'm your Father, I must live for you to survive, you fool!"

Nerus gritted his teeth and said.

Nicole looked at both of them with a face full of disillusionment.

"I am curious about one thing, Your Highness the Crown Prince. When you sacrificed many people at the altar and killed them in exchange for using the Flame, was there no one among them who begged for their life?"

Nicole asked, looking at Martes.

"I am... of a rank that allows it. They were born to be sacrificed."

Martes muttered. Nicole looked at him and smiled faintly.

"You asked whom to spare, right? Let me tell you one thing, Raul. That precious person made of glass over there, who was the Crown Prince of this country- he tried to strip my clothes to test whether my skin was made of glass. If those around hadn't stopped him, he really would have done so. What would have happened to me if they had found out I wasn't made of glass?"

"Hmm."

Raul nodded lightly.

"Take our female lead out."

"Yes."

Dagger took Nicole's hand. As he carefully escorted her out, a bursting sound was heard from behind.

Glancing back, the Crown Prince's body was slammed against the wall, and Raul was thrusting his sword into Nerus after smashing him into the throne.

"Since you coveted a power that wasn't yours, it suits you to die like this. Very slowly. Over a long period of time."

Raul's cruelty was well-known, so it was not frightening.

Rather, seeing that she even felt awe, she thought she must have been quite influenced by him.

"And Princess Sylvia?"

"She is being hunted. She will be caught soon. What should we do with the Princess? Would you like to take revenge yourself?"

Dagger answered while walking with Nicole.

"Revenge?"

"Princess Sylvia is also from the family that kidnapped and imprisoned you. Since the Grand Duke has killed Martes, he will decide to spare Princess Sylvia. If you ask to bring her and punish her, he will allow it."

Nicole stopped. She found herself strangely hating everything about the royal family.

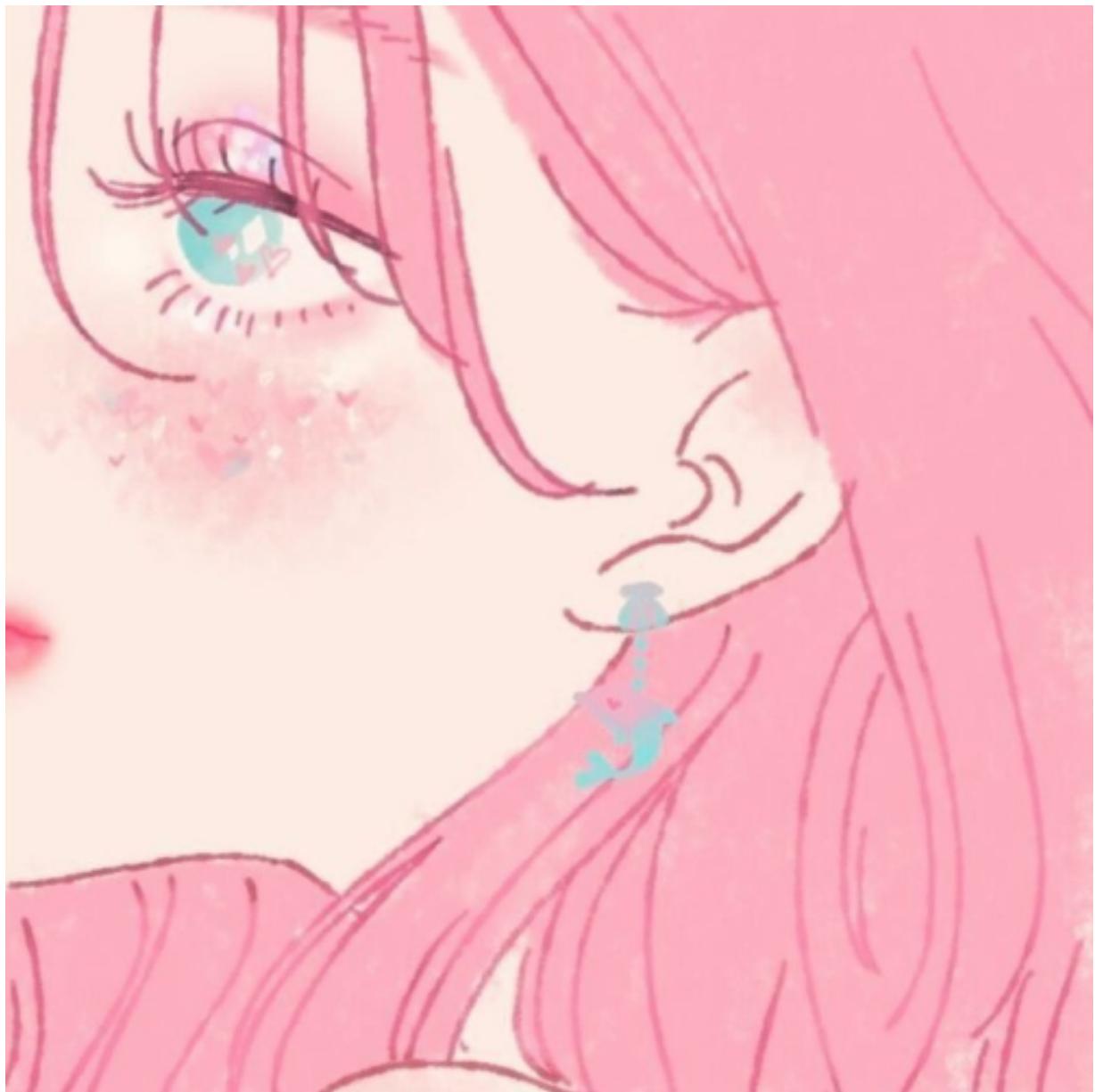
Moreover, Sylvia had... a debt from her past life.

Nicole thought of Jay, who was young and pitiable in her past life, and now Jay, who had changed like a different person. She felt a slight guilt for leaving his enemy alone.

But somehow, she felt it would be wrong to drive Sylvia into suffering.

"No need for apologies or punishment. Sylvia is still young, so please don't be too harsh... Ask that she not be hurt. Just say it's a request from me to Raul."

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# Chapter 183

“I understand. Princess Sylvia will probably be demoted to a commoner. It’s as if she’s not really alive,”

Dagger responded.

At that moment, from the opposite side, Estock approached with an expression like that of a beast sated with its meal.

“Estock.”

Nicole called out to her.

“Today is the day of a delightful banquet. However, it’s a party of a genre that doesn’t suit our lady. Now, since our esteemed lady has come to this gloomy and dark place, shall we escort her to the brightest spot available, Dagger?”

“I’ll follow shortly after meeting the Grand Duke. I must convey our lady’s generous verdict.”

Dagger nodded agreeably.

Estock was wearing an outfit that slightly revealed her figure, a Sith uniform for female knights. Until now, Estock had worn men’s uniforms.

“At least now I know your gender.”

Estock shrugged her shoulders.

"We have something to talk about as well, don't we?"

\*\*\*

The place Estock took Nicole to was a small relic storage room.

Originally surrounded by strict guards, the place was now unattended by anyone.

Glass cases were placed along the walls, containing ancient crowns, scepters, and various maps and accessories.

It appeared to have been used as a small audience hall in the past, as evidenced by the large throne now unused at the head seat, with several crimson silk chairs scattered around.

"Wow, this is cool. I doubt anyone would notice if one went missing."

Estock whistled and casually swung a poker from near the stove. Soon after, a clanging sound was heard as the glass cases shattered.

