



# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

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## Chapter 1

### The Opening Page Present Day

“Ahh!”

“H-help!”

“Please! No!”

“S-sir!”

People were dying in front of her eyes. Severed legs were splayed across the floor—legs of the people she had seen walking around only yesterday. Others were on all fours, attempting to crawl away.

The man who was once her father sat at the table, still as a statue. A sword pierced his heart, and his eyes were glazed over in pain. Of course, none of his limbs were left intact. One of his eyes was an empty void filled with blood, which dripped down his cheeks like tears.

Valeta tried to move her immobilized legs again. She wanted to run away, but she couldn’t move—her legs were caught in mysterious black shadows. This wasn’t fear and she wasn’t frozen with terror. She felt no pity for anyone in this household. They all deserved to be punished for what they had done. It’s just that if something went wrong now, there would be no way for her to escape.

No matter how hard she tried, Valeta couldn’t lift her feet or turn her head. She could only stare straight ahead as if she’d become a statue herself. However, even though she couldn’t move a single finger, she could control her eyes.

“Sir? In all my time here, I’ve never heard that word before directed at me.”

Valeta's ears pricked up at the mild voice tinged with laughter. The owner of the voice had long hair, an extraordinary shade of silvery-white, that hung over his shoulders and swayed slightly above his waist.

Once upon a time, his red eyes had reminded her of rubies. Now, they reminded her of blood, burning with madness.

*Bang!*

The heavy door to the dining room burst open with a loud noise.

“Ahh!”

Two maids and an attendant came flying through the crack of the door. Two men in black robes trailed after them, pushing the servants onto their hands and knees like dogs.

“P-please, spare us!”

“Monster! You’re a monster! Nooo!”

“Quiet.”

The man’s smile vanished in an instant. It was not just his voice but also his gaze that was laced with madness—a gaze that was now directed toward the three people who had just entered the room. The servants’ mouths snapped shut at the sound of the man’s chilly voice.

Finally, Valeta got a glimpse of the owner of the voice. The three shivering figures were pathetic, but she did not pity them. She wasn’t in the position to pity anyone.

“These are the only survivors left in the mansion,” said one of the robed men. There was no way of telling which one of the two had spoken. The only thing that Valeta knew for sure was that the speaker sounded utterly indifferent, as if

he had no remorse over the entire situation.

"Perhaps it's because it's such a large mansion, but there sure are a lot of pests to exterminate," said the silver-haired man. He strode toward the paralyzed Valeta with light footsteps and smiled brightly at her. He poked her cheek with a single bloodied finger before turning on one of the maids who had tried to flee.

Valeta squinted at the man as he walked past and caught a glimpse of a pair of shiny, well-polished shoes. She noticed that the tips of his shoes had blood on them—no wonder she was starting to get goosebumps. She felt the urge to wipe her cheek where he had just touched her.

"I'm starting to get tired of this. I want to move on to the delicious main dish," the man said, glancing behind him at her.

Valeta could only look ahead. She wouldn't have been able to see what was happening in the corner behind her even if she had tried. Still, it wasn't hard to tell what he meant by "main dish."

"P-please, spare us. W-we'll do anything, sir!"

"Ahh! Eeek!"

"I never thought I would live to see the day you call me sir. You used to call me vermin." His scarlet eyes crinkled into the shape of crescent moons. One of his bloody hands slowly reached up to the maid's cheek, using her face to wipe off the blood from his slender fingers.

"It's a pain to kill you one at a time, so I'll kill you all in one go," he said warmly, almost as though he was being merciful.

At the snap of his fingers, a spear of ice appeared out of thin air. In truth, it was more of a large icicle rather than a spear—if one ignored the tip, sharp enough to kill a man as it was.

Whoosh.

Valeta heard a whistling noise, followed by the sound of a person being stabbed, one after another. The three gathered servants died without uttering a sound.

Satisfied with the silence, the man smiled and spun around on a single foot as if he were a dancer. Valeta could hear his footsteps drawing closer behind her. It was as if an invisible grim reaper was approaching her. She felt a chill run down her spine and swallowed hard.

*This is why I told them to get rid of him while we still had the chance! None of this would have happened if they had just listened to me. I should have found a way to escape from this mansion when they refused to get rid of him. I shouldn't have stayed here!*

Valeta mentally willed her limbs to move, but it was fruitless. In reality, there was nothing she could do. Suddenly, the mysterious force that had held her rooted to the spot like a statue disappeared. She found herself losing her balance and falling forward.

Huh?!

Taken by surprise, she quickly attempted to steady herself, but she was a moment too late. As she squeezed her eyes shut, anticipating the pain to follow, someone grabbed her by the shoulder and waist. Her head seemed to be resting on someone's chest. Yes, it was as if she was caught in someone's embrace.

Ah... Valeta groaned to herself. She had a feeling she knew who it was, but she didn't want to open her eyes to find out.

"My cruel master. You tried so many times to get rid of me and begged your dim-witted father every day. How is it that you're here in my arms?" cooed the voice in her ear.

Feeling his breath tickle her ears, Valeta hurriedly stood up and pushed the man away. He yielded without a fuss.

He was even more beautiful up close. She wondered if he was really from this world. His mesmerizing voice was at once cool and sweet, and he spoke as if he were a fae creature that had just stepped out of a fairy tale. But Valeta knew full well that those were all lies. This was a man who, with a smile upon his face, could exchange pleasantries with someone one moment and then kill them the next without any qualms.

He was the lord of darkness and the head of the Magicians' Tower. And until only a moment ago, he had been Valeta's slave. If master and slave was the best way to describe their relationship, that is.

"Now, you're the only one left, master," he said in a sweet voice. He stood so uncomfortably close that Valeta wanted to make a run for it, but the two hooded figures blocked the dining room's only exit.

"Do you want to live?" the man asked.

There was something devilish about his tone, the way he was extending a hand as if he were offering salvation. Valeta took a step back. The man took a step closer as the woman withdrew. However, his stride was larger than her much smaller one, bringing them closer together than before.

His crescent-shaped eyes slowly widened. There wasn't even a hint of amusement in his gaze.

"Take a seat, master," he said, turning his eerie red eyes onto her. He snapped his fingers, beckoning her to sit. Those were the first words that Valeta had ever said to him. She stiffened before taking another step back. She had to get away somehow. She held her breath and took two more steps back before her foot caught on something.

"Ugh!" She fell, tripping over one of the many corpses that lay sprawled all around her. The man grinned and leaned over, bringing himself level with her. His hair spilled around him and dangled precariously over the bloodied floor.

"Well done, master," he said. The man reached out with a blood-crusted hand and stroked Valeta's auburn hair, as if praising her.

*I knew he was crazy, but I didn't know he was this crazy.* Anyone could tell that she hadn't meant to find herself on the floor. She had fallen!

Valeta wasn't looking down on him for being a lunatic. She knew the man was crazy, but she also knew that he was no ordinary madman. This was why she had constantly begged her father to get rid of him! However, her father had insisted that he would be useful when he grew up and refused to let him go, believing that the younger man was firmly within his grasp. He had never expected that this man was planning something nefarious behind his back—and this was the result.

The whole family had died in the novel, Valeta included. Yet, Valeta was the only one who knew what would happen. In order to prevent this from becoming a reality, she had attempted to be nice to him, but that didn't change the way the crazy man looked at her.

Valeta quickly abandoned that strategy and started pleading with her father to get rid of him instead. What else could she do? The people in the mansion had no idea how terrifying this man would become, and so they treated him poorly. How could they not? Perhaps it was because of his beauty, uncommon for one who held the lowly status of a slave, that made others feel as though they could look down on him.

Not only that, but he also had a sweet tongue and was capable of keeping his anger hidden.

*I should've just run away! If everyone was going to be killed, I could have still saved*

*myself. What did I have to feel so guilty about?!* She screamed inwardly, holding her breath.

The man who had been staring at the frozen Valeta reached out for the necklace that hung around her neck.

*Snap.*

The way the necklace broke apart so easily seemed like a forewarning of what Valeta's future had in store for her. In his hand was a red coin-sized glass bead. It was a shackle carved into the madman's heart. When the bead was squeezed tightly, he could not disobey orders from his master because of the seal on his heart.

This was the nature of "human sorcery." One could control their opponent by using their heart as a lifeline. If the opponent disobeyed, all one had to do to control the other was to squeeze the bead, and thus squeeze their heart, causing immense pain.

If he didn't want to feel the pain, he had no choice but to obey orders. It was a terrible spell, one that Valeta had never wished for. There was only one way for her to escape from this place.

*I didn't want to reveal my abilities in front of this madman.* But it was better to reveal her power than to be caught and killed by him. Escaping was her only priority.

"Gene!"

At the sound of Valeta's cry, an intense whirlwind descended into the empty space around her. The man's eyes widened slightly in surprise. This was something he couldn't have anticipated.

"The great wind elemental?"

"She's an elementalist?"

The hooded figures near the doors murmured to one another in confusion.

"What's this? Why would you summon me to this carnage?" the wind elemental asked.

"Please help me. Please take me away, somewhere far away. It doesn't matter where," said Valeta.

"And what will you give me?"

"I'll give you my blood," replied Valeta.

The transparent falcon spread its vast wings in an apparent sign of agreement. A gust of wind enveloped Valeta, and for a brief moment, she was suspended in the air. Just as she reached up to grab onto the falcon's wings, an intense pain shot through Valeta's heart.

"Aaah!"

The unexpected and terrible pain clouded her vision. At the same time, the transparent falcon she had summoned vanished. Valeta fell to the floor, writhing in pain.

"Dear me. I'm sorry, master. I was so startled, I..." the man started.

*What's happening?* Valeta clutched her heart and shivered on the floor, covered in a cold sweat. The pain was slowly subsiding, but her body continued to shudder from the remnants of it.

"You are remarkable, master. I've noticed you talking to thin air before, but I never imagined that you were an elementalist," said the man as he crouched in front of her. He reached out a hand and stroked her hair affectionately. Valeta, on the other hand, was still writhing in pain with her hands clasped to her chest.

"Forgive me. I went too far," he said.

Valeta forced her head up upon hearing the man's pretentious voice. "What was...?"

"Oh, your father's... I transferred the seal from my heart and placed it on yours. You see, I was afraid that you would abandon me," the man said as he reached out, grabbing a strand of her hair and kissing it.

"Say my name, master, and I'll put you to sleep," he whispered. The gentle look in his eyes and how he had bent to one knee reminded Valeta of his time as a slave. She saw the red marble roll across his palm.

*Damn it. Why hadn't she run away?* She sighed, still deeply regretting her actions.

"Come now," the sweet voice whispered in her ear. Her eyelids were getting heavy. She slowly opened her lips instead of fighting to keep her eyes open.

"Rein... hart..."

"Good girl. Sweet dreams, master," Reinhart said as he continued to stroke Valeta's hair. How could she describe what was wrong with this man? She didn't even know where to begin.

Valeta eventually sank into unconsciousness, unable to forget the pain.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 2

### The First Page - The Past

Valeta Delight first met Reinhart ten years ago at nine years old.

She was Count Delight's one and only daughter—his pride and joy, or at least, as far as people knew. In any case, one day, after returning from a brief skirmish with a barbarian tribe, Valeta's father threw a filthy boy at her feet.

“Father...?”

“I found him milling about the battlefield. He’s quite handsome, so I thought he’d make the perfect slave for you,” said Count Delight as he carelessly shrugged off his armor.

Valeta dropped her head, a troubled look distorted her face as she listened to the dry voice of her gray-haired, purple-eyed father. The boy’s clothes were in shreds, especially around the shoulders. *He must have been stabbed*, Valeta thought. Even at a glance, the girl could tell he wasn’t in good condition. The boy was bleeding profusely and appeared to be suffering from a high fever.

“I don’t need a slave,” Valeta murmured.

“No, you do,” her father cut in. “The future empress can’t have just any slave, but a boy like him will do. Think of him as a shield that you can use to protect your life in times of need.” The tone of the count’s voice implied that this was an order, not a suggestion.

Valeta furrowed her brows. Her lips quivered as she spoke. “But...”

She really hated the idea of having a slave. Even though she had been born and

raised in this world, she was still tethered to the memories of her previous life. Because of that, her values were completely different from the people of this world. If anything, Valeta was uneasy around the beautiful, silver-haired boy. She felt a sense of *déjà vu* as if she had seen him somewhere before.

"Valeta Delight, did you just talk back to me?" The count gave her a cold look. Valeta snapped her mouth shut. Count Delight was horribly obsessed with his daughter. The reason was quite simple: She had been born with the remarkable abilities of a talented alchemist.

Alchemists were rare in the empire, for few were born with such abilities. However, alchemists were essential in the making of potions, so even alchemists born as commoners were guaranteed a position of status. Being born as a commoner was one thing, but Valeta had been born into an aristocratic family. And she wasn't just any alchemist either—she had the potential to become a top-tier alchemist. She had the potential to be a lucrative commodity, one that could even join her own house and the imperial family together in marriage. In fact, Count Delight was already in talks with the imperials.

"The position of empress has come up more than once," said Count Delight.

The count was a merchant through and through. Once he had discovered Valeta's worth, he spared no effort in supporting her.

"But more importantly, the banquet is a week from today. Do try to become acquainted with the crown prince," he continued. "It's better than being strangers."

Valeta remained silent.

"But make sure you talk to the prince too. You never know what's going to happen. There's no telling who's going to become the next emperor."

Valeta stared at the floor.

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Yes, Father. I understand."

By now, Valeta was used to listening to her father and nodded along as he spoke. Count Delight had envisioned marrying her off to the imperial family for quite a while. Of course, he had decided this without considering Valeta's feelings at all.

*Ugh, if only I were a little older. I'd run away.*

Obviously, Valeta's thoughts were not reflected in her behavior. She was less than thrilled to be used this way, but she was just a child, only nine years old. She had no power, no money, no authority. She couldn't escape, no matter where she was or where she went, given the current circumstances.

"I've put proper shackles on him. He won't be able to disobey you," said Count Delight.

"Yes, Father," she replied begrudgingly.

The boy, who had been writhing around on the floor, on the brink of death, finally opened his eyes. His dazed but stunning ruby eyes searched the room before landing on Valeta. Although it looked like the boy was struggling to breathe, Count Delight only gave him a cursory glance before continuing on in a monotonous voice, as if he were explaining how to use a new toy.

"If he doesn't listen to you, squeeze this."

He placed a necklace with a red marble around her neck. The marble was horribly red as if it was made from crystalized blood. Valeta stared down at it.

"I engraved a seal on his heart, so he won't be able to disobey you," said the count. "Order him to do something."

"What? Uh... Maybe later..." said Valeta, shaking her head at her father's sudden order.

Count Delight gave her a sharp look.

*What does he want me to do with someone as injured as him?* No matter what she ordered him to do, he wouldn't be able to stand. She was sure of that.

After a while, Count Delight opened his mouth. "You seem to have a lot to say these days."

Valeta didn't want to displease her father. Although Count Delight rarely raised a hand against her, he punished her in other ways that were just as mentally unbearable. He would order her to kill her own pets or lock her in a dark room for days without a single drop to drink. Once, he had even strung her upside down. He didn't want to hit her for fear of leaving marks that would lower her value, but everything else was fair game, so long as Valeta was at his mercy.

Count Delight was a madman—a madman who had met a madwoman and from their union, begat Valeta. And even at the age of nine, she knew her father better than anyone. He won people's hearts by providing food and aid to commoners and refugee camps, while, behind the scenes, he was involved in corrupt, dirty work—selling slaves. On the outside, Count Delight appeared to be a father who doted on his daughter. However, inside the mansion, he was anything but.

*"That's why he died."* Valeta remembered reading a line like that in the novel. The count had enslaved the future head of the Magicians' Tower as a child and thus brought about his own demise.

*Hmm, I think the novel said something about a beautiful boy too. But it was only a few lines, so she couldn't remember what it said.*

"Hurry up," urged Count Delight.

"S-sit," Valeta said the first thing that came to mind. She stiffened after hearing her own command. It was the only thing she could think of under pressure. The silver-haired boy's expression grew stormy at her words.

*Am I treating him too much like a dog?*

Just as she started reconsidering her order, Count Delight reached for the red marble in her hand. Just as his large callused hand clasped around Valeta's, the boy groaned as if he had just realized something and knelt at his master's feet.

"Master."

The boy gave Valeta a broad smile despite the fact that he was struggling to breathe, his shoulder still bleeding. He looked like an obedient dog, but his red eyes flashed dangerously. His smile didn't reach his eyes.

*"The boy was extremely beautiful. He had eyes like rubies, fair skin, and silver hair that sparkled in the sunlight. And Valeta fell in love with him."*

Valeta was about to respond with a strained laugh when the passage suddenly popped into her head. She stiffened.

*Is this... him? The man who will devour the main character of this world?*

"Oh, okay. Um, hello," Valeta stammered. "Uh... What's your name?"

"Rein... Reinhart, master."

This was the future archmage of the Magicians' Tower, the wicked man who toyed with the main character by giving him meaningless trials, only letting him go when he lost interest.

Valeta remained silent. She was sure that the character's name was Reinhart.

"He's your birthday present," Count Delight said. "Use him well."

"Yes, Father."

*What should I do... My father has given me a time bomb for my birthday.*

Valeta knew there was no internet, nor any similarly advanced technology, in this world, but still, she really wished she could ask the internet what to do.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 3

\* \* \*

*Since we've already moved him for now...* Valeta was lost in thought, a troubled expression upon her face. Of course, she couldn't move the boy herself, so she'd had an attendant assist her.

Even though Reinhart was injured and a slave, he was given a room next to Valeta's under Count Delight's orders. This was so that her new possession could protect her with his life at any time, at any moment.

*I feel like he'll die before me at this rate,* Valeta thought as she looked at the clumsily wrapped bandages. The attendant had barely cleaned the boy's wounds before carelessly wrapping them. She didn't know much about medicine, but even she could tell that the attendant didn't know anything either.

*Knock, knock.*

Valeta turned at the sound of a knock on the wooden door. The attendant who had wrapped the boy's bandages earlier entered. He had with him a bowl of cold water and towels. She assumed they were for Reinhart, who was running a high fever.

"He doesn't need that. He needs a doctor. He'll die if we don't do something," she said.