Estock took out a small crown from there. She spun it in her hand and then plopped down onto one of the chairs.

Nicole quietly looked down at Estock.

"You were the royal family's sacrifice and the only escapee from that mad religious facility."

"Yes, that's correct."

Estock replied cheerfully.

"And you used me. You knew I would be kidnapped by the royal family, or perhaps face something even more dangerous."

"I was helping you. Weren't you desperate to be kidnapped by the royal family?"

Estock said.

Nicole's gaze changed. To her right was a large window with the curtain half-drawn. The rising sun cast a shadow across Nicole's face.

"On what basis?"

"You pleased our boss by deciding to avoid Grace. The Grand Duke did not wish for the two of you to be close. Yet suddenly, you were secretly visiting Grace's home, flaunting your friendship as if daring the royal family to notice."

"I wanted to protect Grace."

Nicole said calmly.

"Grace had drawn too much attention from the royal family just before her demise. I intended to become the target instead of Grace. I knew they would never dare to kill me; they didn't have the courage to kill Raul's mistress. But Grace was different; they had been plotting against her for a long time, knowing that Raul's protection of her had run its course."

"Whether it was due to that effort or by chance, you were kidnapped together. Thanks to that, you became the Sith's Shadow, the first to have a chance to spy on the inner workings of the royal family. Wow, I'm a proud colleague. You are the best spy."

Estock clapped her hands in applause.

“But Grace... I couldn’t protect her.”

Nicole said in a dry voice. It was true that she had feared the prophecy, but now that Grace was in danger, she felt that the prophecy no longer mattered.

At the same time, Nicole was aware of the royal family’s tactics. She had an intuition that they would try to take her away and threaten her at least once.

Such attempts had been made in her past life as well, through Duchess Lisbeth. Perhaps, if Raul had not protected her then, she would have been taken away like the former Grand Duchess.

However, in the end, Grace died, and Nicole was left alone to uphold Grace’s will. She did what she could as Raul’s agent, gathering as much information as possible.

“Now, let’s hear your story. Who are you, Estock?”

“You know who I am.”

Estock said, tapping the crown on her head and swinging her legs.

“But if you wish to hear it, I will gladly serve you with my tale.”

Estock said, speaking as if she were a storyteller from the marketplace.

“Somewhere in this world, there was a secret temple, hidden so well that no one knew how to enter or leave.

About twenty and some years ago, an extraordinary girl appeared within it!"

"How many times have I heard this story? I'm tired of your storyteller's imitation."

Nicole remarked when Dagger entered the room silently. She glanced at him.

However, Dagger's face shone with a faint affection for Estock.

"Everyone inside was very, very happy. The pitiful people outside, the commoners, were unhappy. They worked and fell ill, while those born here were called 'God's People' just for being born, feasting and playing, sleeping, and taking drugs to feel good several times a day! Wasn't it practically the most perfect paradise? And when their time came, they died as sacrifices on the altar. They believed this temple was the gateway to heaven and that death took them to a real heaven, a better place. What an interesting affair it was. Children, the elderly, the middle-aged—all went in turn without exception!"

Estock's tone, animated as she spoke, was tinged with a faint madness.

"But even in such a happy world, there is always a black sheep born, a terribly naughty black sheep who questions everything with 'why'. This black sheep girl had wondered from birth about the royals and priests of the prophet class. Why do they never go to that good heaven themselves? Whether it's a clan not even of sound mind that rules this earthly paradise."

"Interesting. Go on."

Nicole encouraged Estock.

"The black sheep girl realized that there was one thing not permitted in this earthly paradise: a reversal of status. Born a sacrifice, you could not become a priest even in death. How irrational is that? So, the girl decided. She would challenge this injustice."

Estock extended her arm.

"Look at this tattoo. It signifies that I am of the lower class, according to their religion."

"Estock, you were number 239. It's unimaginable how many people lived and died as living sacrifices..."

Estock gave a wry smile and extended both hands as if to conclude the story with a greeting.

"And then the girl found an incredibly beautiful young lady who could be the clue to return me to that earthly paradise. Her name is Nicole, or Karen, perhaps. I thought about it every day—to bring down the royal family and laugh at those people. But I couldn't find a way. The hidden temple—it didn't exist physically, you see. A small warp gate using mirrors? No one would guess that."

Food and necessities would have been needed to sustain many people.

It was possible to transport them using the warp gate, and it's said that only the royal family could use the gate.

It wouldn't have been strange for them to go unnoticed if they created an environment where only a minimal number of people were needed to move goods and be self-sufficient.

But now, even the authority to use that gate will belong to Raul.

And all the secrets of the royal family will be exposed, leading to their complete downfall.

The crime of demon worship is something not even the imperial family can escape from paying for.

"My hunch was spot on. Karen, you found the way, went back there, and reported on the situation. Once again, you've proven yourself to be an exceptional agent."

"Even though my lover has fired me,"

Nicole chuckled and made a joke.

"So what is your ultimate goal, Estock?"

"Rebellion, curiosity,"

Estock answered.

"...The sacrifices there were all, to some degree, descendants of the six great families. Estock, what about you? Do you know which family's bloodline you belong to?"

Estock gave the brightest and most radiant smile Nicole had ever seen.

"Hyperion. I am of the royal bloodline. It's rare, but I've heard that even those of royal descent can be kidnapped if they are illegitimate. And then they give birth to children there, living only within that realm."

It was as she had suspected. Nicole had imagined many things about Estock. Could the power of the prophet's

lineage really be passed down only directly? Could all of Estock's actions have been merely intuition or feeling?

"Do you want to become the Emperor?"

"It's not bad. But I'm not interested in ruling. I just wanted to try on the crown. If it comes to regency, I'll do it. Though I would be nothing but a puppet of the Grand Duke, after all."

Nicole finally understood everything. Estock said she had a card to negotiate with Raul. Estock had revealed her lineage and provided Raul with clues to the secret religion.

"Then let's go now. I wish to meet our Grand Duke. Only then can I open the mirror gate and return to the paradise I left behind. I wonder what expressions people will have when they see the return of the black sheep."

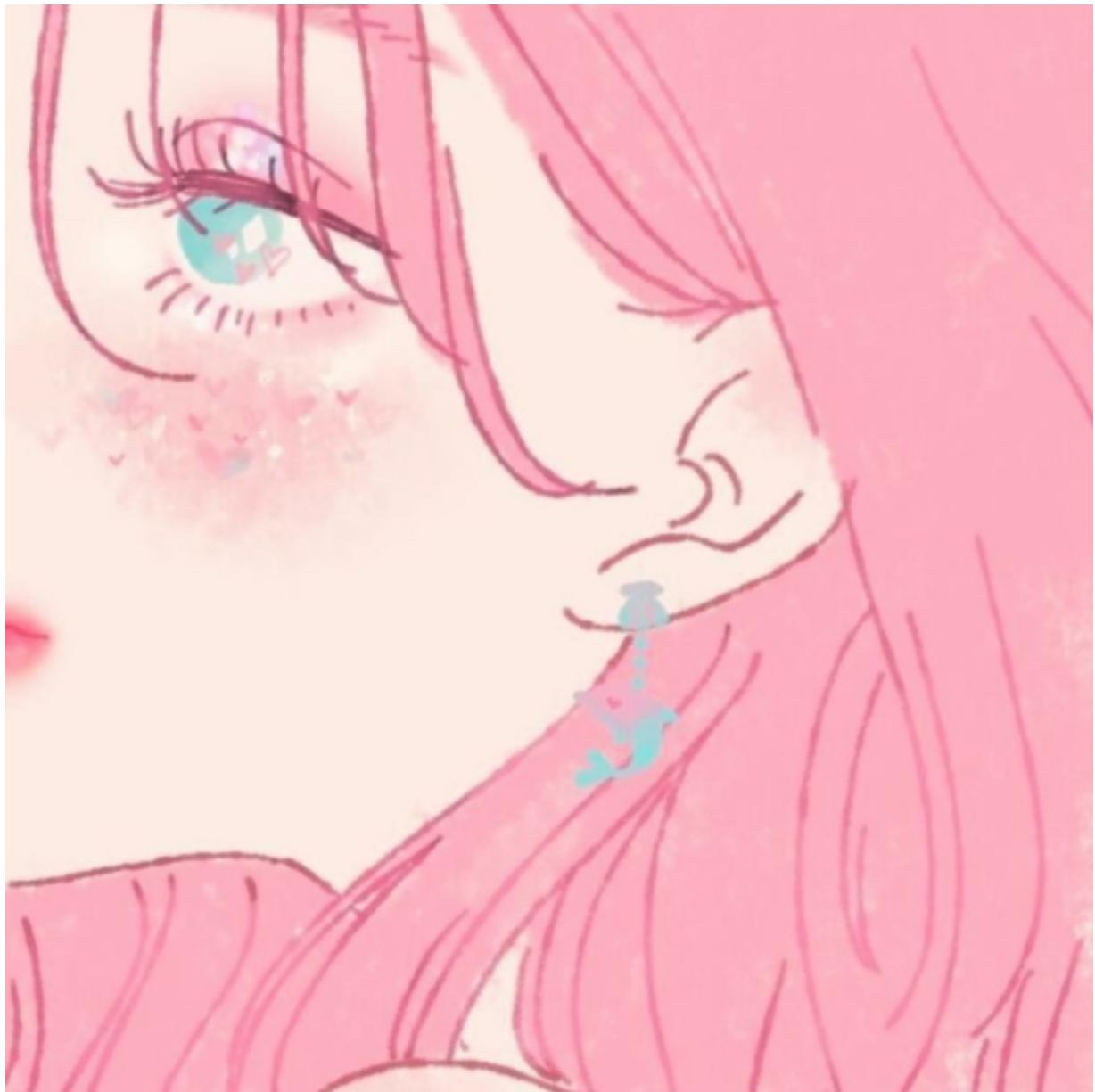
"Princess Sylvia will be on her way to that paradise, somewhere in the middle of the passage. If you happen to meet her, please don't harass her. Somehow, I feel you might."

Estock spoke again, like a jester, to Nicole's calm words.

"Our female lead is bold, kind-hearted, and clever as always today. Understood."

"And one more thing, Estock. If you are of Hyperion's blood, do you also possess the power of prophecy? Have you seen something about me as well?"

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# Chapter 184

“That’s too easy. You don’t need the power of prophecy to know that.”

Overjoyed, Estock spun around near the door as he was about to dash out.

“You will live happily ever after. You deserve to overcome all obstacles and achieve anything in the world.”

Nicole was so amused by Estock’s words that she wanted to laugh. It seemed forever impossible to analyze her true intentions.

As Estock left with a clamor—twirling a crown on one arm—she turned to look at Dagger.

Dagger stood in a corner of the room, looking at Nicole with cat-like eyes.

“I thought something was strange, Dagger.”

Nicole opened her mouth to speak.

“No matter how much you are of the YvesChapel lineage, it was odd how quickly you opened up to me. You acknowledged and chose me as your master right upon meeting me. But in reality, the person you chose was Estock. You used me for Estock’s benefit.”

Dagger had three masters: Raul, Nicole, and Estock, whose status as a friend or royalty was unclear.

"It's quite something to straddle three legs. Admirable indeed."

"I have been devoted and sincere to everyone. I haven't betrayed anyone, my lady."

"But Estock comes first, doesn't she?"

Dagger smiled faintly.

"Always, without fail."

Nicole nodded. If the next great ruler were to be born, it seemed inevitable that the successor would have YvesChapel blood mixed in.

'If Dagger and Estock were to be linked... perhaps it would be so.'

This game was truly interesting. Somehow, YvesChapel was destined to have the next emperor.

"Still, I am grateful, Dagger. You have helped me on several occasions."

"I will continue to be devoted, so please do not worry. Now, the Grand Duke is everyone's master."

"But, Dagger. Were you alright? How did you not get taken to that secret temple? You had the perfect qualifications to be a sacrifice."

"I was lucky. The fall of YvesChapel was a recent event in history. My mother, known as the only survivor of YvesChapel, was a bastard. Her existence was known to

many, whether they realized it or not, including the Grand Duke's family..."

"So you were safe because there were too many eyes to take you away unnoticed."

"Yes. The fact that Estock never got caught by the royal family until the end. It was even luckier that we both ended up in the Grand Duke's family."

Dagger said up to that point and stood up.

"I need to go outside too. So, would you like to look around more, or would you prefer to go back?"

"I will go back. I have to wait for him. Raul."

The winter in the holy land came later than in the capital.

Nicole spent quiet times in the mansion of the holy land until the situation in the capital was settled. She also spent the New Year alone with Jay.

One morning she woke up to find the entire mansion had turned white. Nicole gazed for a long time at the silver-glistening snow.

"I want to take a walk to clear my mind."

Redia and Bluea warned Nicole not to wander for too long, worried that she might catch a cold.

Nicole put on a thick coat with fur.

*Crunch*, Nicole's shoes pressed into the snow. The cold winter air awakened her senses.

A lot had happened in the capital in the meantime.

Rituals of mountain sacrifices, worship of the demon god.

Raul exposed the royal family's religion and various scandals all at once. The enraged populace gathered in the square, in front of the imperial palace.

The public demanded that the royal family be dragged into the streets and burned at the stake. Faith had been a major foundation supporting the royal household.

The people relied on the Grand Duke's family. Raul smoothly took control of the entire capital.

Nobles from the provinces flocked to the capital even before the social season began, currying favor with Raul. The Grand Duke's residence was bustling with people.

Despite his incredibly busy schedule, he made time to visit the holy site every few days to spend time with Nicole.

None of the royal family survived, except for Sylvia. Their official deaths were all recorded as 'suicide by drinking poison.'

The shame of having tarnished the royal name and a sense of responsibility for participating in social activities were recorded as the Emperor's will to repay with his life.

Of course, Nicole knew the truth. Raul had them killed after making sure they paid a sufficient price.

'Compared to the sacrifices they made of others, they got off too easily. Only the dead sacrifices are to be pitied.'

On the other hand, Sylvia's fate was different from theirs. She did not die but had to stand trial.

Throughout the trial, Sylvia testified about what had happened in the royal household. She was not imprisoned but was stripped of her rights as a member of the royal family.

She would be under lifelong surveillance and would serve the Southern Temple to atone for her sins.

That was the verdict Sylvia received. Being still young, she received a relatively lenient sentence.

‘But Sylvia, that girl will also have a difficult life ahead of her.’

The people’s hatred towards the royal family will not disappear.

Sylvia would have to bear all of it alone as long as she lived.

On the day Sylvia’s verdict was announced, Jay, who was reading the newspaper, quietly asked,

“Don’t you feel it’s a waste? The credit for all this originally belongs to you, sister.”