"I don't think you understand, my lady. Calling a doctor to treat a slave is unnecessary," the attendant said. "These things tend to have long lives. They'll get better on their own if you leave them alone."

Valeta didn't understand. They were all human. What difference did one's position have on one's constitution? She frowned at the attendant's ridiculous logic. It was obvious that the boy wasn't going to get better at this rate. She turned to the attendant. "Did I ask for your opinion?"

The attendant looked stunned. "Pardon?"

"He's going to die if we leave him like this. Call a physician," Valeta said. The attendant's eyes widened. Although the little girl barely came up to his waist, he could feel the icy stare of her violet eyes.

"That was an order. Do you understand?" The young girl cocked her head. "Or shall I tell Father that you're defying me?"

"Oh, no," said the attendant. "Forgive me. I'll call a physician right away."

"Tell him to come as soon as possible. I'll pay whatever the cost."

"I understand." The attendant gave a quick bow before rushing out of the room, leaving the washbasin behind.

Valeta scratched at her cheek, sighing as she recalled the pale look on the attendant's face. She wasn't used to this hierarchical structure but felt that she had no other choice than to exploit it. Count Delight was a strict man. However, because he treated Valeta more like a useful object rather than a person, the attendants tended to ignore her.

Nevertheless, they would never have dared to treat her like that in front of the count. The mere mention of his name was enough to silence them.

Typically, Valeta was one to keep her mouth shut even when the various servants and staff disregarded her. The reason was simple. Even if she said something, the chances of the count turning on her were too high. But occasionally, there were attendants who failed to read the room, especially

newcomers. This wasn't the first time she was being treated like a naive child who didn't know how the world worked, but Valeta was bothered that an otherwise reasonable attendant was just assuming that all slaves had a similar lifespan.

*Besides, if I leave the child to suffer like this...* Valeta was afraid of the consequences. Reinhart was not one to be quick to anger and was depicted as always having a smile on his face. And although he was just a fictional character in a novel, she was surprised at the number of times she had found his description unsettling. Reinhart was the kind of person who collected all the misdeeds committed against him, one by one, before exploding in the worst way possible.

*Unawakened magicians are weak, right?* They said the stronger the magician, the later their powers manifested. Typically, magicians tended to awaken in their mid-teens. However, Reinhart's awakening would take place on Valeta's twentieth birthday.

That was also the day when Reinhart would annihilate every living thing in the Delight household and become the head of the Magicians' Tower.

*Including me...*

She let out a deep sigh. Reinhart's ragged breathing made it sound like he was at death's door. She didn't know how he'd had the strength to kneel at her feet. Of course, as the attendant said, he probably wouldn't die if Valeta left him alone.

*After he recovers, I'll send him on his way.* She would free him and escape death. Valeta picked up the towel sitting in the cold water, wrung the excess water from it, and placed it on the boy's forehead. He must have felt the cold of the towel because the boy began to stir.

"Who...?" Reinhart's silvery eyelashes fluttered open, revealing dark, ruby-red

eyes.

"Rest. I already called for a physician. Once you get better, I'll get you out of this place. Okay?"

"Why...?"

Valeta frowned. *Why do you think? I'm trying to get rid of you before you can kill me.* She would rather have another slave.

It couldn't be Reinhart.

A future madman was still a madman—the boy may have looked weak and pathetic now, but Valeta could tell by the way he had given her that eerie smile. There was an old saying that if you save a thief from the gallows, he'll be the first to cut your throat. Reinhart was that thief. If he stayed here, he was bound to bring destruction. Valeta would have considered herself lucky if destruction was the only thing he brought. But no, he would bring her death too.

"I don't need you," she said flatly.

There was no doubt that Count Delight would be furious with Valeta if she told him that the slave had managed to escape with the marble. However, she would take any punishment he had in store for her. Rather than meeting her end at the hands of this madman, she would rather starve for a week or be strung upside down from the ceiling.

"You're a strange... human..." Reinhart murmured, his eyes slipping closed.

*I could say the same for you,* Valeta thought as she slipped the now lukewarm towel back into the cold water before placing it back on Reinhart's forehead. The physician arrived an hour later.

"Looks like he was stabbed with a sword. Luckily, it's a clean-cut. The wound looks severe, but it's not as bad as it looks."

“Really?”

“Yes. Give him this medicine three times a day after his meals, and sprinkle this powder on his wounds,” the doctor said. “You should replace his bandages every day, but make sure that no water touches the wound until it is healed.”

“I understand. Thank you. I’ll call you again next time. Feel free to charge as much as you want, and my attendant will see that it comes out of my allowance.”

“Understood. Then, I’ll see you next time.” The physician bowed before leaving in a flurry of white robes. He had given Reinhart an injection and some painkillers before leaving, so the boy’s complexion already looked better than before.

*I’ll give him some money and get rid of him once he recovers,* Valeta thought again for what was probably the dozenth time today.

Reinhart didn’t appear often in the novel, but his presence was inescapable. Once he appeared, he had wiped out an entire village and treated the main character, a swordsman, as his plaything. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. He was such a cruel character that, after treating someone with such generosity and warmth, he’d slice their throat without another thought the second they turned their backs to him.

*He seems different as a kid, though.* If she hadn’t known all this, she would’ve tried to befriend him. In fact, the “original” Valeta loved him.

“Do you love me, Valeta?”

*“Yes, I love you. I’d do anything for you, Rein. Once you’re finished taking revenge on this family, let’s run away together.”*

*“Really? That’s a shame because I don’t love you,” Reinhart whispered in a sweet*

*voice as he stroked her cheek.*

In the novel, Reinhart had used Valeta's love to kill everyone in her family before finally killing her with a smile on his face. Of course, there was a reason why Reinhart had killed the original Valeta...

For a moment, she stood there, thinking. *But what was the reason again? I can't remember...*

Either way, just thinking about it was giving her goosebumps again. She vehemently shook her head.

"I have to get rid of him," said Valeta with a resolute nod.

After giving the sleeping Reinhart one last glance, she quietly slipped out of the room.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 4

In the novel, the original Valeta had never treated Reinhart like a slave. In fact, she had treated him affectionately, as if he were her lover. He had smiled, whispered sweet words back to her, then killed her.

*Whoa, I'm getting goosebumps.* Valeta shook her head as she rubbed her arms up and down. She had no idea how these thoughts were able to give her the chills. The little girl quickly made her way to her room and buried herself under the covers. Her eyes squeezed shut and she rested her cheek on the soft blanket. Just as the darkness was about to descend over her, her eyes sprang open again.

"Come to think of it, I should've just made him a potion."

She wouldn't have needed to call a physician then. Valeta wasn't used to her alchemic abilities yet, so there were times when she forgot she had the ability at all.

*Count Delight won't like this.* After giving it some thought, she stifled a yawn and crawled out of bed. There was a bookshelf in her room, however, instead of books, the shelves were filled with glass jars and vials and various medicinal herbs.

The glass vials each had complicated formulas written on them, along with a preservative symbol that only alchemists could use. She took out a few herbs from various jars and placed them all into a single glass vial. Then, she took out a piece of paper and began writing down a formula.

*Why do I even bother?* Valeta thought as her hand continued to scribble out the complicated formula without hesitation. She let out a short sigh as she gazed at

the symbol that resembled a magic circle drawn on the piece of paper.

“Extract.”

The moment the word fell from Valeta’s lips, her violet eyes began to glow. A white magic circle appeared in the center of her eyes as if it’d been carved into her pupils. Before long, intangible energy began to escape from her fingers, seeping into the symbol on the paper. The symbol began to emit a purple glow as it mixed with her energy.

Alchemic abilities were a talent bestowed upon birth. Those born with the ability to commune with plants used their ability to gather herbs of the best condition and quality in order to make the best potions. Every alchemist was different, but the potions of a high-ranking alchemist could regenerate a severed arm or even bring back a man from the brink of death. Of course, these abilities were rare, even among alchemists. Still, most could heal a wound that would normally take months to heal in a single day.

The ancient magic circle in their eyes was their defining characteristic. Nobody knew where the magic formulas came from, but very few people were born with the magic circle in their eyes. The medicine that they produced was more effective than any other medicine. Magicians created “potions” in order to mimic their effect, however, those “potions” were just that. Imitations. None could compare to those created by a true alchemist.

As the years passed, the number of alchemists in the world began to dwindle. Now, there must have been less than twenty officially registered with the empire. The potions made by the empire’s alchemists were extremely rare, and the majority of them were owned by the imperial family—and only they could use such potions.

Then one day, a girl was born into the Delight family. What’s more, she had the ability to become a high-level alchemist. That girl was Valeta.

*This part isn't in the novel, but...* She had doubts as to whether she was actually living inside the novel. The original Valeta had been a lonely girl, mistreated by the cold Count Delight. That was why she had worked with Reinhart and helped him get revenge on her family. However, she was different from the original girl. Being born with the powers of a high-ranking alchemist was one thing, but she also had another ability that she could not share.

It was also why she remained under Count Delight's protection, unlike the past Valeta. She couldn't even step foot outside of the house without her father's permission. But she knew very well that this overprotection was not rooted in love. No. To Count Delight, his daughter was an item valuable enough that he was able to use her alchemist blood as an excuse to make connections with the imperial family.

In fact, Count Delight was now quite close to the emperor after he had been able to prove his daughter's worth as a high-ranking alchemist. Valeta had thought that the trajectory of the story would change significantly because of the new powers she'd been gifted. But the most important parts had stayed the same, starting with Reinhart's arrival.

Even in the novel, Count Delight had brought Reinhart in as a slave, believing that the boy's pretty face would come in handy one day. That was just how beautiful Reinhart was, even as a child. In the novel, the count hadn't given the young boy to his daughter as her personal slave, but that didn't change the fact that he was still a slave.

The purple glow that lit up the room slowly faded. The vial that was once filled with herbs now contained a pale pink liquid. The symbol on the piece of paper was nowhere to be found. All that remained was a single sheet of paper, blank, as if nothing had ever been written on it.

The girl crumpled it up before throwing it in the wastebasket. Then, she grabbed the vial of pink liquid and left her room. She hadn't realized it had

gotten so late. Darkness had settled in, and the mansion was as still as death.

"I hope I don't run into him..." Valeta whispered. She hoped that the boy was still sleeping. The doorknob was up high for a small girl like Valeta, and she had to reach up to turn the knob. The door slowly opened with a creak, and she carefully pushed her head through the gap.

*Oh, good. He's still asleep.* Valeta let out a sigh of relief and slipped inside. Perhaps it was because she didn't see the boy's red eyes, but she wasn't as scared as she thought she would be. *He's still a kid too.*

Reinhart appeared to be so deep in sleep that he didn't stir as she leaned over him. Valeta worked quickly, carefully removing his bandage and pouring the pink liquid onto his wounds. Instantly, his wounds began to heal. The potion would have been more effective on his internal injuries if he had ingested it, but it wasn't as if she could pry his mouth open right at that moment.

*This is good enough.* Feeling that her job here was done, Valeta quietly left the room. As she left, Reinhart slowly opened his eyes and shifted his hazy red eyes to where the girl had just been.

"So she's an alchemist. I guess the rumors were true," he murmured. He wore a cold gaze that was utterly unlike the servile one he had adopted earlier.

Magicians were required to serve humans before their awakening, but many of the humans were uncomfortable looking into the eyes of magicians. Perhaps that was why magicians faced more open hostility compared to ordinary humans. Every so often, there were magicians who were born into good families with good parents, but that was not the case for Reinhart.

Born into the worst family and sold off for next to nothing, he had served as a war slave, forced to wield an unfamiliar weapon as he fought in battles. He knew that he would become a magician one day because the head of the Magicians' Tower was born with all the knowledge of the world. As proof of this,

Reinhart was able to use magic even though he had not yet awokened. It wasn't high-level magic, but it was still something that none of the other magicians could do.

Reinhart speculated that it was because his full powers could not be contained. But somehow, he'd been stabbed by a foolish human and dragged to this place. On top of that, he was now inflicted with a horrible spell, a seal carved into his heart.

"She... could be useful," Reinhart muttered in a low voice. He knew how to use the beauty he was born with and how to take advantage of the kindness and affection of others. It was a survival technique that he had developed while growing up in a cruel world. A smile flickered on his lips. It was a beautiful smile, one that anyone would be captivated by.

He decided that he would stay here until he came of age. Rather than roaming out in the world with no place to go, it was far better to stay here and kneel at the girl's feet and call her master. Reinhart glanced at his shoulder. The sword-inflicted wound had completely disappeared.

Satisfied, Reinhart slowly closed his eyes. *Alchemists' potions are quite the wonder.*

The boy did not resist the lull of sleep as he knew that sleeping was one of the best ways to heal an injured body.

That night, both the boy and the girl slept soundly in their respective rooms.

\* \* \*

"Valeta Delight!"

Valeta jerked awake at the sound of the voice coming down on her like thunder. She could feel her heart sink. Recognizing the owner of the voice, she slowly

opened her eyes and blinked at the dark figure standing above her bed.

Count Delight had just barged into her room and was giving her a penetrating stare.

*I don't care if he's my father. It's annoying how he enters my room without permission.* Valeta sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

Count Delight didn't bother to hide his displeasure as he glared at his daughter.

"Yes, Father?"

"Did you use alchemy on that slave?"

"Yes, because he was going to die if I didn't."

The count stomped over to the bed and grabbed Valeta by the collar of her nightgown with one hand, lifting her up into the air. He then shook his nine-year-old daughter as if she were nothing more than a rag doll.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 5

"I thought I told you never to use alchemy without my permission," roared Count Delight as he shook her. "How dare you disobey me? The ability that you have, the clothes that you wear, the food that you eat, and even your body—it all belongs to me."

*If everything belongs to you just because you're my father, then does that mean your body belongs to the previous count too?* Valeta looked up at Count Delight, swallowing the words that were caught in her throat. Clearly, he was not pleased that she had used alchemy to heal the slave without his permission.

"I'm sorry, Father. I thought the slave was going to die," she said.

"So you used alchemy on it?"

"It was your birthday gift to me. I couldn't let him die on the first day," Valeta replied. She was choosing her words carefully now.

Count Delight narrowed his eyes and frowned, but he was silent for a moment as if satisfied with her lie. Finally, he said, "Even so, it's a sin to use your abilities without my permission."

*Then everything in the world would be a sin,* Valeta grumbled to herself, all the while keeping her head bowed, pretending to look apologetic.

"Yes, I'm sorry."

She hated the idea of a child being their parent's property just because they had given birth to them. It made her uncomfortable.

"You're forbidden to leave your room today. You will have no meals either. Use

this time to reflect on yourself and what you did wrong."

Valeta nodded obediently. "Yes, Father."

Count Delight turned away, looking much more relaxed than before. The curtains were drawn and the door was closed. The room plunged into darkness. Valeta could hear the click of a key, the sound of a door being locked.

"Only a day, huh? I can't tell if that's a good thing or not," she said into the dark.

*I can't even use the powers I was born with,* Valeta thought as she swallowed a sigh.

The boy must be completely healed by now. Tomorrow, she'd feed him and then tell him to run away the day after that. If she gave him the marble and helped him escape, he would be able to take care of himself after that.

Valeta slowly sank back into her bed, recalling the words that had shaken her awake. *Let's just go back to bed.*

She could plan all she wanted, but there was nothing she could do today. Valeta lay there in the gloom of her room. She couldn't even open the curtains without her father's permission. She quietly turned over and hugged her pillow.

\* \* \*

"Good morning, master."

"Mmm... Five more minutes..."

"Your 'five minutes' is the same as an hour, master. Please think about your poor slave. He's heard 'five more minutes' about twenty times now."

"Ugh." Valeta's face scrunched at the nagging voice in her ear. She slowly opened her eyes to find Reinhart right in front of her face. His own had only

grown more handsome over the years. "You're still here..."

"And it still hurts when you say that right to my face, master," Reinhart replied. He hovered only a few inches above her.

Valeta pushed him away. His voice was sweet and gentle, but he didn't seem to realize his eyes weren't smiling at all. What's more, he would often sneak up close to her as if trying to seduce her. Take, for example, when he had tried to wake her up. *Does he keep trying because I keep pushing him away?*

*Don't fall for him, Valeta. He'll be your end.* She repeated those words like a mantra before steeling herself to face him. It had already been five years since the slave had first stepped foot in the mansion. Valeta was now fourteen years old. Despite all the times she had tried to give Reinhart the marble and set him free, he simply refused to leave.

*He must already consider this his nest,* Valeta thought with her face still buried in her pillow. *I guess he plans on staying here until he's an adult. He must think it's better than having to wander from place to place until his awakening.*

"I said I'd give you everything, so why won't you leave this place?"

"Where would a slave go without his master?" Reinhart said in a sweet voice.

*Then do something about those cold eyes!* Speaking in a sweet and caring voice isn't everything. *Then again, Valeta thought, he could live just fine just off his face alone.*

The day Valeta met Reinhart, the very same day she had poured the potion on him, Count Delight had taken Reinhart's room away from him in a fit of anger. To this day, Reinhart had no place to sleep. He would drift from room to room, catching a wink of sleep in the stables, the basement, and sometimes even the kitchen. Valeta requested that Reinhart stay in her room instead, but Count Delight had berated her for that.

In the end, Reinhart was forced to work odd jobs while being despised by all the attendants and some of the maids. Valeta begged them not to, but the abuse continued behind closed doors.

*If this were a game, their relationship meter would be in the pits of hell.* There was no hope for this household. Valeta let out a deep sigh. She thought it would be a good idea to talk to her father today. *Why can't he see that I'm trying to save him?*

He was a dangerous child—a dangerous child who was most likely meeting his followers from the Magicians' Tower in secret. *He's going to raze this mansion the day I come of age!*

Valeta rolled around on her bed, resisting the urge to tear her hair out.

Reinhart tilted his head to the side, still watching her. "I don't know why you keep wanting me to leave, master."

"I don't need a slave."

"Am I a nuisance?"

"I just don't like the idea of having a slave."

She couldn't tell him that he was going to kill everyone in this mansion. Valeta slowly crawled out of bed. It was dangerous seeing such a beautiful first thing in the morning every day.

*My head hurts.* She was most decidedly not a morning person. She stumbled slightly, and in a flash, Reinhart was at her side, grabbing her waist to support her.

"Be careful, master."

"I know." Valeta frowned at the arm that was wrapped tightly around her waist.