“I’ll say it again, I was Raul’s spy. An agent works from behind the scenes. I’ve completed my mission, and that’s enough.”

Jay nodded his head after hearing Nicole’s words.

“If that’s what you wish, sister.”

The royal family itself was not replaced overnight.

For that to happen, a revolution would be necessary, and it would greatly shake the entire nation.

This time, because Raul firmly grasped the power from behind the scenes, it was close to a bloodless revolution.

Instead, a new figure emerged.

Estora de Hyperion.

A mysterious figure raised in a monastery from a young age as part of the imperial bloodline.

Her official status was as a sibling of the former emperor. One of the princesses who had died long ago – one of the mad women – was Latrina's daughter.

Raul had known about the royal family's atrocities early on. Therefore, he said he protected Estora, raising her separately so she wouldn't be involved with the imperial religion.

Estora grew up quietly learning imperial studies in a monastery isolated from the world.

She suddenly appeared and named the direct descendants of the previous Hyperion as the 'old royal family.'

Estora announced that as the new emperor, she would govern the country in cooperation with the Grand Duke.

With her emergence, the social atmosphere quickly stabilized.

There was a magical artifact passed down through the royal family. That rod would burn the hands of anyone not of the royal bloodline.

Raul convened a noble assembly to verify that she was indeed of the royal bloodline.

Naturally, Estora was Estock. Dagger had recently come to visit and chatted with Nicole before leaving.

〈To think that Estora was Estock. The name was well chosen, too. The codename and her own name are similar.〉

〈Estock named herself, you know. She insisted on that name or nothing at all, and as always, the Sith lost to her stubbornness.〉

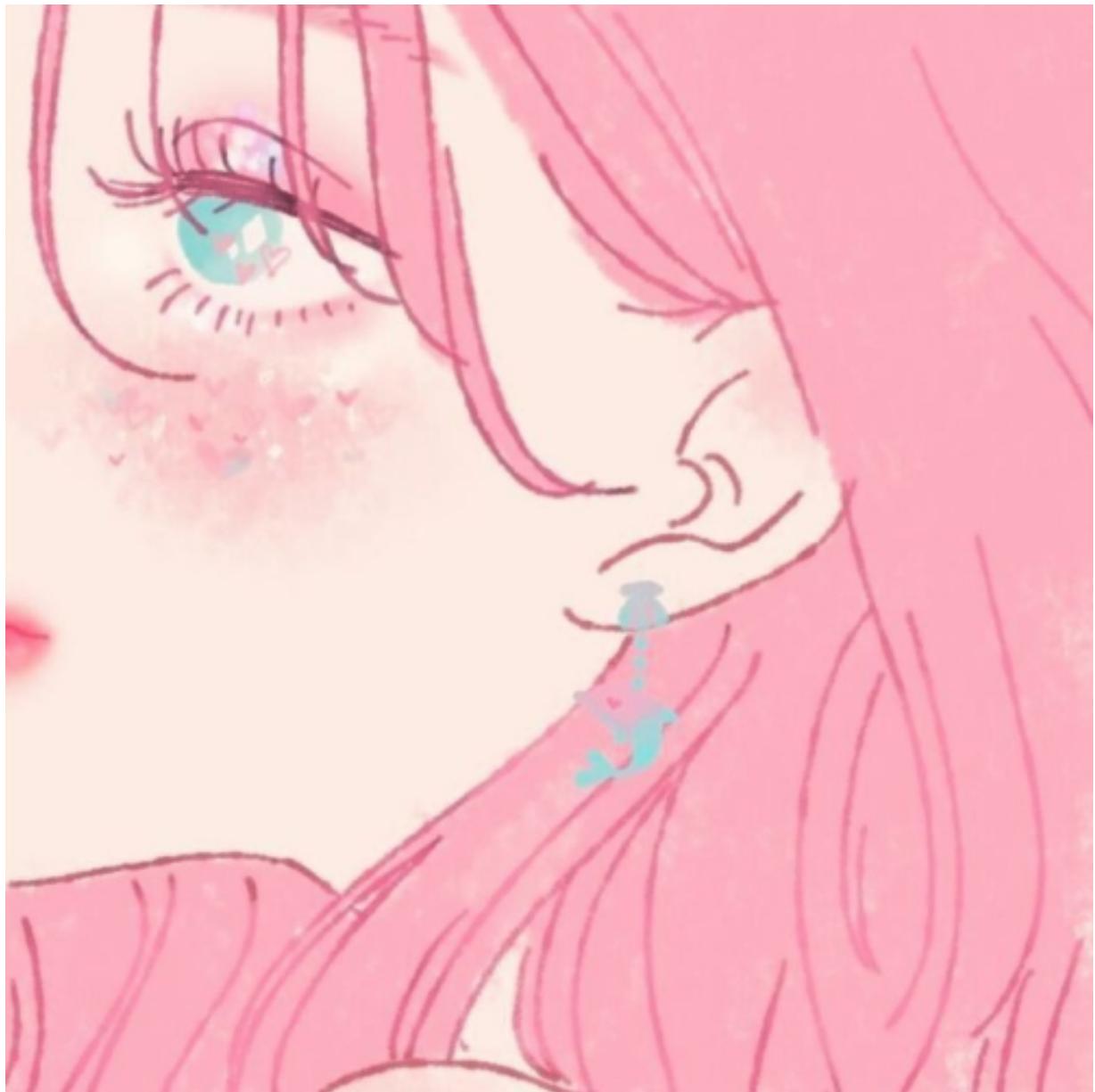
Dagger shrugged his shoulders as he spoke about this matter.

〈Additionally, ‘Bastard’ was originally ‘Buster’ from ‘Buster Sword.’ But once Estock started calling it ‘Bastard’ on her own, the nickname just stuck.〉

〈Ah, I was concerned about the codename ‘Bastard.’ So that was the reason. That is a bit much.〉

Regardless, Nicole had the intuition that she would end up calling her ‘Estock’ for the rest of her life.

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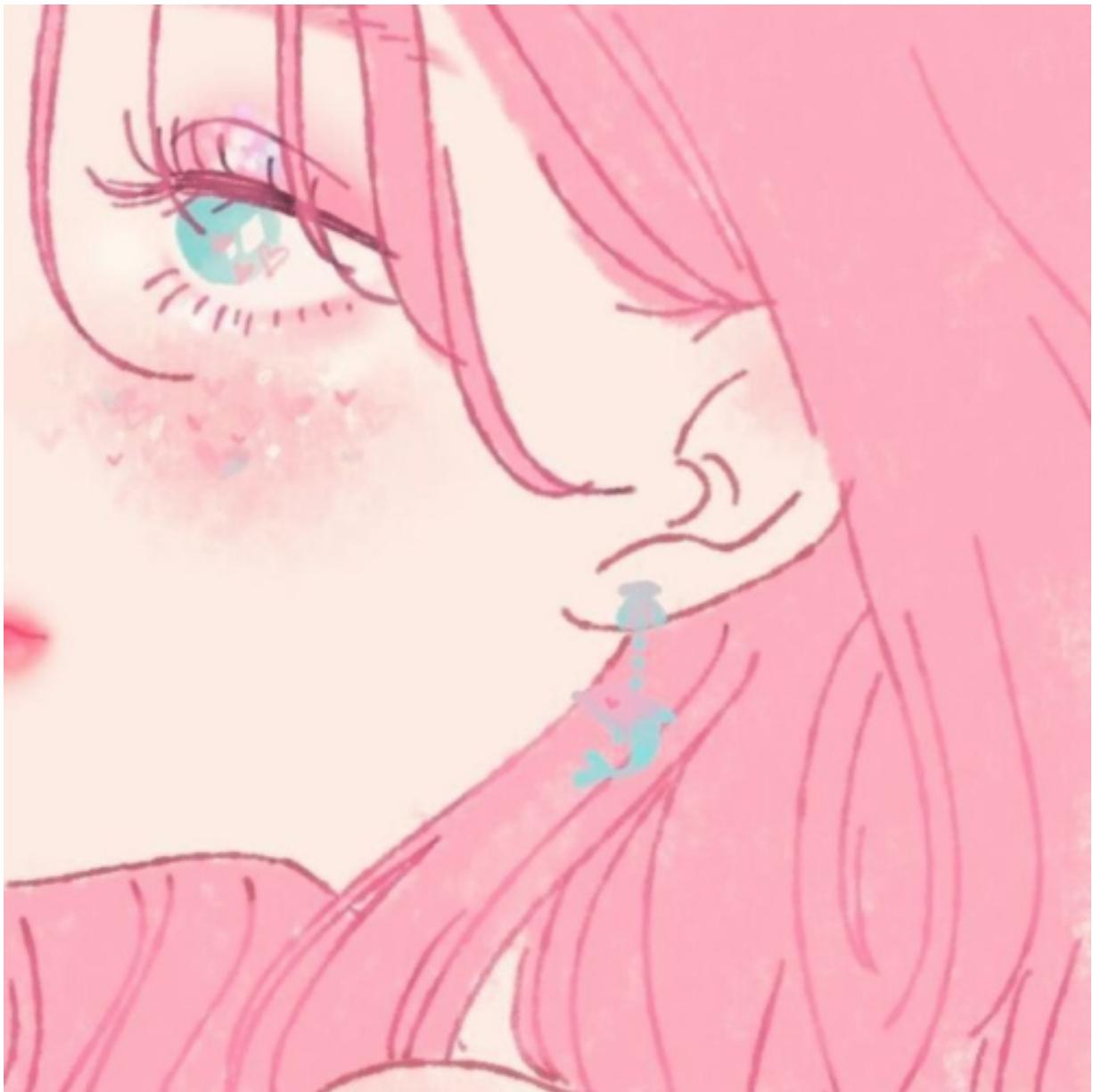


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# Chapter 185

Dagger revealed various matters.

On the day Estok was ‘appointed’ Emperor by Raul, he prostrated herself, kneeling with her head bowed before him.

Raul spoke indifferently, with the expression of a ruler, as if it was a matter of course.

⟨Fine, I’ll let you sit in that position for a while, as you wish. Tell me your ambitions, what you plan to do from that hollow seat.⟩

⟨I will be completely loyal and prostrate myself in submission.⟩

It is said that Estok spoke with shining eyes.

Now, it no longer matters to Nicole.

Flame is now Raul’s possession, and that’s just the beginning.

The country has fallen into Raul’s hands. Whether he ascends to the Emperor’s throne himself depends on his mood.

\*\*\*

‘Is it all over now?’

Nicole wondered.

The time at this holy estate was mostly peaceful.

However, there were days when she woke up to immediate anxiety and worry. On such days, Nicole would take out her abacus. Today too, she had brought it in her pocket.

Just as she had learned in her childhood, she slowly pressed and fiddled with it.

This abacus had also been Nicole's treasure during her childhood.

It was the size of an adult woman's palm with a handle, making a clicking sound each time the button on top was pressed.

The part to be held in the palm was silver with a lily decoration engraved on it. Upon closer inspection, there were jewels embedded in the lower part.

Naturally, Nicole thought the jewels were fake. But even considering that, it was quite an elegant piece.

'Where could Mother and Father have gotten something that looks so valuable? Maybe Mother brought it with her when she ran away from her family. It's a relief they didn't sell something like this given our circumstances.'

However, she couldn't remember when she had received this abacus from her mother. It had just naturally become an item she carried around at some point.

It had been cold these past few days, and the servants had dissuaded her from going far.

Today, she had made up her mind and walked up to the treehouse. She wanted to take a proper look at it for once.

The treehouse was located not as high as she thought. The ladder leading up to it was sturdy but narrow. Nicole began to climb carefully.

‘It’s cold.’

Nicole felt some of the snow that had gathered on the ladder slip into her shoes. She sat in front of the treehouse and took off her boots.

“Nicole.”

Thud.

Startled, Nicole stretched out her foot, causing her nearly removed shoe to fall to the ground.

Raul was looking up at her from beneath the treehouse.

“Raul.”

The redness in Nicole’s cheeks wasn’t just due to the breathy weather.

Raul slowly bent down to pick up the shoe himself.

Nicole recalled a memory from her past life, the day she dropped a shoe in front of Raul under a camellia tree.

Snow fell from the shoe in Raul’s hand. His large frame made the treehouse seem too modest and small.

“Ah, thank you, Raul... When did you get here?”

“Just now.”

He climbed up the ladder slowly, which creaked under his weight. Nicole tried to get up on one foot.

“Stay still.”

Raul, with his foot on the ladder, helped Nicole put her boot back on.

Nicole’s feet were curled up before she knew it. Her cheeks were flushed, not just from the cold. Nicole blinked her eyes.

“It’s not the weather to be wandering around. Have you forgotten? You’re still recuperating.”

“I’m recovering from mental trauma. I’m much better now. I just wanted to see the snow.”

Nicole stood up and faced Raul. Raul had his hand on the railing surrounding the treehouse deck, looking at her.

“I wanted to see you. Really. I’m glad you came.”

Nicole grinned broadly.

Raul’s body tensed. Nicole now expressed her affection for Raul without reservation.

She was ready to remove the glassworm inside him, but before that, she wanted to love him enough to overcome the glassworm. She wanted to give him her heart and fill him with emotion.

“.....Hmm.”

“Didn’t you want to see me?”

Raul answered a beat later.

“A lot.”

His soft words warmly swelled Nicole’s heart. Nicole reached out her hand to Raul.

The deck surrounding the treehouse was too narrow for two people to stand on. Nicole stepped one foot between Raul’s feet and embraced him tightly in his arms.

“I love you.”

Raul’s body stiffened even more. He closed his eyes. Raul’s heart was beating fiercely. Nicole liked to listen to that sound.

“You don’t have to answer.”

Nicole whispered. After a long while, Raul replied softly.

‘Me too.’

Nicole could hear his whisper clearly enough.

She remembers Raul, who had slaughtered people in the imperial court not long ago.

Such a grim appearance is also part of him. But now, it’s a side only she can see. That too is Raul. Nicole thought this and slightly lifted the corners of her mouth.

And then she lifted her cheek from Raul’s chest.

“But this treehouse... Raul, is this where you played when you were young?”

“When I lived here. It was a very long time ago.”

“May I go inside?”

"Do as you like. I'll wait down below."

Nicole went inside. The ceiling was high enough to stretch out her back, and it was more spacious inside than she thought.

'It's well maintained and clean.'

It seemed that the servants cleaned it regularly. There was a carpet laid out inside, and several old cushions were scattered about. A low bookshelf was packed with books, and wooden toys were placed on top of it.

A desk, clearly not meant for adults, also caught her eye.

Nicole slowly ran her hand over the wooden desk, full of marks from being frequently touched.

'It's really strange. Why do I keep feeling... like I've been here before?'