Reinhart reached up to feel his master's forehead with his free hand. "Are you all right? Could it be your anemia again?"

"No, I was just a little dizzy, that's all. I'm fine now." Valeta stepped out of his embrace. She could understand why the original Valeta was so enamored with this boy. She had probably felt like she was the most loved person in the world with the charming way Reinhart treated her. "Let me know if you ever want to leave."

"I like you, master. That's why I want to stay by your side." Reinhart was kneeling now, looking up at Valeta from the floor, his silver tongue making it sound as though he were giving her all the authority.

As far as Valeta knew, Reinhart was still being abused by the servants, but he seemed to have won over the hearts of the maids and a few of the attendants. Still, she knew that there were plenty of other servants who didn't like him.

"I'm not falling for your lies. Get out. I need to wash up, so go call a maid for me."

"Yes, master." Reinhart glanced at her with narrowed eyes, but she had already turned away. He bowed and left the room.

As soon as Reinhart left the room, Valeta released the tension in her body and slumped on her bed. "Ugh, there's not much time left," she groaned, rubbing her temples. She couldn't believe that it had already been five, no, six years since Reinhart first arrived.

She didn't think that he'd stay for this long. He'd stubbornly refused Valeta's pleas for him to leave. Instead, he woke her up every morning. He knelt, looking up at her with doleful, half-lidded eyes as if to tempt her.

"Why...?"

*Why won't he leave?*

Of course, Reinhart hadn't left in the novel either, but the situation was different. In the novel, the original Valeta was obsessed with Reinhart, but maybe he hadn't left because Count Delight was in possession of the marble. But in this timeline, Valeta wasn't obsessed with him, and she was the one who was in possession of the marble now. In fact, she had tried to give it to Reinhart several times before. But every time she did, the boy would just smile and place the marble back in her hand.

"Don't let go of your lifeline, master," he whispered.

To Valeta, it sounded like he was saying that this was her *only* lifeline. But logically, Valeta knew that Reinhart's decision was the right one. It was safer for him to live as a slave doing odd jobs for a nobleman than to wander out in the world as a child.

Above all, given his looks, the chances of him being sold into slavery again were high. In fact, it appeared that Count Delight had plans to do just that when Reinhart was older.

Reinhart was growing more beautiful by the day. He'd be less likely to die as an adult and would have far more uses too.

*Isn't it fine for him to leave now, though? Valeta was fourteen, which meant that her future murderer was now sixteen. Thoughts raced through her mind. Isn't he old enough to live on his own now? What on earth is he still doing here? And I know he can use magic too.*

Reinhart hadn't awakened to his full powers yet, but Valeta knew that he could use practical magic. That was something she had discovered by chance when she witnessed him using magic to clean a particularly stubborn stain.

"I don't know what to do..." she lamented.

Six years. She had six years left before she became an adult. Reinhart would awaken on the day she would come of age, two years after he became an adult. There would be nothing she could do once that happened. She buried her head in the pillow and groaned.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 6

*Should I just run away?* the girl pondered with narrowed eyes.

The truth was, it was difficult for Valeta to even step foot out of the house. She looked down at the bracelet around her wrist, a present gifted to her by Count Delight on her tenth birthday. It was also, in fact, a tracking device that could also force her back to the house regardless of where she was.

"We're no different from each other." She was just as trapped as Reinhart. The girl flopped on her bed, sprawled back her arms, and gave a deep sigh. She still wasn't used to the ways of this confusing world, and she suspected that it'd be a long time before she ever was.

*Knock, knock.*

At the sound of knocking at the door, Valeta instantly snapped upright.

"Come in," she said.

A maid stepped in. "I heard that you called for me, my lady."

"Yes. I need to wash up."

"Of course. I'll make the arrangements."

Valeta nodded slowly. Although she still felt out of place, she was slowly getting used to giving commands and being waited on. Would that mean she would get used to this caged life one day, a life where she would never be able to defy Count Delight's orders?

"I didn't think I'd ever find myself in an arranged marriage like one of those millionaire's daughters," Valeta said with another sigh. Her engagement to the

crown prince was imminent. The count had sprung the news on her yesterday. She had met the crown prince a handful of times, but to already be engaged? The thought was ridiculous.

She suppressed another sigh and muttered, “Ugh, I don’t want to take a bath.”

She was scheduled to meet with the crown prince today to discuss their engagement before it was officially announced. That was why she didn’t want to get up, but who just had to force her up?

*That damn Reinhart.* Was he so clueless? If she had refused to get up even after his twenty-fifth time trying to rouse her, he should have gotten the hint and given up. She didn’t actually think that he would take each of her “five more minutes” seriously. She dropped her head and sighed yet again.

Eventually, Valeta was freed from the clutches of her maids. They had spent the morning helping the girl bathe and lacing her into her dress. Worried that eating a full meal would ruin the shape of the dress, the maids had thrust a sorry excuse of a salad consisting only of a few leafy greens and a slice of apple into Valeta’s hands after she started complaining of hunger. Still, the corset was too tight.

“I hate this so much,” she grumbled. But it didn’t matter how much she complained. This was what Count Delight wanted. If word that Valeta had appeared at the imperial castle in a state any less than perfect reached the count’s ears, he would have her strung upside by her ankles, even at this age.

It hadn’t hurt as much when she was younger, but now... Well, Valeta thought the pain would make her go insane.

“You’re all set, my lady.”

“Wonderful.”

Valeta started down the carpeted stairs with a scowl on her face. At the bottom, Reinhart was waiting for her, dressed in a tunic much nicer than the shabby one he typically wore. It seemed he had dressed for the occasion. Actually, it wasn't much better than a burlap sack, but Valeta couldn't help but notice that it made him appear more dazzling than ever.

"Hey, get out of the way. Stop blocking the lady's path, you worthless slave."

"Tsk. Just because the lady adores you doesn't mean anything! You're getting too big for your britches."

"Go stand over there!"

"All right." Reinhart may have smiled and replied lightly as the maids and attendants continued to berate him. But Valeta could see it. A dark rage was slowly blooming and steadily growing behind that smiling face. *Whatever. Why should I be responsible for their lives?*

She didn't know what to do anymore. Despite her pleas, the servants continued to abuse Reinhart behind her back. Why couldn't people understand that she wasn't trying to help him because she liked him? She was trying to save their lives! Why couldn't anyone see that? By now, why hadn't someone, anyone noticed Valeta's desperation?

So she'd given up. She couldn't let herself die trying to save these people. It was a fool's errand. Reinhart, still keeping his head down, moved off to the side. Valeta already knew what he would do to these servants: he would break their fingers one by one as he recalled every one of their misdeeds against him. But there was nothing she could do except keep her mouth shut.

*If I'm going to die, let me die with grace and dignity.* Her goals were slightly different now. Although not dying was still her top priority, if it was going to happen anyway, Valeta just hoped that it would be quick and painless.

"I'll have your slave seated on the floor," said the attendant.

Valeta was lost for words. She even felt a little faint and quickly waved her hand. "No, there's no need for that. The carriage is big enough for him to sit with me."

"But..." the attendant faltered. "He's just a slave, my lady. Having him sit with you is..."

"Is there a single servant in this household that won't make me repeat myself? My word is your command. I am your master, and I'm giving you an order."

The attendant's face contorted with anger, and he opened his mouth as if to say something, but he couldn't argue with her. An order was an order.

"I... I understand, my lady."

Clearly displeased by Valeta's words, the attendant scowled and roughly grabbed Reinhart's shoulders and whispered something into his ear before shoving him toward the carriage. Valeta flinched as she watched them.

*That crazy bastard...* As they climbed into the carriage, she caught a glimpse of the eerie way Reinhart's eyes glowed. Sighing deeply, she settled herself into her seat. Everything seemed to be becoming more and more hopeless. Could that just be an illusion?

Reinhart followed Valeta into the carriage. Whether he knew what she was thinking, she couldn't tell. As soon as the attendant closed the door, the carriage departed for the imperial castle.

"What are you doing?" Valeta asked in an exasperated voice. She looked down at Reinhart, who had forgone the perfectly good seat across from her in favor of the floor.

Reinhart—from his seat on the floor—gave a brief sigh before looking up at her

with a bright smile. "Your great attendant told me that I should know my place," he answered with a tilt of his head.

*Oh, he's upset.* The only time Reinhart spoke informally with Valeta or let his expression show undisguised on his face was when he was in a foul mood. Also, she suspected that wasn't the only thing the attendant had said.

"Get off the floor. Nobody's going to see you anyway. It'll be fine as long as you get back down before we arrive."

Reinhart stayed on the floor, gazing up at her with a vacant look on his face.  
"Only if you let me sit next to you, master."

"Why?"

"Please lend me your shoulder."

*I knew it. He's really upset.* Perhaps it was because he was starved for attention, but he always seemed to look for it when he was upset.

Valeta gave it some consideration. Eventually, she nodded. Reinhart brightened and immediately took a seat next to her, and she didn't say a word as he lowered his head onto her shoulder. Settling in, Reinhart closed his eyes as if he were overcome with exhaustion and said no more.

The rest of the ride continued in silence. Before the carriage arrived at the castle, he slipped back down to his place on the floor of the carriage. He looked to be in a better mood than before. As soon as they arrived, Reinhart opened the door of the carriage, exited, and knelt before her. It was obvious that Valeta was meant to step on his back, but it was honestly the last thing she wanted to do as all she could imagine was what would happen the day Reinhart awakened.

*"How dare you step on my back with those filthy feet?"* he'd say. He would probably snap her ankles for that. Just the mere thought was enough to send

goosebumps down her back. She shook her head.

"You there," Valeta called to the coachman.

"Yes, my lady."

"There's a log under the box seat. Bring it here," she ordered. "I'm not going to step on anyone."

"Of course, my lady."

The coachman dashed to the front of the carriage. Reinhart, who was still kneeling on the ground, looked up at Valeta with a strange expression. She waved her hand, avoiding his gaze.

"Get up already."

"Do you hate me that much, master?"

When he spoke, his voice took on a cold, almost cruel tone, as if he were offended. It was so frigid that it sent a shiver down Valeta's spine. She frowned. But when she turned to look at Reinhart, she was met with a bright smile.

*Is he mad or not?* There were times when it was just the two of them when he would drop formalities for a moment. Valeta couldn't blame him for doing so, but it seemed to be happening more frequently. *He thinks I'm easy, does he?*

But what could she do to stop him? Even though Valeta knew everything that would happen, she wasn't able to do anything about it. Reinhart could have slapped her across the face and she wouldn't be able to say a word, sadly. He was just as skilled in treachery as he was in acting.

*What a sad life,* Valeta thought with a sigh.

"What are we doing at the imperial castle anyway?" Reinhart asked.

"The crown prince wants us to have tea together before they officially announce our engagement."

Reinhart stiffened when he heard Valeta's words. "Engagement?"

"You know, it's just grown-up business," she answered nonchalantly. "Not that it will ever make sense to me."

She was looking elsewhere and didn't see the look on his face. Her tone made it clear that she had not the slightest bit of interest, but Reinhart's expression was stony. He looked as if he was surprised, almost as if he were having trouble understanding his own feelings.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 7

\* \* \*

“Here you are, my lady!”

The coachman cut through the silence, placing the log down at Valeta’s feet. Valeta, using the log as a stepping stone, made her way out of the carriage.

*If it wasn’t for this dress, I would’ve just jumped down,* she thought as she grappled with the hem of the cursed dress.

“You,” she indicated to the coachman. “Stay on standby.”

The coachman bowed as she waved him away with her hand. Valeta sighed as she watched the coachman drive into the distance. She glanced behind her to find Reinhart still standing there.

“What... do you want to do?” she asked.

“I want to stay with you, master.”

She nodded. “Suit yourself.”

After a moment, the palace door opened, and an attendant came to greet them.

“Welcome, Lady Valeta.”

“Yes, long time no see.”

“Indeed. You’ve become even more beautiful since the last time I saw you.”

“Thank you.”

Valeta continued exchanging pleasantries with the attendant as a formality as she followed him into the drawing room. Perhaps it was because the imperial castle commanded attention as the center of the empire, but no matter where she looked, everything in the palace appeared to be gilded.

The attendant opened the door to the drawing room. Valeta lowered her gaze and slowly entered the room, carefully bowing her head.

"Greetings, Your Highness. I, Valeta Delight, am honored to be in your presence."

"Oh, you're here, Lady Valeta. Please, there's no need to be so formal. After all, we're to be married soon anyway."

"After our coming-of-age ceremony, that is," she said in a monotone voice, lifting her head.

The crown prince was a handsome man with golden hair, deep blue eyes, strong, clearly defined features, and a sweet smile. He was beautiful. But at the same time, Valeta was not impressed. After all, she had a certain someone waking her up every morning... Someone with more beauty than humanity could offer. But that wasn't all. She just didn't like the situation that she was in. *This is a loveless marriage.*

In her past life, she had never dreamed of getting married like this. Even now, none of it felt real. Her only relief was that the coming-of-age ceremony was to be held at the same age as it had been in her previous world—when she became twenty years old.

*I still have six years left.*

Six years to find some way out.

Valeta genuinely didn't want to marry the crown prince or become the crown princess, because she knew the imperial family's true motive was to get their

hands on her alchemic abilities.

"Lady Valeta, I see you're as cold as ever," chuckled the crown prince. "Still, I thank you for not refusing my invitation."

"I would never hear the end of it from my father if I had," she replied.

"Hmm, seems Count Delight may be scarier than he appears."

The crown prince made his way over to the sofa and beckoned her to sit down as well. Valeta, accepting his invitation, took a seat on the sofa while Reinhart took his place beside her, kneeling. This was typical behavior for a slave, one that Valeta usually went to great lengths to avoid. The problem was that his presence itself was anything but normal, at least to Valeta. It felt like she was sitting on a bed of thorns.

"Putting everything aside, I like you, my lady. My hope is that we can get along as friends even after we get married."

"Indeed."

"Of course, I do have interest in you... as the fairer sex," the crown prince said earnestly.

"Thank you, Your Highness..." she replied softly. If she were being honest, the arranged marriage wasn't the crown prince's fault. It was only the fault of those above them, making the decisions on their behalf.

*If I think about it, the prince is a victim as well.* In fact, Valeta was thankful that her father didn't know that she could see and talk to spirits. If he had discovered that, he would have never allowed her to leave the house, and she would have been a bird trapped in a cage.

"Please, call me Miloyd. There's no need for formalities between us."

"Perhaps once I'm more comfortable?"

"Huh? Oh, o-of course! Was I being too hasty?" Prince Miloyd asked with a laugh.

Valeta looked away with a fake, coy smile on her face while the prince continued laughing to himself.

*Why was I born in a place like this?* she wondered. She sipped her tea with meaningless resentment, the bitter tea reflecting her equally bitter thoughts.

"Oh, right. The engagement ceremony is going to be held on the last day of the year."

"Yes."

"Please tell me if there is anything that you'd like to do for the ceremony. And would you like an engagement gift of some sort? Please, tell me!"

"I..." As Valeta tried to find the words, Miloyd nodded eagerly. He bent over and leaned closer toward her, his eyes shining with anticipation. Valeta swallowed another sigh. "I don't know much about this kind of business. I'm sure that you will have everything prepared just as it should be, Your Highness."

"Oh... Really? I suppose that can't be helped. Are you sure there isn't anything you want?" he pressed.

"Um, if it's an engagement ceremony, wouldn't you think an engagement ring would be appropriate?"

"Hmm, that's true, but that's a given for an engagement ceremony. Surely there's something else?"

Valeta struggled not to roll her eyes at the kind but puzzled face of the crown prince. He was such a cheerful, innocent man, his smile as bright as the midday

sun. She'd heard that he had a strong sense of justice and was full of grace and mercy. Everyone in the empire loved him. However, Valeta really had no need for a gift. It was not like she wanted this arranged marriage in the first place.

Valeta could tell that Reinhart's eyes were on her without having to see for herself. She swallowed yet another sigh. *I know he's smiling for real now.* Reinhart's smile was one befitting a grim reaper right before it collected a dying soul.

"I'm sorry. I can't think of anything at the moment."

"I see. Then again, everyone knows how much Count Delight adores you. I'm sure he has already bought you everything you could ever want," Miloyd said with a laugh.

Valeta silently smiled. It was true that Count Delight adored her, but just as much as one could adore a precious jewel, and he definitely wasn't giving her whatever she wanted. Then again, she never really wanted anything anyway.

*If I had one wish, it would be to get rid of this stupid bracelet,* she thought. She tilted her head, glancing at the emerald green bracelet on her wrist. Miloyd held his breath, an anxious look crossing his face. He looked at her as though she were about to fly off somewhere far, far away.

"Lady Valeta?"

"Yes?"

Miloyd reached out, grabbed her hand, then flinched as if surprised by his own behavior. He quickly withdrew his hand. Valeta's brows furrowed at the warmth of his touch.

"Oh! I-I'm sorry. I thought you were going to disappear," he said.

"What?"

"No, no, it's nothing. I'm sorry for suddenly grabbing your hand."

"It's all right." She shook her head, rubbing her wrist in the place where Prince Miloyd had grabbed it.

He quickly rose from his seat. Reinhart's red eyes glanced up at the prince's rising figure, his eyes fixed on the other man for a brief moment before lowering his gaze again. The crown prince nervously took a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped his hands a few times before extending a now shiny hand to Valeta.

"It's stuffy in here, isn't it? Would you care for a walk? I heard that alchemists can hear the sound of plants. Our gardens are very well maintained. I think you'll like it."

"That would be lovely," Valeta said after a moment's pause. She took the prince's outstretched hand and rose from her seat.

Reinhart, his head still bowed, rose to his feet, and trailed after the two of them. Try as she might, Valeta couldn't get a sense of what he was thinking from his expressionless face.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 8

\* \* \*

“What are you looking for, master?” asked Reinhart.

“Oh... I need to get into my workroom,” Valeta said as she searched the room.

“But I don’t know where Father put the key.”

“Your workroom?”

“Yeah.”

Once Count Delight had discovered that Valeta was prone to using alchemy for pointless things, he took away her workroom altogether, moving it to the basement and locking it up. Now, Valeta wasn’t allowed to use it without his express permission. She was often locked in there for hours, honing her skills, but she wasn’t allowed to take anything outside of it. The maids even went as far as to check her undergarments every time she left.