Nicole focused on the vague memories that were surfacing.

It wasn't just the cushions and carpet. There was also a cozy blanket with a red background and a grid pattern. Young Nicole sat huddled under that blanket, reading a book.

And next to the young girl was a boy. The boy cut something out and showed it to Nicole.

'I've cut out a passage I like. Read it later, not now.'

...There was definitely such a memory. It was very faint, but certain.

Nicole opened the door of the treehouse. And then she almost ran down the ladder.

“Nicole, don’t run.”

Raul said. Nicole swallowed her breath and looked at him.

“I remember now. I’ve been to that treehouse before, several times. But I can’t recall exactly when or why I went there. However, it wasn’t a dream.”

“Speak slowly. What do you mean?”

“I hate forgetting and not being able to remember things. My memory is still unstable now...”

Nicole harbored a kind of distrust and anxiety about her memory.

“Calm down. Breathe.”

Nicole began to try to calm down as Raul’s thumb gently traced her forearm.

‘That’s right, the abacus... I had that.’

Nicole took the abacus out from within her embrace and slowly pressed it.

“Is this yours?”

That’s when Raul slowly opened his mouth.

“Ah, yes. Is it strange? I was taught this when I was young by my mother... When excited, pressing this was supposed to help calm my emotions slowly.”

Before she knew it, Raul was looking at Nicole as if he would devour her.

“Give it here.”

Raul extended his hand. Nicole complied. Raul fondled it for a while.

“It was you.”

“What?”

“The girl from my first prophecy, N. The successor to YvesChapel I’ve been searching for, and Karen, Portia, Sophia... Karen. It was all you.”

“Raul?”

Instead of answering, Raul leaned towards Nicole. Nicole’s back touched the tree trunk supporting the treehouse. Raul leaned in.

“All my life, I’ve been searching for you.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying—”

Raul, trying to calm his surging emotions, gripped Nicole’s shoulders. He took a deep breath, trying to inhale Nicole’s scent.

“It means you were that ungrateful little thief.”

“Thief?”

Nicole stiffened. Raul took the abacus from Nicole and showed it to her.

“This abacus is mine. My grandmother bought it for me. There’s a ruby from the Serced region embedded underneath where you hold it.”

“That can’t be. This isn’t such an expensive item. Besides, my parents gave it to me when I was young-”

Of course, she can't remember exactly when they gave it to her.

Nicole once asked her mother, Freya, about this. At that time, Freya didn't answer, just gave a strange expression.

"There's proof too. Look carefully at the bottom part of the abacus for a shallow notch. There will be a screw there. I know what's inside it."

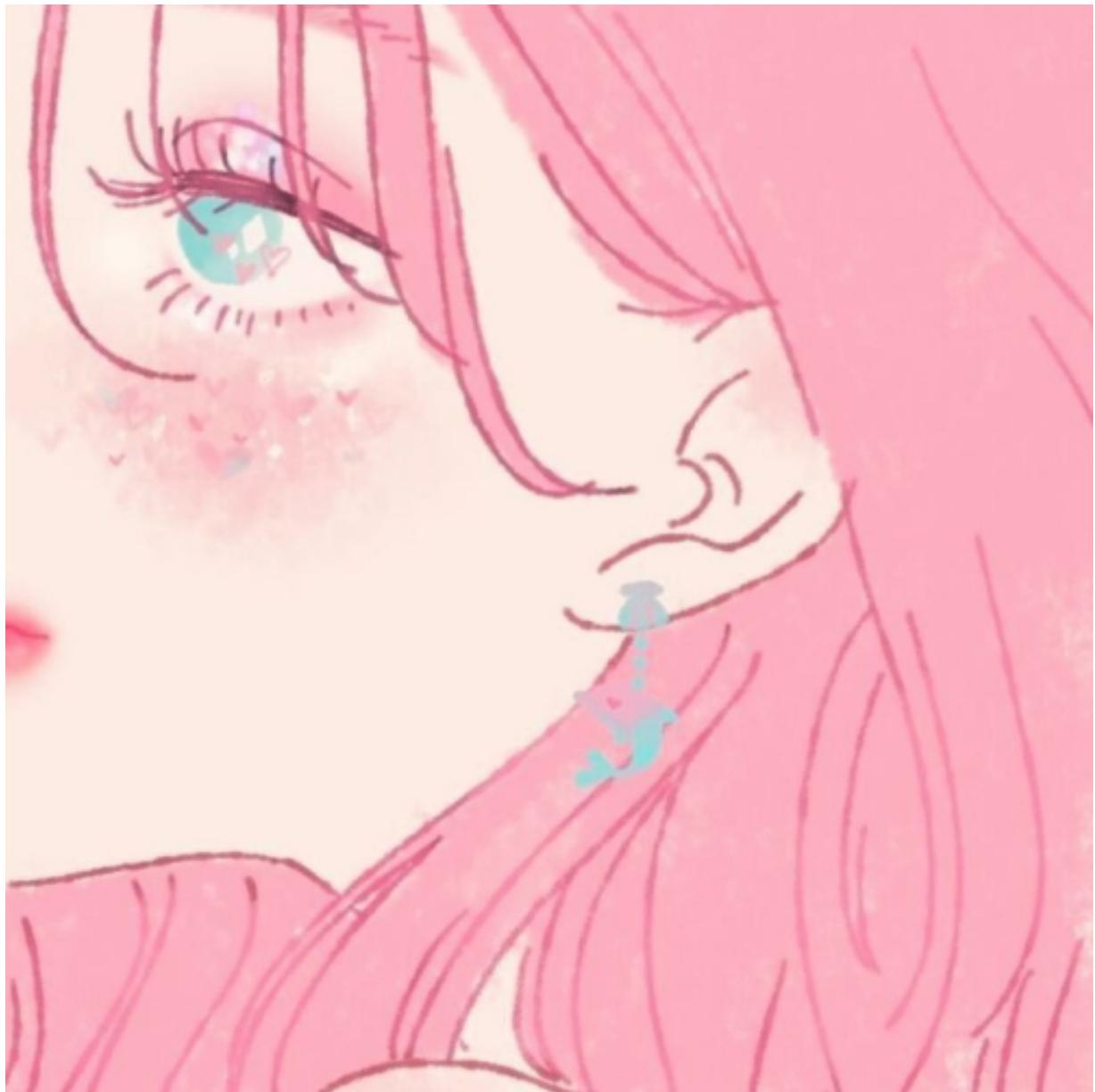
"What?"

"There will be a phrase cut out from a book. A phrase I chose when I was young."

Nicole took the abacus back from Raul and examined the bottom part.

"If you're going to surprise me further, tell me now. Like another identity you have, or something you're hiding."

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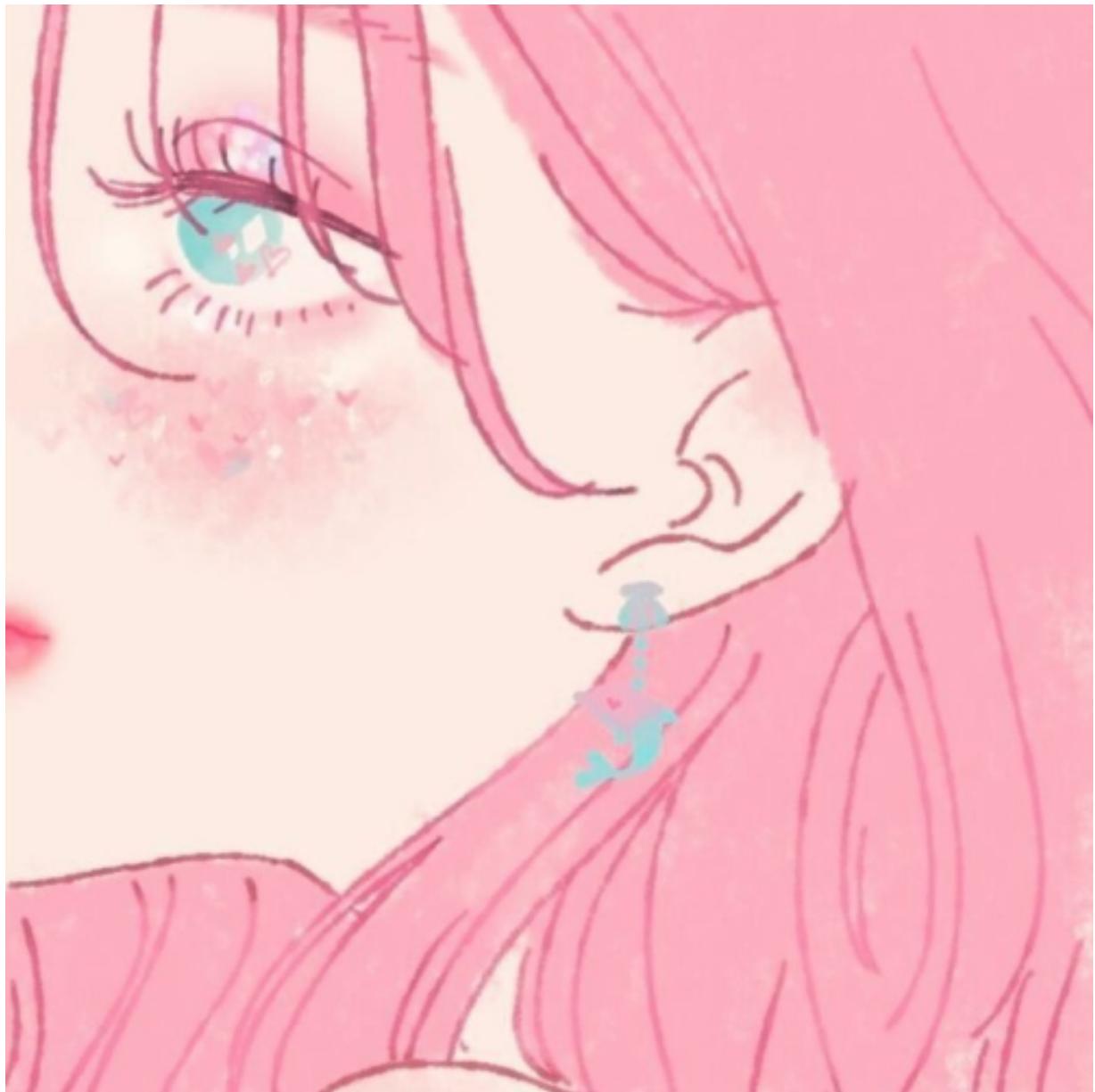


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# **Chapter 186 - end**

Nicole gave up trying to understand Raul's words. If she could unscrew his head and see what was inside, she might determine the truth of Raul's words.

"Hmm, there might be one or two things. Among them, there's probably one you'll strongly object to."

Nicole linked her arm through Raul's.

Just because Raul had overcome his own insinuations and acknowledged his love for her, the glassworm inside him hadn't disappeared.

Nicole had to make Raul acknowledge its existence and take medicine to eliminate it. Convincing this man full of distrust and stubbornness would not be easy.

"It's cold now... Let's go home and talk."

Nicole didn't realize she had referred to Raul's mansion as home. Raul wrapped his hand around Nicole's shoulder and began to walk slowly. Nicole mulled over the riddle Raul had thrown at her.

As they walked in the snow, Raul spoke softly,

"I suppose I have to marry you."

"What?"

Nicole stopped walking. They were just passing under a camellia tree in the garden.

"You might do something crazy again, so I need to keep an eye on you. You have too many questions."

"Didn't you say you couldn't marry me?"

"The situation has changed. At least marrying me won't make you a target or cause you pain. Thanks to you."

Nicole wanted to annul her engagement to Raul. However, the engagement she wanted to break was the humiliating oath imposed by the royal family.

Now, that marriage vow is gone. If the two of them were to unite, it would be a new beginning.

"I'll think about it."

"Hmm."

Raul pressed his forehead against Nicole's.

"Marry me. Throughout my life, I will want only you."

For a long time, Nicole realized that Raul had never lied to her, not in her past life, nor in this one.

Nicole's heart slowly warmed. Considering that there was still a glassworm in Raul's heart, this was a significant progress.

Nicole found him endearing and wanted to give him everything.

"Not yet. But... someday."

Raul gently kissed Nicole's lips.

"Until then, I'll have to keep you tightly bound so you can't do anything else."

Nicole chuckled softly. Suddenly, the cold breath of air engulfed her.

Seeing her slender shoulders shivering, Raul quietly walked her back to the mansion.

The large and small footprints of the two stretched out over the freshly fallen snow.

\*\*\*

That evening, after dinner, the two went to bed.

Persuaded for a light round, Nicole had willingly spread her legs only to find it was dawn when she came to her senses, half-fainted on the bed in her robe, completely spent.

Fortunately, this ancient-style mansion was very warm inside even in the dead of winter.

Raul was fast asleep. Once again, the dawn light rose in the sky. Yesterday, without Raul, she had been anxious, but now it was different. She was extremely happy.

Nicole got up from the bed and silently headed to the next room. She carefully opened the drawer in the powder room and took out a small screwdriver. She had asked the maids to bring it during dinner.

Nicole slowly turned the screwdriver, opening the inside. Just as Raul had said, there was a click, and the handle part of the counter opened.

'Is it real? There's paper inside, just like Raul said?'

Nicole illuminated the words on an old piece of paper with a small lamp.

⟨I always see you, even in the darkest of places.⟩

Nicole caressed those words for a long time.

"What are you doing?"

Raul embraced her from behind, startling Nicole.

"Is this really yours?"

"Yes."

"What kind of object is this... to be in my hands?"

"When I was very young, I did a single good deed, entirely meaningless."

Nicole furrowed her brow. He sometimes spoke in ways she couldn't understand.

"So, how did that good deed taste?"

"As always, it was difficult and felt worthless."

"A lack of reward doesn't make it worthless."

"Hmm."

Raul nodded his head.

"I received a reward. One that will complete my life forever."

Nicole fondled the words for a long while, as if they were a message sent to her by someone.

Like the way Nicole's heart had lit a fire in the darkness for him.

The truth about the time Nicole had stayed here as a child was revealed thanks to Jay, this time as well.

⟨I had a talk with Father. It turns out he once considered sending you out of the hideaway. We didn't have any status, did we? It seems he intended to let her live as a person unaffiliated with YvesChapel in the outside world.⟩

Father had a few friends who were reclusive monks. One of them knew father's true identity.

One of them seemed to have offered to take Nicole in as an adopted daughter. Father first took Nicole out to the outside world when she was six years old.

Even so, it was only to the residences of the hermit priests of the sanctuary.

However, Nicole disappeared during that journey. Father searched for her frantically, almost going mad.

About three weeks later, Nicole returned to the inn where father was staying, barefoot and dressed in strange clothes.