“What do you need the workroom for?” Reinhart asked. “An injured rabbit? A fallen bird? Or perhaps, did you find an ant with a broken leg this time?”

Valeta ignored his sarcastic teasing. She couldn’t care less about people, but her heart went out to animals, little creatures that she could take into her arms and release again at any moment. She had no wish to call people by their names, but animals didn’t need names at all. And while she didn’t want to depend on anyone, always being on her own was quite lonely. That was why she longed for some kind of warmth, even if it came from a little, furry beast.

Instead of responding to Reinhart, Valeta turned away in silence. She couldn’t

find the key anywhere, which could only mean that it was in her father's office. She needed that key. Valeta started to head toward the office, but Reinhart strode after her. He reached out, catching her by the waist.

"I don't know why you even care about those things. Why show them affection? I just don't get it."

"You don't have to," Valeta replied.

He frowned at her words, his smile vanishing into a thin line. "There are people over in that direction."

Valeta froze when she heard this. He slowly released the hands that were around her waist. When she turned around, she saw that Reinhart was looking down at her with a strange look on his face. He turned, his steps light, and headed straight to her workroom.

*He doesn't even have the key. What is he trying to do?* Soon, Valeta realized that he didn't even need the key. With a single flick of a wrist, the lock to her workroom snapped open.

She pushed past Reinhart and entered. She didn't even glance at him as he closed the door behind them and leaned against it. Valeta hurried around the room, cramming herbs into a vial and scribbling a formula on a piece of paper.

"Extract," she said finally.

Reinhart never took his eyes off Valeta's moving body. An ancient magic circle flashed in her eyes, filling the room with violet light. It was always so incredible the way simple herbs could become a potion. A strange light flickered in Reinhart's ruby-red eyes.

There was inexplicable hunger in his stomach. He rubbed his neck before turning to glance at the girl. Valeta relocked her workshop and headed out into

the backyard with the newly made potion tucked under her arm.

"You always refuse my help, but you accepted this time just for a mere cat?" Reinhart said, disgruntled. Valeta was unfazed when it came to seeing people getting hurt or dying—it was something she had been expecting all along. But for some reason, she couldn't stand seeing injured animals. To her, animals were human, and humans were the animals.

"Valeta. What are you doing out here?" a voice called out.

She flinched. Her shoulders started shaking, but she remained still, still crouched down on the ground in case Count Delight saw the cat.

The count glowered at her. "Valeta Delight!"

"Yes, Father?"

She gave a sigh before standing up. The cat, already healed, was rolling around in the grass at her feet, purring as though it were thanking its benefactor.

"You used alchemy again!"

Valeta raised her head, indifferently spitting out the words that now had become a habit. "I'm sorry." Count Delight wasn't alone. Behind him were two people, an attendant and a maid. Valeta turned her cold eyes on them. The maid, meeting her gaze, looked away.

*I should've known,* she thought. Someone must have seen her, but instead of stopping her, they had ratted her out instead. She glanced to the side at Reinhart. He had a smile on his face, though it was one that didn't reach his eyes.

*This is how you bring yourself one step closer to death.* How she envied their ignorance. Ignorance was bliss, as they say.

"You're sorry? You're always sorry!" Count Delight roared.

*Slap!*

Valeta's head jerked to the side. Her eyes widened, but she wasn't surprised. The count had always been a man of short temper. This was bound to have happened sooner or later.

"Take her to the punishment room! Don't give her anything but water for a week!"

The count was so predictable. The attendant and the maid grabbed Valeta's arms as if they had been waiting for this. She saw Reinhart's eyes widen in shock.

*Why is he looking at me like that?* It was as though he was seeing this happen for the first time. It wasn't until Valeta turned the corner that she realized that this was the first time she had seen him show any true emotion on his face.

Needless to say, the week she spent confined in the punishment room was boring. Perhaps it was because she had often been locked up in that room ever since she was small, but Valeta was unimpressed with how dark the room was and how she had to grope around to find the bowl of water.

She was used to starving for days and no longer felt the need to claw at the door like she had when she was a child, begging for mercy.

*But still, a week is too much.* She tried to convince herself that she was on a new diet, but it wasn't working. There was nothing she could do other than meditate, lie there as still as possible, or just sleep.

A week later, the door opened with Count Delight himself stepping through the door. "This is your last chance. If you use alchemy without my permission again, you will be nothing to me, child," he whispered as he stroked her cheek.

After he left, Valeta staggered to her feet. *What happened to Reinhart?* He usually came to visit her at least once, but she hadn't seen hide nor hair of him since she'd entered the room.

*I hope he's gone*, she thought. But first things first—she needed to eat. After requesting some soup from the attendant, Valeta headed straight to her room. Nothing had changed in her absence. Just as she was about to rest on her bed, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

"I can see my bones." She gazed indifferently at her body before tearing herself away from the mirror. There was no sign of Reinhart even after Valeta finished her dinner and was getting ready for bed. His absence could only mean that he had left the mansion or was dead. Either was fine, but Valeta wished that he was out there, living a better life than he had been here.

"Hello, master."

Valeta knew it was too good to be true. Just as she was about to drift off to sleep, she heard a soft voice coming from behind her door. It was the same voice as always. She sat up in her bed. *He usually just enters... What's going on?* It wasn't like anybody was watching over her room at night, either.

Reinhart's voice came floating from behind the door. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Valeta replied.

"I see. That's good, then." A pause. "Do you want to know something, master?"

She remained silent. Would he cut her throat if she said she didn't want to know?

Reinhart continued as if he wasn't even expecting her to answer. "The two servants who couldn't hold their tongue and dared to put their hands on you that day have died."

“What...?”

“It was an unfortunate accident. They fell out of a window.”

Valeta stayed quiet. Whether it really was an accident or not, only Reinhart knew. She stifled the lump in her throat. Would he be satisfied with killing a few people? Then again, he probably hadn’t even needed to use high-ranking magic for that. At such a height, a stiff breeze could have blown the servants over. Either way, Valeta was once again reminded of how dangerous Reinhart truly was.

*I told them not to bother him, but did they listen to me?*

The servants had continued to harass him despite her warnings. Valeta rubbed her forehead as if she had a headache, then slowly swept her hand down her face.

“Can I come in, master?”

Something was definitely wrong. He never asked for permission to enter her room, at least not this late at night. Valeta narrowed her eyes.

“When have you ever asked for my permission?”

“Master, I want to take care of you.”

Something had definitely happened. Valeta knew that those words were a tell. She ruffled her bangs a few times and responded lightly, “Fine.”

The doorknob turned. Reinhart must have been barefoot, for she couldn’t hear his footsteps. Valeta looked up as he closed the door behind him.

“Why are you...?” she trailed off, unable to finish her sentence. His whole body was covered in bruises and scratches. Anyone could tell that he had been terribly beaten.

His red eyes were even duller than usual that, if Valeta hadn't known better, she would've assumed that they belonged to the dead.

"Master..." Reinhart collapsed in her arms, crumpling into a heap. He hugged her tightly as she just sat there in her bed. He clung to her like a child, desperately trying to hold back his emotions. Valeta didn't return his embrace, but she didn't push him away either.

"My knees... You may touch my knees."

Reinhart didn't speak for a long time. At last, his embrace slipped down to her knees, his head resting on her thighs. Then, he closed his eyes and remained like that for a long time.

*What am I doing?* Valeta thought.

She didn't force Reinhart away from her, although she knew it was stupid not to, and she didn't ask how he'd come to be in such a state. The reason was clear enough. He was no less pitiful than herself. For now.

Tomorrow morning, the two would begin their day with Valeta kneeling before the count, apologizing for her disobedience, and Reinhart with a bruised and battered body.

Neither soul spoke as the moonlight shone down on them. Reinhart didn't complain to Valeta, and she didn't comfort him. The only thing that filled the room was silence.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 9

\* \* \*

“Your clothes are slightly crooked, master.”

Reinhart, who had been watching Valeta dress herself, strode up to her and lightly grabbed the hem of her dress. He loosened the poorly made bow and tied it back up again neatly.

“How many times do I have to teach you how to tie a bow?”

“Isn’t it time... for you to leave?”

Reinhart gave her a broad smile before putting the necklace with the red marble around her neck. Then, he wrapped a thick shawl around her shoulders. “There you go again, saying things like that.”

Valeta sighed. It had been two years since the night when a bruised and battered Reinhart had desperately clung to her. How time flew.

After that day, Valeta stopped disobeying the count. Knowing that Reinhart would have to pay the price of her disobedience, she was now compliant and amenable. Of course, Count Delight’s final warning also played a large role. There were only four years left, but it seemed that Reinhart had no intention of leaving.

“We need to straighten up your hair again.”

“It’s fine...” Valeta grumbled.

“If you’re fine with the wind blowing it around, then I won’t force you,” Reinhart replied.

She couldn't tell if that was an excuse or a threat and fell silent. By now, she was used to being waited on by Reinhart. The relationship between the unlikely pair was the same as ever—nothing more than master and servant. Consenting, Valeta took a seat, and Reinhart started to work on her hair with his long, skilled fingers.

In addition to earrings, she was wearing a bracelet similar to the tracking bracelet she had on her other arm, though it was less flashy and more modest. Around her neck, she donned the enchanted necklace. The accessories were all simple, made to suit Valeta's tastes. She had never once expressed her preferences, so she wondered how Reinhart had known what to choose for her.

"Why are you going to the market?" he asked quietly.

"To buy medicinal herbs."

"Hm..." Reinhart hummed in response as he put another robe around her shoulders. "Can I come with you?"

"No."

"What a shame..." Reinhart fell quiet at Valeta's sharp refusal. He knew that she was trying to get rid of him or send him away somehow, but he would have been lying if he said it didn't bother him.

"Why do you dislike me so much, master?" he whispered in her ear.

Her mouth was shut tight as if it had been painted with glue. She refused to meet his eyes. Reinhart's eyebrows twitched.

*He could snap my neck right now.*

He slowly reached out, placing the tips of his fingers on the column of her neck. She raised her head and looked at him with a slight frown.

"There was a speck of dust," he said. He gently rubbed the nape of her neck with his thumb before stepping back. If she died, he wouldn't be able to see her face or hear her voice again. It was a rather unpleasant thought.

Valeta rubbed her neck in the spot where Reinhart's hand had been, where his touch had sent shivers down her spine.

"I suppose there's nothing I can do if you don't want me to go with you. Have a safe trip to the market," he said.

He relented obediently, giving Valeta her space again. She glanced at him, before nodding without a word. True to his word, he didn't follow her. *Finally, I'm free.*

\* \* \*

"I apologize for our tardiness. We should have come sooner."

"It's fine. It's not like I could have sent a signal from here, and you wouldn't have been able to find it on your own anyway."

"There's a seal on this," a voice said. "But it won't be difficult to break it. We can handle it for you, so come to the tower with us. You can stay there until you become an adult."

Valeta's eyes fluttered open, awakened from her sleep by strange voices.

*Where are those voices coming from?* she wondered, still sleep-addled. It wasn't from her room. She turned her head and saw that her window was wide open, curtains fluttering in the night breeze.

*The room next door?*

There was no doubt about it. That was Reinhart's voice. Nobody used the room

next to her own, but it was always unlocked, so people were free to come and go whenever they wanted. She simply never would have imagined him to be there. Valeta covered her mouth with both hands and swallowed hard as she processed the conversation she had overheard earlier.

*Did they meet Reinhart this early? A whole year in advance?*

Reinhart was twenty-one and Valeta nineteen. Five years had passed since her engagement to the crown prince, and she was set to be married on her twentieth birthday. Of course, it was an arrangement she had no say in, a choice made for her by Count Delight and the imperial family.

“His followers...” Valeta muttered under her breath. In the novel, Reinhart had two right-hand men. The two were utterly devoted to him, willing to die for him at his command.

*The novel doesn’t go into much detail about Valeta’s story... But given the time of year, she supposed that this would have been around when Reinhart had started meeting with his followers. She couldn’t rule out the possibility that he had already contacted the tower and told them of his location.*

*I’ll talk to Father again tomorrow. Ever since the day Reinhart had touched her neck, his eyes glowing with madness, she could hardly make it through each passing day. It had come to the point where she’d started begging Count Delight at least once a week to get rid of the slave. In the end, her pleading had worn him down, and he’d given her a new slave to replace Reinhart about a year and a half ago.*

*That’s not what I wanted! In fact, it had only made the situation worse. The problem was that Reinhart was still in the mansion. If Count Delight couldn’t get rid of him, she had then asked if he could sell him somewhere else instead, earning herself a harsh scolding.*

*How could he tell me to stop being so immature...*

But this wasn't about her maturity—or immaturity. Nor was the problem whether Count Delight would lock her up. The problem was that her life was flashing before her eyes. Silently, Valeta tip-toed to the open window. She closed it, drew the curtains, and sneaked back to her bed, sitting down on it. Anxiety gripped her.

*How long do I have to keep this bracelet on?* she thought, her wrist dangling in front of her. She was certain that her father would have taken the bracelet off by now, but he hadn't.

Would he only remove it once she got married? Her frown deepened. She didn't get a wink of sleep that night. It had been a year and a half since Reinhart was removed as Valeta's slave, and he hadn't been allowed to serve her since, by Count Delight's decree. After all, his master had rejected him.

Reinhart looked quite hurt the day he found out, but Valeta knew that look was a lie. If anything, she could no longer bear to see that face every morning. As soon as dawn came, Valeta headed straight for Count Delight's office. Reinhart was now serving as her father's slave, but luckily, only her father was in the office at that hour. She glanced around the room furtively before speaking.

"Father."

"Yes, Valeta? What brings you here so early in the morning?"

"It's just..."

"What are you wearing? We may be at home, but you should still be presentable. You're about to be the crown princess and, one day, the empress."

Valeta's face twisted at Count Delight's words. She'd been listening to him say the same things for close to twenty years now, and it gave her goosebumps every time she heard her father repeat the same words over and over again.

"Well, it's about your slave, Father."

"If this is about that slave again, I don't want to hear it," her father replied, clearly fed up with the direction that their conversation was taking.

His voice rose. "How many times are you going to repeat the same thing? Go practice your embroidery or something if you don't want to be punished!"

"But, Father—"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I have plans to put that slave back on the market after you come of age?"

*And how many times do I have to tell you that it'll be too late by then? Why don't you get it?!* Valeta stifled the scream that was building inside.

"I know that slave gets on your nerves, but you're nineteen years old now. There's only a year left, so have some patience."

"Well..."

*That's the problem. We only have one year left.* Valeta dropped her head, clenching her fists to stop them from trembling. Her father wasn't listening. What was the point of talking to him?

*I don't know anymore. It's over.* As she continued to hang her head, her eyes fell on the bracelet with the emerald gem. She raised her arm and waved the bracelet in front of the count.

"When can I take this off, then? I'll be the laughingstock of the imperial castle if they see me wearing this."

"That is for your safety. I'll remove it once you are married."

Which meant that he planned to keep it on for another year. Valeta scoffed.

*Safety? What safety?* It was obvious that he was afraid of something happening, such as her being kidnapped or running away.

Despair washed over her. It was too difficult to run away, and even when she asked her father to get rid of his slave, he wasn't willing to listen, blinded by how much money he could make off of him in the future.

*Could I break these with pliers?* Valeta stared at the bracelet thoughtfully before she turned away. As she opened the door to leave the office, she was surprised to find Reinhart standing right outside. Their eyes met.

*Did he hear everything?*

Valeta could feel herself stiffen as she met his gaze. His eyes were as cold as a snowstorm in the dead of winter.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 10

Reinhart's cold, impassive face quirked into a smile. "It's been a long time, master."

"Hmm, yes..." Valeta said, averting her gaze. She closed the door behind her and started walking away. Reinhart, apparently having no intention of entering the office, started following her. "Didn't you have something to do?"

"Yes, I think so," he said.

"Oh, I see..." Valeta didn't understand. He either had something to do, or he didn't. What did he mean by that? She glanced at him with narrowed eyes, then returned to the second floor.

"Master."

"I'm not your master anymore."

*Please, just forget about me, Valeta thought. She knew that everyone in this household would be murdered because of the way they mistreated Reinhart. However, she thought that was a little unfair. No, she thought it was really unfair. She did her best to give the boy his freedom. She'd even put the marble in his hand and had given him the directions so that he could get out. Not just the directions. I even gave him a map because I knew the roads would be difficult to navigate.*

But Reinhart was the one who refused her help. For an entire year, she'd gone as far as to treat him kindly in an attempt to win his favor. But eventually, she'd given up. No matter what she did, his cold gaze and feigned smile never changed.

That was when she resorted to begging her father to get rid of him. Of course, all those plans were shattered, the pieces all over the floor like scattered garbage.

“I feel like you hate me, master.”

“Not particularly.”

If she was being honest, she would have gladly given up an arm and a leg for him—had she not known anything else about him. It was not that Valeta inherently despised good-looking people, but rather the fact that she had a thing for people with soft smiles.

“Why is that?”

Reinhart’s voice came from directly behind Valeta, bent at the waist and whispering into her ear. He was standing slightly too close for comfort. She swallowed hard.

*When did he get so big?* Valeta was caught off guard. Ever since she started distancing herself from Reinhart, she rarely had the chance to be this close to him.

“I’ve never done anything to you, master.”

Although he called her “master,” the tone of his voice suggested that he considered her no more important than a speck of dirt. Reinhart’s hand started brushing along the nape of Valeta’s neck. She stiffened, his touch sending chills down her spine.

“No matter how hard I tried to win your affection, you always push me away.”

The voice that was so close to her ear now sounded far away. As Valeta slowly turned around, Reinhart looked down at her, his usual smile plastered on his face as if he hadn’t just invaded her personal space.

"I'm sorry. There was some dust on your neck, so I took the liberty of removing it for you. Now, I must attend to my master."

"Oh... I see," Valeta said as she covered her neck with her hand.

Reinhart gave her a quick bow before descending the stairs again. She leaned against the wall and bent her head. *I think I'm going crazy.*

\* \* \*

"One, two, three! One, two, three! Excellent. That was very well done, Lady Valeta."

"Thank you," said Valeta. She bowed to Lady Joshua as the dance lesson came to a close.

It had been another boring session. As the wedding date grew closer, Valeta's etiquette lessons were becoming more frequent and rigorous. She was set to marry the prince three months after her birthday, but she didn't see why her lessons had to be scheduled back-to-back, hardly giving her any time to breathe.

She would rather have gone back to her senior year of high school in her previous life when she had had to study for her college entrance exams. These days, since she was to marry the crown prince, Valeta's number of social engagements had increased. There were many gifts to receive, tea invitations to accept, and even more meetings with the crown prince.

Despite her initial reluctance, Valeta found that the prince wasn't arrogant or unkind. But that didn't mean she had started developing feelings for him. Instead, she just thought of him as a decent person. She was, however, still incredibly skeptical of this arranged marriage.

"Lady Joshua," Valeta said.

"Yes, my lady?"

"Do you know what the date is by any chance?"

"Since it was your birthday a week ago, today must be December 22."

Valeta nodded nervously at Lady Joshua's response. Her birthday really had passed, and the massacre that was supposed to take place on her birthday had never happened.

In disbelief that it had passed so uneventfully, she'd started asking people every chance she got for the date. She must have looked like a mad person. But the answer she received was always the same. Her birthday had indeed passed, and since it was *her* birthday, a grand party had been thrown at the imperial castle.

It was only natural as she was to become the next crown princess, but also because she would be the first noble alchemist. Of course, she'd been forced to turn herbs into potions as a party trick, as though she were a dolphin performing in an aquarium. Honestly, she didn't know who the party was really for. She was utterly miserable, but what could she do? It was what Count Delight wanted. And until she was out of his reach, it was more beneficial for her to keep following his orders. She didn't want to be starved or hung upside down, not at this age.

"Until next week, my lady," Lady Joshua said, snapping Valeta out of her thoughts.

"Oh, yes. Thank you for today's lesson."

"Not at all. You've always been so refined, my lady. It makes me want to devote myself to bettering myself. It's like you were meant to be the crown princess," Lady Joshua trilled.

Valeta gave an awkward smile at the older woman's praise. All of her instructors

were first-rate and, at the same time, members of high society. Naturally, they were eager to make connections with Valeta.

A few of her instructors had already become prominent figures in high society just by having a hand in her education. Although they didn't make it obvious, it was clear that they wanted to hear some news about the crown prince.

"Thank you for your kind words. This is my last lesson for today, so I'm afraid I will turn in for the day now."

"Oh, dear! I've kept you for too long. I'll be going now."

"Yes. Until next time, Lady Joshua."

After bidding her goodbyes to Lady Joshua—lengthy only for the sake of formality—she let out a long sigh. She slowly made her way to the second floor, accompanied by a maid who was puzzled by Valeta's dawdling. Once in her room, she washed up and changed into more comfortable clothes.

After changing, she was unable to leave her room. She didn't want to risk running into Count Delight and being scolded for it. That was also why she always took her meals in her room.

"My lady, will you be having dinner in your room again?"

"Yes, please bring my meal to me."

"Yes, my lady."

The maid bowed. As she turned to leave, Valeta suddenly opened her mouth again.

"Um..."

"Yes, my lady?"

"What has that slave been doing these days?"

"That slave?" The maid blinked once before saying, "Oh." She cocked her head.  
"Are you... talking about Reinhart?"

"That's right. How do you know his name?"

"We weren't fond of him at first, but we learned that he's a sweet-tempered lad. Most of the maids like him now. Of course, I can't say the same for all the attendants."

Valeta nodded slowly while listening to the maid. It was good to hear that Reinhart was doing well, but hadn't his powers awakened by now? What was he still doing here? *Why hasn't he left for the tower?*

"He's been serving the count, cleaning the stables, and doing other chores around the mansion," the maid continued.

"Really?"

"Yes, but, well..." the maid faltered. "It seems... that the count has been mistreating Reinhart recently."

Valeta, who was still nodding along, suddenly froze. She forced herself to turn her stiff neck. *Who's mistreating who? Is he crazy? What do you mean by that?*

"Well..." The maid hesitated. "Um, it seems that count tried to force him to do something... sexual, but Reinhart refused, so..." She trailed off, her voice growing smaller.

*Something sexual? That crazy b\*stard! To whom? The madman? So why didn't he just run away?!*

"I saw him not that long ago," the maid said quietly. "His cheeks were swollen like he had been beaten."

“When was that?”

“I think it was the day before your birthday, my lady.”

Valeta was shocked. Thoughts raced through her mind. *This damned house. I need to run away. No. How do I do that? No. Why is he still here, enduring such torture?*

Did that mean the Delight Manor Massacre wasn’t going to happen? *Did the story change? Or did Reinhart have a change of heart?*

Valeta’s head was spinning, but she couldn’t come up with any answers.

“I’ll have your meal ready for you.”

“Mmm, thank you.”

After the maid left, the girl threw her hands up into the air. Valeta plopped down on the bed and muttered to herself.

“My birthday... did pass, right?”

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 11

It had been a week since Valeta's last proper night of sleep. She remembered that in the novel, Count Delight's murder took place on the morning of her twentieth birthday, but it was now a whole week since that day had passed. Valeta looked down, narrowing her eyes.

*—The guard came running after receiving the report. He found Count Delight in the entryway, covered in blood. The farther the guard made his way inside the manor, the more and more blood he saw. By the time he reached the dining room, the terrified guard had no choice but to flee.*

*Mangled bodies littered the floor of the dining room. Documents detailing Count Delight's illicit affairs were scattered on top of the bodies, as if on display. As if this were retribution.*

*And on a special stage of her own, on top of the dining table was Valeta Delight. Her neck was bent at a strange angle, and her mouth was ripped grotesquely into a makeshift smile. In front of her was a mountain of corpses with candles mercilessly stabbed into them, flames still blazing away. It looked no different than a birthday cake.*

*There were twenty candles in all, for that day was Valeta's twentieth birthday.*

Valeta recalled the scene from the novel clearly. It was a very dramatic one, one she supposed was intended to leave quite an impact on the reader.

How could she not be afraid of that lunatic? She considered Reinhart one of her favorite characters, but only in the novel. She never wanted to meet someone like that in real life. However, there had been some subtle differences between her life and the novel, and since things were going differently now, did that

mean it was all over? That the event wouldn't come to pass?

Valeta pondered. If that was the case, she felt sorry for what she'd done to Reinhart.

*But I know what I saw. That look in his eyes was real. He wasn't smiling at all.*  
Perhaps he didn't feel the need to kill Count Delight anymore?

It was possible that Valeta had been able to protect Reinhart to some extent, preventing him from becoming as hostile as he had been in the novel. She took a deep breath.

"It's been... a week."

Was it safe for her to let her guard down? Reinhart could still become the head of the Magicians' Tower, but maybe he wasn't as crazy as he was in the novel.

"Is there another reason?"

Did he have a change of heart? Valeta anxiously held on to the ends of her hair as she sighed yet again. She wanted nothing more than for this to end quietly. She had been sick with anxiety because of all this.

*All that's left is for Reinhart to run away, she thought as she released another sigh.* He was an adult now, so she presumed that it wouldn't be long before his departure. After that, they would have no need to be involved with each other.

"What a relief..."

The girl sighed again as she laid back on her bed. She started to relax as the anxious thoughts that filled her mind began to dissipate. Her head cleared as her tension dropped.

"What's taking the maid so long? Is she harvesting ingredients with her own two hands or something?"

Valeta was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she hadn't realized just how long the maid had been gone. It must have been about one, no, two hours since she'd sent the maid away.

*Did she forget?* It was already dark. The moon was rising across the sky. Valeta was starving after she had spent all her energy worrying about pointless things.

"I should go check." Valeta hopped out of bed, put on her fluffy slippers, carefully cracked the door open, and poked her head outside. The manor was quieter than usual. *Could she still be in the dining room? Maybe Father didn't give her permission to leave.*

It was possible that the count didn't want Valeta taking her meals alone in her room.

"Where is everyone?"

The manor was quiet. Too quiet. Valeta slowly walked through the dreary silence, one step at a time.

"The servants should be finishing up for the day."

*Has the manor always been this quiet?* Because she usually ate in her room, Valeta rarely wandered around her house in the evening, but the gloomy silence was sending chills down her spine.

She looked down the corridor, barely illuminated in the flickering candlelight.

*Should I just go back?*

Valeta stopped in her tracks and glanced behind her. She looked down the long corridor she'd come from and, for some reason, was less inclined to go back.

"She was just supposed to bring me my dinner. It's not like she took a bow and went hunting for game herself," she grumbled. If this was Count Delight's way of

letting her know he wasn't allowing her to dine in her room tonight, then Valeta had no choice but to have dinner in the dining room.

*He usually tells me of his decisions, though.* To be honest, Valeta was annoyed by the count's authoritative behavior. If it wasn't for the bracelet, she would have fled from this place long ago.

"Have all the servants left for a get-together?"

A feeling of dread started settling in her stomach. No matter how much she thought about it, it was strange how she hadn't run into any of the dozens of attendants that worked here.

"No... It can't be."

Valeta shook her head as a horrible thought crossed her mind. She didn't want to assume that this was the worst-case scenario, but she couldn't help imagining that the worries that had plagued her for the past week were coming to life.

*It's been a whole week. What happened in the novel was supposed to happen a week ago.* But if she thought about it, there were a lot of differences between the novel and the world she was living in now.

Unlike the original Valeta, she wasn't obsessed with Reinhart, nor was she madly in love with him. On top of that, the original Valeta didn't have these special powers, and she wasn't engaged to the crown prince, either.

There were so many differences. And if it had already been a week since the incident was supposed to happen, that meant *her* story was going in a different direction than the novel, right? Valeta tried to convince herself that it was true and nodded her head. Her steps were slower now.

*On the other hand, if things don't go according to the novel, that means something*

*could still happen a week later, right?* Another anxious thought crept up, and she assumed the worst had happened again. Her slow steps came to a halt. *Isn't the house too quiet for there to be a massacre going on?*

After all, she couldn't hear any dying screams.

"Please," she whispered.

Valeta resumed her walk, hoping that nothing happened. She prayed the scenario playing inside her head was nothing but her imagination. Eventually, she found herself in front of the dining room. She put her ear against the door, but she couldn't hear any sounds coming from within.

With a sigh of relief, she placed her hand on the doorknob, took a deep breath, and looked around the corridor once more before pulling the door open just an inch or so. Through the crack, Valeta could see the bright chandelier.

The sudden stench of blood assaulted her nose, and she instinctively let go of the door.

It closed soundlessly.

"No. It can't be," she murmured as she spun around. This had to be a dream. She had worried about this for so long that it was now manifesting as a nightmare.

*Let's just go back to bed.*

It didn't make any sense for the manor to be so quiet in the first place. She shook her head frantically, and turned on her heels, about to make her way back to where she had come from, when a sudden light from behind her illuminated the dim corridor.

Valeta froze.

The only thing behind her was the door to the dining room, and Valeta was

pretty sure that she had closed it. She couldn't have reopened it as her back was to the door the whole time.

Her body stiffened as if she had just looked Medusa herself in the eye.

Cold chills ran down her spine.

She couldn't run away, but she couldn't turn around and face her opponent either.

"Why didn't you come in?" the voice asked.

"I took a wrong turn."

"If I knew you were awake, I would have invited you."

"I must decline..." she said quietly.

"What brings you to the dining room?"

"I was hungry, but I changed my mind. I'm going back to bed," Valeta replied, her back still turned to the voice. There was a stiffness in her own voice that she couldn't hide. They were having an utterly meaningless conversation, but what else could she do?

Their exchange was beyond ridiculous, given what she had just seen in the dining room. It wasn't as if she could just waltz in there to fill up her plate with food. Valeta could hear a low laugh at her desperate reply.

"Oh... That maid from earlier must have been yours."

She didn't respond.

"If I had known, I would've spared her. But she just kept screaming, so I couldn't help it and..."

Valeta inhaled sharply at his words. It didn't take a genius to figure out what he'd done next. Forcing her frozen arms to move, she rubbed her face with her hands. The footsteps behind her were coming closer, but she kept still.

Her mind was screaming at her to run, but her legs wouldn't move. She could feel his breath right behind her.

"My dear master, it's quite admirable the way you're desperately trying to look away, but I'll be very sad if you don't look at me properly." Reinhart's fingers, which were long and slender like a pianist's, gently stroked the nape of Valeta's neck before his palm flattened against her skin as he grabbed it. "Look at me, master. It'd be a shame if I ended up snapping your neck by forcing you to look at me."

"You can keep doing whatever you want. Just leave me out of it."

Reinhart's eyes widened before he burst out into laughter at Valeta's frigid reply.

"You're as cold-hearted as always," he said with a chuckle. "Not just to me, but to others too."

Valeta had already imagined the worst in her head dozens of times, and if the things she'd pictured were to play out right in front of her eyes, she wouldn't have so much as flinched. She swallowed when she heard Reinhart's reply. She didn't know why, but his voice sounded quite cheerful.

He tapped Valeta, who was still staring straight ahead with her back to the dining room, on the shoulder.

"Look at me, master."

The hand on her neck felt cold, as if all blood had been drained from his hand. Valeta slowly lifted her head and turned to face Reinhart. At some point, the door to the dining room had closed again. All she could see were his glowing

red eyes that flickered in the candlelight.

"Good girl," he murmured as he gently stroked her head. How could Valeta tell this lunatic that she had turned not because she wanted to, but because she had to?

"I was trying to be as quiet as possible because I thought you were sleeping. I even drew the curtains, but I guess I didn't need to do that after all."

He poked at the air by the dining room entrance, and Valeta saw a transparent wave ripple across the door. It was hazy, but she could sense that there was certainly something there. That was the reason why she couldn't hear anything. Her face contorted.

"Yes, I should have just stayed in bed. I'll forget that I saw anything."

*So please let me go back,* she ardently wished as she looked into his eyes.

He chuckled at her reply. The scrawny boy that Valeta once knew had now grown into a tall man, a whole head taller than herself. The shabby tunic he used to wear was replaced with a robe made from fine silk that was probably waterproof, dustproof, and flameproof—no doubt made by magicians.

"Since you caught a glimpse, you must stay until the end," he whispered into her ear.

Valeta could feel the hairs rising on her neck. Some people smelled sweet if you were close enough to them, but to her, this man only smelled of blood.

"The smell of blood..."

"Oh."

Reinhart moved to take off his robe. Valeta couldn't help but notice that the bottom of his dark gray robe was wet and darker than the rest of it.

She tried hard not to stare, pretending not to know what the stain was.

Reinhart flung his robe around her shoulders. The fabric still carried the lingering warmth of his body heat, and Valeta's cold body felt instantly warmer.

*What the hell is he doing?* Valeta lifted her head and gazed blankly at Reinhart.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 12

With his usual smile on his face, Reinhart carefully fastened the robe onto Valeta. If it wasn't for the blood stain on his cheek, this would have made any woman's heart flutter.

"We can't have you getting dirty as you look around," he said as he slowly swept his thumb across her cheek. "I blocked your sense of smell, so you won't be able to smell the blood anymore," he continued with a gentle smile on his face. His voice was sweet but, as usual, his eyes weren't smiling. That made her feel even more anxious.

*You don't have to do all that! Just let me go back to my room!* Valeta screamed in her head. *Why the hell did he give me his robe? Is he trying to warm me up before he kills me?*

Valeta suddenly thought of the scene from the novel, the grotesque image of the birthday cake made up of corpses and her own torn smile. She tried to shake the thought.

"Come, master."

Reinhart wrapped his arm around her shoulders and tried to lead her into the room, but she refused to take a step forward. Instead, she doubled down and braced herself.

She heard a low chuckle come from Reinhart before he snapped his fingers. Immediately, Valeta's feet started moving on their own.

"No, wait!"

"You tried to get rid of me." He held the struggling Valeta in his arms as he

whispered in her ear. Her legs moved toward the dining room on their own, but she was as stiff as a board where Reinhart had his arm around her shoulders. She couldn't say a word as she continued to struggle. "And my poor little heart was so hurt."

*As if!* she cried out in her head. Her mouth was so firmly shut that she couldn't make a noise. She bit her lip, glaring down at her feet that were moving against her will.

"You tried to get rid of me, saying that I was useless."

His voice seemed colder than before. All she'd said was that she had no use for a slave. However, while begging her father to kick him out, she realized that she might have said some other things in the heat of the moment.

*Was he listening to me the entire time?* Valeta's face paled.

"So, I thought I'd prove to you my worth, master," he said in a low voice. He leaned over, brushing a strand of Valeta's hair behind her ear, then met her gaze. "Pay close attention..."

Reinhart's eyes folded into the shape of half moons. His gaze, tinged with madness, lingered over the girl's left wrist. He was looking at the repatriation bracelet.

"To the way I... take out the trash," he finished.

Slender fingers tapped the bracelet once. Twice.

*Crack.*

The gold bracelet fractured into numerous pieces before crumbling, sending dust all over the floor. Astonished, Valeta lifted her head to look at Reinhart, but his attention was elsewhere. Still holding onto her shoulders, he opened the door to the dining room, revealing a sea of red. Although a few people were still

alive, none were left with intact limbs. Groans echoed throughout the dining room.

Valeta grimaced as her gaze fell on someone sitting at the head of the long dining table, his body adorned with knives. She frowned.

*Is he dead?*

Just as the thought crossed her mind, the man's remaining eye fell on her. It was Count Delight. His arms and legs were impaled, held in place with steak knives, and one of his eye sockets was an empty void. She noticed his severed fingers and his remaining trembling eye.

It was a gruesome sight, too awful to describe. Still, he was alive. Instant death would have been better than suffering like this.

“Nngh! Uuugh!”

Count Delight's single eye widened when he saw his daughter.

She stared back at him coldly. *What's he trying to say?*

An alchemist's potion would have healed him immediately, but it wasn't like she could move. She almost felt sorry that things had ended up this way. But then again, he was the one who had ignored her when she begged him to get rid of the madman.

*You deserve this.*

The scene in front of her was horrific, but, perhaps because she had lost her sense of smell, she felt disconnected from the whole thing, as if she were watching a movie. In fact, the horrors before her didn't even seem so bad. The world she used to live in had far more graphic movies and TV shows. On top of that, she was glad she had the foresight not to spare any affection for anyone in this household. It had been years, but she'd never bothered to remember the

names of the servants.

"Some of the pigs are still squealing. As you can see, I'm not done with the slaughter yet," Reinhart said, his narrowed eyes falling on Count Delight.