They were beautiful silk clothes that nobles might wear, it is said. Martin hurriedly took Nicole back to the countryside.

Nicole's disappearance nearly drove Freya mad as well, and that's when oppressive education and control began. The couple never again attempted to send their children out into the outside world after that.

⟨Why haven't you spoken about that incident until now?⟩

⟨Actually, Nicole, you had forgotten all about it, Father said. There's no need to remind you of something like being kidnapped. But there was one strange thing, he said. Sister... right after you returned, you kept repeating strange words. You said you weren't kidnapped - you had been playing with a handsome boy in a house like heaven.⟩

⟨But why did he tell you everything?⟩

⟨When I met Father this time, I asked why he raised us with such control. Then he mentioned that incident. Ah, he told me not to tell you since it wouldn't be a good memory.⟩

Nicole was so dumbfounded by his words that she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

There really was a time when she was with Raul. Nicole was too young at the time and had forgotten everything.

Yet, their connection existed from a deep-rooted place. From a very long time ago.

\*\*\*

That spring, Nicole succeeded in persuading Raul to take the medicine to remove the glassworm.

Raul had difficulty acknowledging the existence of the glassworm due to his self-manipulation.

Nicole completely understood it, as she had more experience than anyone with this dreadful worm.

Raul had changed a lot. Now he knew that he had to respect Nicole's wishes in important matters and enjoyed her

advice. After all, Nicole was his best spy and ally.

\*\*\*

"How do you feel?"

Nicole asked.

Raul was dumbfounded by fascination with the bizarreness of it all the moment the glassworm had popped out before his eyes. It really did exist.

Raul looked at Nicole. There she was, the most radiant and lovely woman in the world, the woman he would yearn for all his life.

A light swelled within him, enveloping him. Overwhelmed by the surging emotions, he was momentarily at a loss for words. He loved this woman terribly. It was a feeling that had been suppressed within him for a long time.

"Not bad."

Raul murmured softly.

He imagined himself eternally trapped and drowning in this surging emotion of love for Nicole. It was a thrilling and happy fantasy.

He would forever worship this love.

\*\*\*

And then, a month later, the full spirit of spring arrived. Nicole heard all about the things she and Raul had experienced when they were young.

And also that Raul had his first prophecy through Nicole.

Nicole thought deeply about his words and then asked,  
“Is the prophecy really the only reason you loved me?”

Raul reacted as if he had heard something amusing.

“I loved you even when you were Karen. How could I reject such a fateful connection? Even if your status was truly that of Karen, we would have married someday.”

“You’re too confident, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t need any other woman but you. Then and now.”

Nicole no longer found him strange when he spoke of love.  
In the end, she nodded her head.

Sometimes Raul would ask,

“There are no more secrets now, right?”

This morning, Nicole pretended to go shopping to avoid Raul’s eyes and secretly visited the physician.

‘No wonder I’ve been craving certain tastes and feeling tired lately...’

Nicole gently caressed her lower abdomen. Inside, there was a secret.

“There is one more secret left. Just one.”

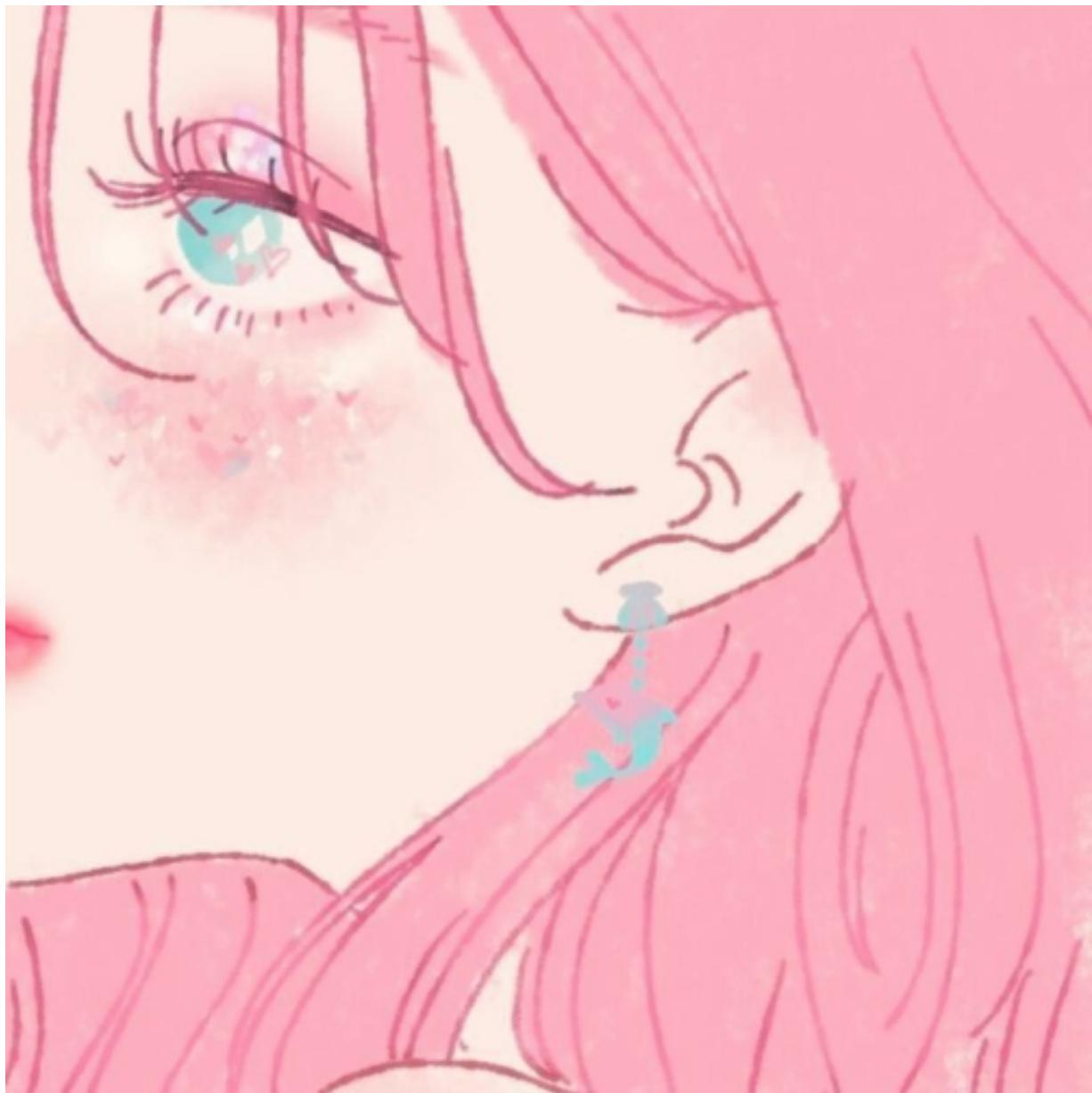
Nicole looked at Raul with a gentle smile.

“You’ll surely like it. Very much so.”

**<END>**

**t/n: NO SIDE STORIES ♀\_♀ I WANT SYLVIA AND JAY  
BACK STORY LIKE I REFUSE TO BELIEVE SYLVIA  
ACTUALLY HAD JAY KILLED IN THEIR PREVIOUS LIFE I  
WANT MY SHIP TO SAIL BUT ALL IN ALL SO HAPPY  
FOR U NICOLE AND RAUL**

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i like clichés with a little bit of spice 🦋

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