The count trembled under the magician's gaze.

Watching the man who had always been arrogant and imposing, trembling like that was an unfamiliar sight to Valeta.

Reinhart reached up and gently tugged her earlobe, caressing it. "I'm sorry for sullyng your ears."

She stiffened. Reinhart's smile did not match the horrific atmosphere of the room.

*He's actually crazy.*

He rubbed her back as if trying to comfort her. She wanted to ask why he was taunting her like this, but she found that she couldn't open her mouth. It was as if they had been glued shut.

"Actually, I was planning on tidying this up before presenting it to you tomorrow," he said while leading Valeta to a corner where there were fewer bodies. She tried to move her body, but she couldn't lift a single finger. *What kind of magic did Reinhart use?*

"But you showed up first."

*This is my fault? Is that what he's trying to say?*

What a poor excuse. Reinhart had served her for over ten years. There was no way he didn't know when she woke up, when she went to bed, and when she took her meals. It would have been more believable if he said he'd timed this on purpose.

"Did you know he dared to educate me on sex, master?"

Reinhart's question sent chills down her spine. Valeta knew, but only because she'd heard about it from the maid earlier that day.

She remained silent.

*If you're going to ask me a question, you should at least let me be able to speak.* His eyes curved into beautiful crescent moons as Valeta glared at him in annoyance. Still, she didn't say a word.

"If you hadn't thrown me away, this never would have happened."

Now, that was unfair. Did he not realize that was the whole reason why Count Delight had brought Reinhart to the manor in the first place? Her father was a famous slave trader. Of course he knew that Reinhart would only become more valuable the older he got, the more appealing he'd be.

"That's why I cut off the hand that slapped me, the tongue that he used to lick his lips with when he saw me, and the useless rod that got excited by my presence," Reinhart said as he twirled Valeta's hair around his fingers. She didn't know how it was possible, but Reinhart's robe continued to keep her warm even as she started to feel colder from the chilly tension. "Is there anything else you'd like me to do?"

*Stop asking me questions when you know I can't speak.* She silently looked into those mad eyes of his.

He let out a deep laugh before stroking her lips with his thumb. Her lips finally parted, and she opened her mouth a few times before letting out a sigh.

"That's the reason why my father brought you here," she said, spitting out the words she had been suppressing. It wasn't her fault. He couldn't blame her for that.

Perhaps he wasn't expecting her to say that because Reinhart laughed so hard that his shoulders shook. He looked like a madman, laughing in the sea of corpses.

"I see. I might have welcomed it if it was you, master," he said with a smirk, stroking her shoulders.

Valeta gave him a look of deep loathing. "Whatever you do to this family, whether you're taking revenge on them or not, has nothing to do with me..."

At those words, Reinhart crossed his arms and looked down at her. She froze as his gaze searched over her, as though he was deciding whether to kill her or not.

"As long as I don't get hurt."

Valeta was concerned for her own life. She honestly didn't care what happened to this family. She had done everything she could. For ten years, she had defended Reinhart, begging the servants not to hurt him.

When they didn't show any signs of changing, Valeta had begun preparing herself dozens, no, hundreds of times for the worst. If it wasn't for the repatriation bracelet, she would have run away long ago.

"My cold-hearted master," Reinhart started with a shrug.

Anyone could tell he was exaggerating, but at the same time, it was impossible to tell what his true intentions were. He was always like that, which is why Valeta was always on guard.

"I tried my best to be your loyal dog." One of his cold hands cupped her cheek. "But you've always pushed me away."

She wordlessly opened and closed her mouth. Her eyes narrowed, and she felt an emotion rise up in her that was close to contempt. *Because you were destined to kill me.*

But she couldn't tell him that. How could she tell him that she knew what the future held in store?

Reinhart stood there, motionless, waiting for her reply. He exhaled, releasing a sigh. A single hand reached for her lips.

"Everything you've done..." The hand reaching for Valeta's face froze. Raising her head, she looked Reinhart in the eye; his expression was impassive, utterly devoid of emotion. She whispered, "...is a lie."

For the first time, Valeta thought that this was the closest she was to seeing who Reinhart really was.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 13

As soon as Valeta spoke, Reinhart's expression shifted, making it hard to tell what he was thinking, and he brushed his thumb against her lower lip again.

"It appears that my dear master doesn't approve of what I'm doing. Why don't you step back and let me take care of everything?"

His face broke into a relaxed smile.

"As much as I want to disembowel that man for turning you into a spectacle and treating you like a circus clown, I won't because you might find it disagreeable."

Valeta stayed quiet. His words were beyond cruel, and listening to him say them with that perfect smile sent chills down her spine. She was about to open her mouth to give a retort, only to find that it was sealed again. She gave up and simply looked at Reinhart.

"I want you to wait here. I'll save you for last," he said. He lovingly stroked Valeta's messy hair, as if she was the most precious person in the world, before turning around to face the carnage.

*Saving me for last, Valeta thought. Her face hardened. Damn it. This is it, then.*

Reinhart glanced at her, giving her a reassuring smile. Then, he strode in the direction of Count Delight, nonchalantly stepping on the dead as he went.

There was nothing more to say. The sight that unfolded before Valeta's eyes could only be described as a massacre. Two hooded men captured every living person left in the manor and threw them into the dining room. Then, Reinhart tossed weapons at them as they trembled in the midst of the slaughter, almost as though he were giving them a chance to fight for their lives.

But the difference between Reinhart's innate ability and theirs was the difference between heaven and earth. The servants had struggled, desperately and in vain, but were immediately subdued with a wry smile and the single snap of their opponent's long fingers.

"I'm giving you a chance." As if that wasn't enough, Reinhart, in a sweet voice, said, "Run. If you manage to escape the dining room, I won't lay a hand on you."

Despair washed over the servants.

In her past life, Valeta had read a fairytale called *The Sun and the Moon*. She wondered if the voice that had lowered the life-saving rope in that story sounded something like Reinhart's: sweet, tempting, and generous—as if the speaker were genuinely giving them a chance.

But the reality was tragic. All the servants' legs were either crushed or severed. There wasn't a single soul in the room that had working legs. Just who was he granting this chance to?

Yet, some of the servants still tried, desperate to live. Reinhart looked down at one of them, smiling softly as he watched her attempt to crawl away.

"Oh. Come to think of it, you kicked me with this leg before, didn't you? Called me annoying," Reinhart said to the crawling maid.

"Herk... Agh..." she gasped. "N-no, i-it wasn't me... I didn't..." The maid, who was attempting to suppress the pain as she crawled, frantically shook her head.

Reinhart gave a low chuckle as if he had heard a funny joke. However, his eyes and mouth were narrowed, unsmiling.

"I hate lies."

With the single crook of a finger, a loud snap pierced through the silence. The maid's leg was bent at a strange angle.

“Ahhhh!”

Valeta winced at the terrible shriek that followed. Not being able to smell the blood didn’t make the sound of breaking bones any more bearable.

Reinhart glanced at Valeta and, noticing her discomfort, raised a finger again. The maid’s mouth snapped shut, her shrieks no more than a muffled groan.

“Shh. You’re scaring my master,” he said with a theatrical whisper.

*Your bloody face is scaring me more*, Valeta thought. The magician gave her an innocent smile and began to move quickly around the room.

The same event continued to repeat itself: Reinhart would recite the details of the crimes each had committed against him over the last ten years before hurting them anew. Even Valeta was shocked at hearing the awful things that had happened to him.

“Weren’t you the one who threw books at my head? And you used me as a chair,” he said as he stepped on the backs of an attendant and a maid. He spoke clearly—it was like he wanted Valeta to hear every single word.

This was nothing like the novel. If Reinhart was different from the novel version of himself, it was because he himself had fundamentally changed.

*So what? Is he trying to make me feel guilty?*

While Valeta listened, she couldn’t shake how dumbfounded she was. She swallowed hard as her vision started going white. She felt no guilt at all. She tried her best, but nobody had listened.

She snorted. They were the ones harassing and tormenting him, and though she’d done what she could to stop them, the abuse was far worse than even she had imagined. She had no pity left in her heart for these people, she didn’t even want to feel pity for them. They deserved it. The way they carried on, they had

been asking for it.

"Ugh... Argh..."

"Oh, I nearly forgot."

Hearing the groan behind him, Reinhart lifted his hand with a look of feigned surprise on his face. A sword that had been lying on the floor suddenly rose into the air and flew straight toward Count Delight's heart.

There was a ghastly sound, accompanied by sporadic gasps, and Count Delight's head dropped to one side. Thanks to Reinhart's... "consideration," Valeta couldn't smell the blood that spilled from her father.

Still, the whole affair felt like a movie. Like none of it was real.

How much time had passed?

*Bang!*

The door to the dining room opened again. The two hooded men walked in, pushing three maids in before them.

"These are the only survivors left in the manor."

"Perhaps it's because it's such a large mansion, but there sure are a lot of pests to exterminate," said the silver-haired man, his words cold. And before they even had a chance to scream, the three maids were impaled by spears of ice.

It happened so quickly that it was hard to believe that they were still alive only seconds ago.

Wow... How Valeta envied them. At least their deaths were not drawn out, that, in the blink of an eye, they were heading toward the afterlife.

Reinhart looked down at the lifeless bodies, gave a long sigh, and turned

around. "Now you're the only one left, master."

His voice took on a saccharine tone, like a siren luring a sailor to their unfortunate end, as he slowly approached Valeta.

\* \* \*

Reinhart calmly looked down at Valeta, who had lost consciousness from the shock of seeing the bloodbath around her and the resultant stabbing pain in her heart. As she had collapsed on the floor, his robe was now filthy. She was frowning and groaning, seemingly uncomfortable even while unconscious.

"Aren't you going to kill her, my lord?" one of the robed men asked as he removed his hood. The other man standing next to him removed his hood as well.

The first figure was a man with jet-black hair and bright yellow eyes, while the second was a beautiful man with sky-blue, shoulder-length hair and equally blue eyes.

"I'm thinking about it," Reinhart replied.

"Is it because of her alchemy skills? Or because of her elemental abilities? These aren't common. I think she could be useful," the man with the jet-black hair said.

"If I wanted her for her abilities, I would have made her mine long ago," said Reinhart, confident that he was entirely capable of it. The two men were puzzled by his blunt response.

Reinhart crouched down in front of Valeta and threaded his fingers through her bloodstained hair, caring not the blood that now coated his fingers. The once bright red fluid had now hardened into a dark crimson on the girl's pale, thin cheeks. Her luscious hair was in disarray, spilled out over the floor.

Valeta was in a deep sleep, but she continued to turn restlessly, a deep line

creasing her forehead. Reinhart placed a hand around her neck. “If she won’t give herself to me, then it would be better if...”

He didn’t think it would be a bad idea to kill her, to preserve only her body. Reinhart’s red eyes flashed. Then, he slowly blinked. But if he did that, he would never be able to feel her warmth or see her smile again. He brushed the thought aside, his finger traveling up the slope of her neck to rest on her cheek. He poked at it.

“How disgraceful.”

No. If someone were to ask if he wanted to kill her, his answer was no. It was merely that his displeasure with her, with the way she never called his name in the ten years they had known each other, had finally come to a head.

“Silon.”

“Yes, my lord,” the man with the sky-blue hair answered, his voice as light as a spring breeze.

“Do you think it’s possible to live with someone for ten years and never call them by their name?”

“I don’t think it’s impossible, but it also doesn’t seem likely to happen,” Silon replied.

“Right.”

Yet that was exactly what Valeta Delight had done. It wasn’t just Reinhart either. She never remembered or called anyone who lived and worked in the mansion by their names. Whenever she called for someone, it was always “Hey,” or “You there.”

That was it.

*You can only call someone by their name if you remember it.* But Reinhart knew that Valeta knew his name. That was what made it even more upsetting.

*"Father, please get rid of that slave! He's bound to bring misfortune later!"*

Reinhart slowly blinked as the memories washed over him. She had always begged her father to get rid of him or to, at least, sell him to someone else as soon as possible, asking Count Delight every single day for a year. He wanted to ask her why she did that, but...

*That will come in due time.*

There was no hurry. She was now his, and he had no need to bow his head to anyone anymore.

After collecting his thoughts, Reinhart straightened, scooping up Valeta's limp body as he rose with one firm arm around her back and another under her knees.

*"Didn't you plan for this to happen a week ago? Why did you delay it?"*

*"It was her birthday."*

Reinhart slowly lowered his head and kissed the girl on the forehead. The very creature that he had been watching from afar was finally in his arms. He looked down at the girl, a dark smile stretching across his face.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 14

“What?”

Reinhart shrugged at Silon’s question. With Valeta in his arms, Reinhart looked around the dining room once more. Not a single soul remained alive. The rats that used to roam these halls were no more.

“Did you prepare what I asked for, Kurt?”

“Yes, my lord. Here is the report on Count Delight’s corruption and illicit activities.” This time, the man with the raven hair replied. His jet-black hair was short, like a crew cut, and a sullen look accompanied his blunt words.

Reinhart’s eyes continued to roam the room, and he made no move to take the sheaf of papers Kurt had in his hands. With an indifferent gaze, he said, “Just toss them. They can interpret it for themselves.”

“Yes, my lord,” the robed man responded. He threw the stack of papers into the air just as Reinhart ordered.

Scores of sheets fluttered into the air, falling like snow. They fell everywhere, over the bodies, the table, and the floor. Some of them were already stained with blood.

“Let’s go back to the Magicians’ Tower.”

“Are you taking the woman with you?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?” Reinhart narrowed his eyes at Silon who had asked the question.

The man shook his beautiful sky-blue hair, a frown marring his delicate face. “But if you don’t intend to keep her for her alchemy or elemental skills, then I don’t recommend it. Only magicians are allowed in the Magicians’ Tower. She won’t be able to leave the tower if she doesn’t have mana.”

“That’s just as well. I hoped that would be the case,” Reinhart said, his red lips curving into a faint smirk. Otherwise, he knew that Valeta would do whatever it took to escape.

With the tips of his toes, he tapped the ground twice. A great magic circle appeared and engulfed Reinhart and Valeta, along with Silon and Kurt, in a burst of light. A second later, all that remained of the horrible night were the slain bodies and papers that remained scattered across the Delight Manor’s dining room floor.

\* \* \*

Not far away, the imperial castle—as well as the empire—was gripped with horror as the news of an aristocrat’s murder spread, an unprecedented event in the history of the empire.

Countless rumors began to spread regarding the disappearance of Valeta Delight, and Crown Prince Miloyd took it upon himself to get to the bottom of it, taking command of the investigation. And thus, the long night came to an end.

\* \* \*

The scenery had changed. Reinhart raised his head. He was now standing in the

middle of a forest. The deep blue sky was covered with white clouds, and various sorts of weeds and wildflowers sprouted from the ground.

A translucent magic circle hovered above the grass, the only entrance to the Magicians' Tower.

"The tower is right above us."

"I see." Reinhart leisurely tilted his head back. It was hard to see through the clouds, but the Magicians' Tower was indeed there, floating in the sky.

Despite its name, the Magicians' Tower wasn't just a tower. Rather, it was a city, built by and for magicians, that formed a small mountain floating in midair. Its namesake sat in the middle of it all. Magicians, being distrustful of humans, had decided that it would be impossible to live with them. The Magicians' Tower was the result of that decision.

At first, the tower was the only thing in the sky until the magicians soon realized that it was too small to accommodate them all. As the years passed, the land expanded, and the tower became a leaderless city. And so, the Magicians' Tower was also referred to as the Magicians' City.

As only awakened magicians could access the entrance to the city, those who hadn't awakened couldn't ask for help from the tower. That also meant that it was impossible for non-magicians to leave the tower without another magician's help.

"Are you really going to bring her?" Silon asked again. Abducting Valeta against her will was one thing, but the inhabitants of the tower were prone to looking down on "socoros," or those without magic.

"Since she was my master for the last ten years, isn't it only fair that I now become her master?" Reinhart said with a chuckle as he embraced Valeta. Holding her tighter, his magic seeped toward the ground. As the barren ground

absorbed the magic, a giant magic circle revealed itself. A pillar of light emanated from the circle, swallowing the four people.

"Welcome, my lord."

Reinhart, who had closed his eyes against the blinding light, slowly opened them at the scratchy yet courteous voice. They were transported in front of a tower with a large spire. The cylindrical gray tower was tall enough to easily pierce through the clouds.

Curiously enough, it seemed to have neither windows nor entrances and at first glance, it looked as though the tower simply shot straight out of the ground like a tree. Reinhart narrowed his eyes. A man in a dark green robe stood in front of him, his hood covering his face. He was too translucent to be human—Reinhart could see the tower through him.

"This is the watchman of the Magicians' Tower. His loyalty lies with the lord of the tower," Silon explained quietly. Reinhart merely glanced at the translucent man before looking away with disinterest.

His concern wasn't with the watchman of the tower.

"Take me to your largest, sunniest room. One that's difficult to leave."

The watchman bowed deeply at Reinhart's command. The translucent being had not spoken a word since his initial greeting.

He snapped his fingers and a dark portal appeared before them.

"Only the head of the tower and the watchman can enter at will. Everyone else must pass the watchman first to enter."

"Is that the same for those who want to leave?" Reinhart asked.

"No. Anyone with magic can leave the tower with a teleportation spell."

"And if they don't have magic?"

At his question, Silon's gaze fell on the sleeping figure still held within his lord's arms. Though they used magic, elementalists were different.

"You must be talking about the woman in your arms. Simply put, she won't be able to leave the tower without your permission."

"Hmm." Reinhart smiled in satisfaction, pleased to know that what he longed for was finally in his grasp.

"Elementalists are fundamentally different from magicians," the watchman said. "Magicians forcibly extract mana from nature while elementalists make a deal with nature and borrow their mana at a price."

"Right," Reinhart replied with a nod. That was basic knowledge.

"Since the Magicians' Tower was made with mana, elementals will not appear here, so she won't be able to make a deal with one."

Reinhart nodded again as they exited a passageway and entered a room that was as large as the imperial castle's training hall. The watchman had led them to the room at the top of the tower.

Sunlight filtered in through the walls made of glass, and the only thing visible to them of the outside world were clouds. A lone bed stood in the middle of the room. Reinhart looked around. There were no doors to be found.

"This is the top floor of the tower. It is only accessible to you and those with your permission. No one can leave without your permission either, my lord," the watchman said in his scratchy voice.

Reinhart strode over to the bed and laid Valeta down on top of it, who then

tossed and turned as if disturbed by the sudden movement before settling in with a sigh. "I can't wait to see how you'll react when you wake up."

Reinhart chuckled as he stroked Valeta's pale neck with his thumb. Sometimes, he had the impulsive urge to snap it, but if he acted on it, he would never be able to see her smile again.

"What do you think, master?" He kissed the ends of her hair and covered her with the blanket.

Kurt and Silon silently glared at the intruder on the bed. The top floor was reserved for the head of the Magicians' Tower, and they were unhappy that it was now being occupied by a socoro.

Reinhart noticed their glares and smiled. As usual, it didn't reach his eyes.

"I'm sure you know if I catch you touching what's mine..." he said, still smiling brightly.

The two men held their breaths. It was hard to tell what Reinhart was thinking even when his face wasn't covered like the watchman's.

"...I will gut you alive, shove your entrails into your mouth, and make you eat them. Keep that in mind." His voice was light, though his words were anything but. His eyes glinted with madness. "Of course, that sounds rather fun."

He looked at Valeta with a deep, possessive gaze before turning his attention back to Silon and Kurt.

At his steely gaze, the two quickly kneeled before their liege.

The warm sunlight streamed through the glass from all angles.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 15

\* \* \*

The news of Count Delight's murder was first reported to the imperial castle by the merchant who normally delivered groceries to the manor. The merchant, who was making his usual rounds, had been suspicious of the way the manor's gate was left wide open. And the fact that there wasn't a single guard manning the gates was very alarming. No matter how much he called out, there was no answer. So, he'd walked through the open gates and, strangely enough, found that there was nobody at the front door either.

In any case, committed to completing the delivery at any cost, he tentatively entered the estate. It was not far from the entrance that he came across the body of a decapitated guard.

A cry tore from the merchant's throat before he dashed out of the mansion to report the murder to the guards who had then sent a single soldier to investigate. But that guard, too, fled the moment he stuck his head through the door.

He couldn't possibly investigate on his own—the carnage was unbearable. The horrific scene had left him dry-heaving in front of the manor. The guards, only realizing the severity of the situation when the lone guard returned with his report, informed the imperial family of the tragedy, which came to be known as the Delight Manor Massacre.

Well-trained imperial knights were dispatched to the Delight Manor to investigate the incident, which had left no survivors. Most of the soldiers couldn't stand the stench of blood that emanated from the manor, much less the sight of the horrifically mutilated corpses.

All of the bodies were disfigured, but the most grotesque of all was Count Delight's.

There wasn't a single survivor among the scores of people who had lived and worked in the manor. However, Count Delight's one and only daughter, the beautiful Valeta Delight, was nowhere to be found among the dead.

"You still haven't found her?" Miloyd's deep blue eyes were stormier than usual, and the knight stiffened when he heard the crown prince's grave tone.

The crown prince, unable to find sleep ever since he had learned of the massacre, had deep shadows under his sunken eyes. It had been three days since the tragic event, and he spent sleepless nights in his office, hoping for updates.

However, there was no mention of Valeta Delight in any of the sporadic reports that followed, which only contained details about the victims and additional information about Count Delight's corruption. In all that, though, there was nothing about the prince's betrothed.

"My apologies, Your Highness."

"No, it's fine," Miloyd said as he rubbed his temples. He slowly flipped through the report which must have been over a hundred pages long. There was no mention of Valeta Delight anywhere. "You say there were traces of magic?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Have we requested cooperation from the Magicians' Tower?"

"Yes, but we haven't heard anything back yet."

Miloyd sighed. No matter where he looked, he couldn't find a single trace of the girl. It was as if she had vanished off the face of the earth.

Thinking back, he wanted to kick himself for singing praises of Count Delight in front of her in light of his corruption. The reports detailed information on her father's slave trade, not to mention his sadistic tendencies. He finally realized that this was why Valeta always grimaced whenever he mentioned how much Count Delight must have treasured her.

"Lady Valeta is a smart woman. If there was a way for her to escape, I know she would have found it. Search every corner of the manor. Even the basement. I want no stone left unturned," Miloyd ordered.

"I'll see to it, Your Highness."

"And if you hear anything else, let me know at once."

"Of course, Your Highness."

"You're dismissed."

The knight gave a quick bow before leaving the crown prince alone.

He sighed again, a deep frown settling on his face. Valeta always seemed aloof, but he knew that she always put her own safety above anything else. She never went out of her way when there was an element of risk. Although she did not yet feel comfortable enough with him to call him by his name, Miloyd liked her.

However, strange rumors had begun circulating once news broke that Valeta's body had not been found, rumors that said that Valeta herself may have been behind her father's murder. It seemed to rise in credibility once the allegations of Count Delight's abuse surfaced.

"Impossible," Miloyd said confidently. Although he didn't get to see Valeta often, he had known her long enough. It never once occurred to him that she could be behind all this.

First of all, the method of killing was too barbaric. Miloyd knew because he had

witnessed the scene of the crime for himself. Autopsies of the dead revealed that most of the people had been alive when their limbs were severed. Atrocities like that weren't possible unless the perpetrator held a deep grudge.

*She doesn't have the strength to hold a sword in the first place.* And even if she had the strength, it would have been impossible for her to make such clean cuts.

"That slave of hers is missing too."

*Did they run away together?* The crown prince frowned, lost in thought. The trouble was, there was more than one rumor circulating.

Shortly after the first, another wild rumor had started floating around high society, this time about how the head of the Magicians' Tower's powers were awakening, and that this magician was none other than Valeta Delight's former slave.

*We don't know where the rumor originated from, but it's not one that we can completely rule out.* After the former head of the Magicians' Tower stepped down, a successor had never appeared to take their place, and the tower eventually faded out of relevancy.

Magicians hated humans because they had no mana, so what would happen to a magician that had been abused by them? It wouldn't be strange if Valeta's slave had snapped after awakening. Though highly unlikely, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility. It made Miloyd feel uneasy.

He rested his head in his hands. He could feel a splitting headache coming on. In order to ease his anxiety, he had asked the Magicians' Tower for their cooperation in reporting any signs of magic. But there had been no response from the tower, even after three days. And although the Magicians' Tower remained closed to humans, they had never rejected a message before.

"This is making me nervous," he murmured as he rested his hand on the

window. "Please stay safe, Lady Valeta."

Although they had met when they were young with the expectation that they would be married, Miloyd didn't mind. She was a calm, stoic girl, but also one kind enough to help an injured animal.

"As long as you're alive, I'll come and save you."

He stared out into the darkness, past the window. The glass reflected the hard, determined look on his face. The crown prince turned and sat back at his desk, then began reading through the report again.

\* \* \*

*Reinhart was kneeling in front of Valeta, sweating profusely. He was gasping, clutching his chest, while Valeta gazed down at him with cold eyes, her face twisted with rage.*

"I heard that you were with a maid today. What did you do with her? Are you cheating on me? Do you love her more than me?!" she screeched.

"Ngh..." Reinhart squirmed in pain.

Valeta held a small bead in her hand, one that was transparent red.

*The boy before her writhed on the floor, but then a murderous look flashed briefly across his features. Pushing through the pain, Reinhart managed to kneel in front of Valeta. He forced a smile on his face.*

*Although he was drenched in sweat, it was a smile so beautiful that anyone would have fallen in love with him. He grasped Valeta's hand in a servile manner.*

"You're the only one for me, master."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course."

*Reinhart smiled gently as Valeta relaxed her clenched fists.*

"Do you mean it? You're not going to betray or abandon me, right?" she asked.

"I mean it," he replied without hesitation. Valeta then fell to her knees and embraced Reinhart. His eyes were cold as he gazed down at the girl, who rubbed her face into his shoulder as if she were a child.

"All right. I love you, Reinhart. You're the only one I have. That means you can never, ever betray me. Understand?"

*He didn't say a word. Valeta raised her head and started petting him on the head as if he had already answered. She was treating him like a dog.*

"I'm sorry for hurting you, Rein."

*Reinhart chuckled as he closed his eyes to hide the hatred behind them.*

*The night deepened.*

Valeta, who had been deep asleep on the highest floor of the tower, abruptly opened her eyes. The scene from the novel had come to her so vividly in her dreams. She knew that the original Valeta had been obsessed with Reinhart, but she wasn't sure of the details. When she thought about it, there had been hints of it in one of the side plots. She was beginning to see now... The reason why Reinhart had killed Valeta so cruelly...

*So there was a reason after all. Aside from the main characters, everyone else in the novel was crazy. Reinhart was crazy, so it only made sense that the original Valeta, who had been so in love with him, was crazy too.*

"But I'm different from her. I didn't do anything to him."

Which was probably why she was still alive. So why is Reinhart doing this to me now?

She couldn't for the life of her remember why the original Valeta had become so obsessed with Reinhart. If only she hadn't skimmed through the side plots...

Valeta didn't know why that scene had suddenly come to mind. "Ow, my head..."

The sunlight was streaming in from all around her, dazzling her eyes. She slowly raised her head and looked around the room. She was sitting on a bed in the middle of a room. The floor was covered in a soft red rug to keep her feet from getting cold.

*Where am I?* Valeta crawled out of bed, slowly approached the window, and peered out.

"Clouds?"

She couldn't see any buildings, people, or landscapes. How was she looking at clouds?

*—It was a large, dull gray tower. At the top of the tower was a room that only the head of the Magicians' Tower could enter. During the day, sunlight streamed through the glass windows, but at night, the room provided a stunning view of countless stars.*

*The view outside the window wasn't an ordinary landscape—no, it contained blue skies and fluffy clouds as far as the eye could see.*

*This room was ideal for magicians who extracted their mana from nature.*

Valeta frowned as the description from the novel suddenly came to mind.

*Please let this be a dream, she prayed.*

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 16

When Valeta looked around the room and realized there was no exit, she was forced to accept reality.

*The top floor of the Magicians' Tower...*

This had to be Reinhart's room. The room itself was mentioned in the novel a few times when Reinhart had remained there, enjoying his time sitting in a chair by the window, looking down at the human world beneath him, and relishing in the tribulations he had given them to deal with.

Although he was currently the head of the Magicians' Tower, it wouldn't be long before he would awaken as a transcendent—one who surpassed all human limits.

"I see that you're awake."

"Ah!" Valeta jumped. She stiffened at the voice, which sounded like grating metal, and forced herself to turn around.

A transparent figure clad in dark green robes stood before her, their face covered with a hood.

She took a step back, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"Please let me know if you are hungry. I will prepare something for you to eat," the figure in green said.

"I want to leave this place."

"That is impossible."

"If you can come in here, then that must mean there's a way out."

"That is impossible."

Valeta frowned when the man repeated his words as if he were a robot. She knew who this person was. He was the ghost, the watchman, the tower's keeper, the gears of the tower, and a worthless being. He went by many names, yet was treated poorly.

There was more to that story, of course. He was one of twelve magicians who had built the tower, and having been so dedicated to its creation, had poured half his mana into it, turning himself into a being that was neither alive nor dead.

His name was Caspelios. It was only near the end of the novel that Reinhart discovered that this person, someone whose name had only been known from the history books, was still alive—and he saw him for who he really was.

*Though that didn't change how he's been treated.* Valeta sighed. She was confident that she could escape from this place, but she wasn't sure if that was the safest thing to do.

"Are you going to keep me locked up like this?"

"That is for the lord to decide."

"Even if it's against my will?"

Caspelios watched as Valeta crossed her arms and said nothing. He continued to gaze at her, expressionless and silent, as if he were a piece of furniture in the room. In the end, she gave in first, unable to stand the silence.

"Let me out of here."

"That is impossible."

"Call Reinhart then." Valeta had hardly finished her sentence when a flash of light emanated from the floor.

Reinhart appeared, clean and well-dressed, the blood stains on his hands and face long gone. He smiled brightly at her.

"You're up earlier than I expected, master."

His eyes crinkled beautifully as he smiled. He didn't look that different from his time as a slave. He strode toward Valeta, but she stayed put, looking up at him as he approached.

"Let me go. I don't want to be here."

"I see that you're as blunt as ever, master."

"How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not your master."

Reinhart chuckled at the icy tone of her voice. Of course, he already knew that. But Valeta seemingly wasn't aware of the face she made whenever he called her master. She always looked at him with disdain, as if she was sick and tired of everything. It had always intrigued him.

"Get out," he said while looking at Valeta, even though the words weren't meant for her. They were directed at Caspelios, who was still standing behind Reinhart, and Valeta seemed to understand that as well.

"Yes, my lord," Caspelios replied. He always obeyed Reinhart's orders, not because of Reinhart himself, but because he was the head of the Magicians' Tower. Valeta watched as the watchman faded away before directing her attention back to the magician.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Not really..."

"Then, would you care for a cup of tea?"

With a flourish of his hand, a round table made of white marble, along with a couple of chairs, materialized out of thin air and joined the lone bed in the empty room. He walked over to the steaming teapot and started serving the tea as if it was the most natural thing to do. After he poured two cups of tea, he languidly glanced back at Valeta before pulling out a chair for her.

"Please, sit," he gestured.

Valeta looked at Reinhart's crescent eyes and the smile on his face before taking a seat with a sigh. Reinhart smiled brightly at the sullen look on her face.

"Let me out of here."

"But you have no place to go," he said with a light shrug.

He was right. Valeta pursed her lips. There really was no place for her to go after what had happened at Delight Manor.

Reinhart slowly reached for his cup. His hand still bore scars from his days of slavery. The girl gazed at the wounds indifferently before glancing away, pretending that she hadn't seen anything.

"Anywhere is better than here."

"Come now, master. No place is better than here," Reinhart countered, a smile playing on his lips.

Valeta was left speechless. It was true, she wouldn't have to worry about food, clothing, or shelter if she stayed here, but she would constantly be at risk of losing her head.

"Do you want to know something, master?" He continued, "I was supposed to kill you. As the head of the Magicians' Tower, I should have. I wanted to kill you

from the moment we first met.”

Valeta, bearing a tired expression, lifted her head, as if she was fed up with the way Reinhart looked as he smiled and the way he talked about her death as though attempting to prove his innocence. However, his words seem to carry significance.

“So why didn’t you kill me?”

“You’re the only one who didn’t go down the given path.”

“What?” she asked sharply.

“You avoided creating... any reason to kill you.”

The implication behind his words started blurring. Valeta’s hand froze while reaching for her teacup. She could feel her throat burn but managed to pick up the cup while looking at Reinhart warily.

*What is he talking about?* Her mind was blank.

“So, why did you do that, master?” He smiled. “Why did you distance yourself from me and try to get rid of me?”

He reached out a hand, carefully tucking a strand of Valeta’s hair behind her ear. Although conscious of Reinhart’s hand, she was more preoccupied with what he had said. Only she knew how the story would unfold—there was no way he could know that. Yet the way he framed his question made it sound like he knew everything.

“I have always been sweet on you, master.”

“You were like that to everyone. That’s what you needed to do to survive.”

“But my feelings for you were genuine,” he replied.

Meeting his innocent gaze, Valeta swallowed hard. She didn't believe him. It was true that he was kind to her, but she was sure that his kindness had only been for his own survival.

"You were locked up and starved for a whole day because you were foolish enough to use alchemy on a mere slave like me," he said.

She didn't respond.

"You ordered the people who harassed me to stop, but they didn't take you seriously."

"You..."

"You were hung upside down when you refused to do something you didn't want to do. You were imprisoned for days because you snuck off somewhere without me. When you were caught taking care of an animal and were ordered to kill it, you refused and let it escape."

Valeta clenched her fists as Reinhart recited her past deeds, her eyes widening in surprise. Completely taken aback, she wondered how the man sitting in front of her could remember all that. Those were all embarrassing moments she wanted to leave in the past. She was trembling now and tried to pull herself together.

"You never complained, no matter how poorly you were treated, my sweet master. It's like you were no different than a slave."

Valeta blinked rapidly at Reinhart's words. *Sweet master?* She couldn't tell if he was praising her or mocking her. She rubbed her face a few times, frustrated.

"You were so indifferent... It was as if everything was happening to someone else."

"That's..."

"I wanted to chop off all their limbs while they were still alive and breathing. Then, I wanted them to watch, with only their heads on their shoulders, as I fed their limbs to the beasts.

Silence followed, his cruel description leaving her speechless.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," he said.

"What?"

"All of this was an unforeseen circumstance. These feelings that I have, even your behavior, all of this was unexpected."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Valeta asked.

Reinhart simply smiled at her question.

"That is why I tried to win your affection, but you wouldn't even give me the time of day."

"Look..." Valeta started.

"Reinhart," he said, cutting the girl off. "I don't know why you never called me by my name, but there's no reason not to anymore, wouldn't you say?"

He smiled once again.

"I think it's time you call me by my name, master."

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 17

Reinhart.

She knew his name. But Valeta had never called him by it as a precaution, worried that she would become attached if she did, worried that affection would creep up on her, as light as a feather, before taking root, worried that she'd become like the Valeta in the novel, willing to give up an arm and a leg for Reinhart, only to end up as an ornament on the dining room table.

"Every time I saw you groveling at your father's feet because you couldn't bear the hunger and the pain, you don't know how miserable I felt because my powers hadn't awokened yet," Reinhart said.

She said nothing as she dropped her head. She couldn't believe that Reinhart remembered each and every one of those embarrassing, humiliating things. *I wish I could hit him in the back of the head just so he forgets everything*, she thought earnestly.

Honestly, she'd never given a second thought to those things she'd done. Count Delight relished seeing her on her knees, wanting complete control over his daughter. Valeta—convinced that she would one day be free from his grasp, whether by marriage or by his death—had no need to hold onto her pride, and thus, the easiest thing for her to do was grovel. Getting down on her knees and apologizing usually ended things quietly.

"Master." Reinhart rose from his seat, circled the table, and approached Valeta. "I'll allow you to be my one and only master, so please stay by my side," he whispered, leaning into her. He gently cupped her cheek. "Hm? How about that?"

Valeta's eyes widened. "You refused every time I told you to run away."

This time, it was Reinhart's eyes that widened before he smiled at her almost bitterly. "If I had run away, I would have been a lot worse off."

"What?"

His smile deflated a bit at her question. He slowly opened his mouth.

"Magicians are born with a different energy than ordinary humans. Ordinary humans find that energy uncomfortable and disgusting."

Valeta remained silent.

"That's the reason why young magicians are often hated for no reason," Reinhart continued. "Humans inherently have a hard time accepting those who are different, and young magicians are particularly vulnerable."

He gently stroked Valeta's cheek with his thumb while she couldn't bring herself to say anything. She hadn't known any of this.

"However, you weren't like that," he murmured.

"I..." Valeta wanted to shout, *I didn't want to be around you! I was afraid of you too!* But she couldn't because his thumb was now resting on her lower lip.

"You always looked me in the eye when you spoke to me, you always listened to me, and you never shied away from my touch."

"That's..."

"It's not just my name you didn't call. You never called anyone by their names. You never opened your heart to them. That means I was no different than them in your eyes, right? You saw me as a human being, just like them."

Valeta couldn't say anything as Reinhart whispered into her ear.

Nobody ever looked him in the eye or talked to him. They only wanted him for his looks, his sweet voice, or to feel superior to him. She was the only person who looked at him for who he was, never wanting anything more from him. Although she wore a cold expression, one that often bordered on disgust, she'd never pushed him away when he clung to her.

"So, why didn't I run away, you ask? Staying in that place and groveling on my knees was my best option," Reinhart said as he brought his face close to hers. Valeta narrowed her eyes and gently pushed him on the shoulder, and he backed away, yielding to her gentle touch. "If I had left that place, I wouldn't have been able to get my hands on you."

He licked his lower lip as he spoke.

*Does he want to kiss me?*

The horrifying thing was that she would have let him. She couldn't tell if it was because of his innocent and pure appearance or because she still had some part of the original Valeta within her.

"It's obvious, but..." Reinhart trailed off. "I wanted to have you, master."

He gave a tender smile, and Valeta stared at it, finding the madman's smile beautiful. She wondered if he knew what she was thinking. She let out a deep sigh.

"I'm sure you didn't want to become a spectacle," he continued.

"Spectacle? What do you mean?"

"Do you have any idea how many people would kill to have just your alchemy skills, to say nothing of your elementalist abilities?"

He received no response. "You have no idea what your foolish father was trying to do with you." Reinhart slowly brushed against the inside of Valeta's wrist with

his hand. He trailed a finger down her wrist, tracing one of the translucent blue veins beneath her skin. “How he tried to draw your blood and sell it...”

Valeta’s eyes widened.

“How he wanted to lock you away in a far-off villa under the guise of recovery and then force you to carry some man’s child.”

A trail of goosebumps followed the path of Reinhart’s finger. However, Valeta wasn’t sure if the goosebumps stemmed from his touch or this new horrifying revelation about Count Delight.

“He was planning on auctioning you off.” The finger tracing her veins rested on the nape of her neck, his thumb rubbing gently at a spot on her neck. “Then, once you got married to the crown prince, he was going to force you to make potions, splitting the profit between himself and that greedy pig of an emperor.”

Reinhart’s thumb started pressing against her neck. It didn’t hurt, but Valeta was frightened. However, she didn’t move. She continued to stare absently at his lips.

“I bet you didn’t know anything.”

Valeta cursed. She knew that her father was obsessed with money, but she was appalled to learn what her own flesh and blood had planned for her.

“You have no idea how much I wanted to snap their necks.”

Her expression contorted, wiping the indifference from her face. Reinhart’s eyes, which were usually apathetic and full of lies, were burning with rage. Valeta was shocked by the murderous look on his face, for she had never seen him like this before. He always wore a kind expression with that fake smile of his, the one that never reached his eyes, of course.

“I was engaged to the crown prince. What do you mean by a child?”

“He was offered a significant amount, enough for him to consider delaying your marriage by a year and sending you elsewhere under the guise of needing medical treatment.”

“Did Father really plan that?”

“Yes. Since you are a noble and a high-level alchemist, to him, you must’ve looked like a goose that could lay him golden eggs.”

“That’s terrible,” Valeta said, frowning. There was nothing she could do now that the count was already dead, but she felt even less sorry for the way he had died. She let out another sigh. “Is that why you want me to stay here? Because it’s dangerous outside?”

“Simply put, yes.”

“No,” Valeta replied, cutting off a smiling Reinhart. “How do I know that you’re not going to hurt me?”

To the girl, the man standing in front of her was equally as dangerous as anything outside the tower. Reinhart shrugged at her biting words and sighed before sitting back down in the chair opposite Valeta’s. With his chin propped on his hand, he said, “I won’t hurt you, master. If I wanted to, I would’ve killed you already.”

Her lips turned down at the way he said those cruel words so easily.

“If you promise that you won’t run away, I’ll let you out of this room.”

“I understand.”

“You won’t run away?”

“No.”

"Such a blatant lie," Reinhart said with a chuckle. Anyone could tell that was a lie, especially coming from her. Her first and only instinct was to escape from this place, and it was obvious that her goal was to get out of the Magicians' Tower as soon as the opportunity arose. She wasn't even trying to hide her true intentions.

At Valeta's confident expression, he smiled bitterly. Even as a child, she never acted in the way that he'd expected her to, and that still hadn't changed. Reinhart extended his hand. A thin, round bracelet materialized in the center of his palm. It was silver, as thin as a ring, and had no jewels on it.

"Take this. If you put this on, you can leave the room whenever you want."

"This isn't another repatriation bracelet, is it?" Valeta looked at Reinhart with extreme loathing in her eyes.

He shrugged and shook his head. "Certainly not. Don't compare me to that bastard."

"Okay," she agreed, though with a disgruntled look on her face. She was rendered speechless by Reinhart's confidence and also surprised at how foul he could sometimes be. She wondered how he was able to play the role of a kind and innocent slave for so long.

"People can leave the room whenever they want, but they have to ask me or the keeper of the watchtower to be let back in."

"Oh."

Did that mean she could enter and exit this room at will? For now, Valeta wanted to escape from this stuffy room. She took the bracelet and slid it onto her wrist.

"If you call my name with this on, I'll come to wherever you are."

"What? I can't come back by myself whenever I want?"

Reinhart's eyes curved into crescent moons at Valeta's perplexed expression. She returned his stare.

"What a silly thing to say, my dear master."

Valeta's frown deepened.

*I really want to punch him.*

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 18

After a moment, Reinhart pushed a crude dagger embedded with mysterious runes toward Valeta.

“This is my gift to you. Always carry it with you.”

Valeta briefly glanced down at the dagger before looking up with hesitation.  
“What is this?”

“If someone starts bothering you, just stab them in the eye,” Reinhart replied casually, as if he were inquiring after someone’s well-being. It was a rather cruel thing to say given his soft expression.

“That will kill them.”

“You have nothing to worry about, master. I’ll take full responsibility.”

Valeta picked up her tea, now cold, as she watched Reinhart leisurely swirling his own around. He pushed the dagger toward her again and smiled in satisfaction as it touched the hem of her sleeve. She sighed.

“Fine...” she said, sullenly. Valeta could resist as much as she wanted, but she knew it was futile.

Propping his chin on his hand as he watched her sip her cold tea, Reinhart gazed at her so intently that Valeta was finding it unnerving. She put down the teacup and snapped, “What?”

“Aren’t you curious about the runes on the dagger, master?”

“They’re just runes, aren’t they?”

"Yes, but you didn't ask what they mean."

Valeta was afraid to ask after seeing the smile on the magician's face. He wouldn't have cursed the dagger with some strange magic, would he? She gave a quick glance to the dagger, anxious.

"It's not explosive, is it?" she asked nervously. Reinhart was more than capable of that. Of course he was. For the fact that he was none other than himself.

Reinhart burst into laughter, and Valeta turned her head to watch him. The combination of his beautiful face, paired with that bright laughter... He was glowing.

*That face is dangerous.*

Over the past ten years, Valeta had trained herself not to fall for his stunning smile. She still remembered the word she had whispered to herself every morning over the last ten years: "Never."

She gave Reinhart's crescent-moon eyes a hard look. He was the only person she knew who could have such a terrifying smile.

"To put it simply, it's been enchanted with a spell that can remove a magician's shield."

"Shield?"

"When a magician feels like their life is in danger, they will form a shield around themselves. However, that dagger I just gave you has the power to break that shield."

"Oh..."

"If you stab them in the eye, their magic will disperse," Reinhart muttered, his chin still resting on one hand.

*Wouldn't stabbing them in the eye already kill them? Valeta questioned silently. At least the dagger was some form of self-defense. It's better than nothing.*

"Okay."

Valeta rose from her seat. The room was beginning to feel stifling, and she wanted out. She could call the elementals to protect herself if she needed it. Seeing her rise from her seat, Reinhart did the same.

"Where are you going?"

"I want to take a look around."

"Ah, of course," he replied. "Call me anytime you want."

Valeta gave him a glance before turning her head.

"I'll be waiting, master."

She closed her eyes, ignoring his words.

\* \* \*

Valeta thought about leaving the room. Immediately, the room swayed and her surroundings changed. She found that she was no longer in Reinhart's room on the top floor of the tower, nor in a hallway, but was instead standing before a large spiral staircase. Gray bricks lined the walls, dark and oppressive.

"Gene."

She called for the elemental, but there was no response.

Whenever Valeta summoned the wind elemental, there was always a strong

gust of wind, even indoors. But seeing as how there wasn't any wind now, she could only assume that she wasn't able to summon an elemental from inside the Magicians' Tower. To be honest, she hadn't been expecting to. She remembered reading something to this effect in the novel.

*Did it say that elemental magic was impossible inside the Magicians' Tower?* Valeta thought as she carefully descended the spiral staircase. She couldn't see any windows or doors. No matter where she looked, she only saw dark gray bricks.

"The eighty-sixth floor?"

After what felt like an eternity, Valeta came across something that wasn't a brick wall. To one side of her, the staircase continued to descend, but on the other side, she saw a door engraved with antique designs. Above the arched door was a plaque that read "86."

As she stepped closer, the door opened on its own and light spilled out, illuminating the dark staircase. Valeta first poked her head through the door before taking a careful step inside. She was immediately met with the smell of books. The room appeared to be a library, and there were several robed figures inside. Some were standing, browsing the shelves as if they were looking for material, while others sat reading books.

The moment she stepped inside, the door closed behind her. The girl stood at the entrance, slowly looking around the room.

*It's quiet, she thought. Her eyes narrowed and she quickly moved to hide between the bookshelves.*

Though she didn't need to hide, everyone else was wearing a robe that seemed to announce their status as a magician. Valeta, however, was still wearing her gown and fluffy slippers, and frankly, it was embarrassing.

"Did you see the new head of the Magicians' Tower? He looks so young and

pale."

She stopped walking between the bookshelves when she heard someone speak. She stood there, holding her breath, listening for more.

"Don't you agree? Think about it. Balteer didn't have it easy trying to run this place, but then this guy suddenly flounces in, claiming that he's the new head."

"Is he really the new head of the Magicians' Tower? The way he smiles makes him look stupid. On top of that, he brought a socoro into the sky room. Is he out of his mind?"

Valeta frowned. *Socoro*—an ancient word that magicians used to call those without mana. It was also an insult that meant that they were stupid. She remembered reading in the novel that the magicians used this word to establish their superiority.

"The sky room? Yep, he's crazy."

The sky room, the room she had just been in, was at the top of the Magicians' Tower, with its walls made of transparent glass. It was the place closest to nature, and a room that was only given to the head of the tower. Only Caspelios, the watchman of the tower, and the head of the Magicians' Tower were allowed to enter.

"I don't like him. I can't believe we have to listen to someone who's still wet behind the ears."

"I heard that he used to be a slave for some socoro noble. Even if he hadn't awakened yet, how is it possible that the future head of the Magicians' Tower could let himself become a slave like that?"

*It's not that he couldn't run away, Valeta thought, he chose not to.* He'd refused to run away even when she begged him to. And for what it was worth, he was the

head of the Magicians' Tower. That was why even Caspelios deferred to him.

*They're asking for it now.* Valeta hoped that Reinhart wasn't listening in to their conversation.

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter," she murmured quietly as she turned away. She couldn't care less whether they lived or died. It had nothing to do with her.

From what she could recall, there was one incident in the novel that would turn the Magicians' Tower upside down. A single magician had foolishly made a stupid remark, a slip of the tongue, but one that caused Reinhart to purge the tower.

Valeta knew that her captor would dispose of anyone who badmouthed him or talked behind his back.

*But I don't know the details because it was only a single line in the book.* Again, it didn't matter to her. *I think the tower collapses at some point too. But why?* Valeta couldn't remember the reason but knew that Reinhart had been noticeably absent during that time. With a head full of thoughts, she left the library and continued down the stairs. After a while, she started getting tired.

"I don't think these stairs are meant to be used."

She was certain that the magicians were using a teleportation spell since she hadn't bumped into a single soul on the stairs. But what could she do? Mana was required to make a magic circle, and Valeta didn't have a single drop of it. She glared at the stone bricks all around her and lifted her head.

"Gene! Nereid!" she called, looking around the tower. Neither Gene, the wind elemental, nor Nereid, the water elemental, answered. There was nothing but silence. She felt no wind, no water, not even the slightest breeze or the smallest droplet. Valeta sighed before resuming her walk.

"Come to think of it..."

Now that the count was dead, who was looking after the slaves? Her father had owned a prison where all the people he'd illegally abducted, children included, were forcibly held before they were sold off.

*I need to set them free.*

She was sure that the people taking care of the prisoners would stop the second they were no longer getting paid. That meant it was only a matter of time before the slaves starved to death. Valeta was starting to get worried. She rubbed her temples.

Some time passed before she chanced upon another door. "The eighty-second floor..."

How would she be able to make it to the first floor at this rate? Valeta sighed. The door to this floor looked no different than the door on the eighty-sixth. As she drew closer to the door, it opened, the smell of grass wafting in her direction.

"Oh my goodness."

She gaped, her mouth wide open. The door fully opened, revealing a vast field that was covered in grass and divided into sections. Each section had all manners of herbs and plants growing in it. She lifted her head and saw a bright blue sky with clouds floating around. The light from the rising sun was intense but not too hot.

*Is this magic? Everything looked so realistic. Could I summon the elements here?*

"Don't you know that you shouldn't be opening doors?"

Still mesmerized by the lush scenery, Valeta turned to face the voice that had just spoken.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 19

The owner of the voice was a small, robed boy who only came up to Valeta's waist. His light green hair swayed as his eyes narrowed.

"Who are you? A newcomer? No, you don't have any mana. A socoro? How is that possible? How did a socoro get in here?"

"Hey, is this real?" Valeta asked, interrupting the boy.

He narrowed his dark green eyes at her question. Though cute, he appeared to have a hot temper.

He crossed his arms and scoffed. "This is why socoros are so stupid. We're inside a tower. You think any of this is actually real?"

"Oh, I see..."

*I guess that means I can't call an elemental here.* The other magicians were beginning to stare, which unnerved Valeta. She turned around. If she couldn't summon an elemental, then there was no need for her to stick around.

"I'll leave you to it."

She approached the door again, which automatically opened.

"Ha!"

Valeta left the room on the eighty-second floor without a second thought, the boy's surprised scoff echoing behind her. She couldn't deny how incredible magic was, to be able to imitate nature so realistically like that. It was impressive.

The eighty-first floor was home to a strange laboratory, while the door to the eightieth floor was locked. The floor below that was the dining room, and the floor below that one was another library. After what felt like ages, Valeta slumped on the staircase, too exhausted to go on.

*“Call me anytime you want, master.”*

She glanced down at the bracelet Reinhart had given to her before shaking her head.

*I don’t want to be told what to do.* Her legs were beginning to hurt, but due to the lack of windows in the tower, she had no way of telling what time it was.

*As if I’d call Reinhart,* she thought. That left only one person she could call. She wasn’t too keen on the idea, but she would call on the watchman of the tower. Nobody else could summon him because they didn’t know his true name.

“Caspelios.”

The moment Valeta spoke his name, a magic circle appeared in front of her. Then a transparent body clad in green robes materialized from the circle.

He had come.

She couldn’t see his face, but his whole body radiated with surprise.

“How do you know that name...?” he asked.

“It just popped into my head, and I said it out loud. I didn’t know it was your name.”

“Lies...”

“I’m not asking for much. Take me back to the sky room,” Valeta requested, an

exhausted look crossing her face.

Caspelios studied her for a moment before extending a hand with resignation, and though translucent, she could see that it was covered in cuts and bruises. On his palm was the outline of a footprint, bruised black and blue.

It was clear how he was being treated. Valeta placed her palm on Caspelios' outstretched hand. "It's funny how this is happening to you, even though you're one of the twelve revered magicians who built this place."

He flinched and started trembling. Caspelios slowly lifted his head. His scarlet eyes, normally hidden by his hood, glowed in the dark, wide with surprise.

Valeta wondered if he thought the magicians of today ridiculous.

On the one hand, they sang praises of him, applauding him for being a renowned magician, while on the other, they relegated him to the position of caretaker, to be abused by the inhabitants of the tower.

"Who on earth are you...?"

"How long are you going to hold onto my master's hand?" a voice said.

As cold fingers touched his nape, Caspelios quickly dropped his outstretched hand in surprise.

Valeta's hand, which was resting on top, fell along with his. She frowned. "I don't remember calling you."

"Didn't you know that he was with me?"

No, Valeta hadn't thought of that. She mentally clicked her tongue. Reinhart came up behind her and slowly wrapped his arms around her waist. His breath tickled the back of her neck.

"Why didn't you call me instead? You never called me by my name. You're so cruel, master."

Keeping one arm firmly around her waist, Reinhart flicked his wrist.

A magic circle appeared on the floor. Perhaps it was because they were teleporting, but Valeta's vision blurred. Dizzy, she scrunched her face. Reinhart held onto her and guided her to the bed. He slowly knelt by her feet and looked up at her.

"So, have you tried to call your contracted elementals yet?"

"Contracted?"

"I'm talking about that Gene," the magician replied, smiling with his eyes slightly narrowed.

Valeta looked at him wordlessly before shaking her head.

"I didn't make a contract with Gene."

"Didn't you summon him?" he asked, a rare hint of surprise glinting in his eyes.

It wasn't a contract. Valeta had no intention of entering into a contract with an elemental in the first place. She simply asked them for help, and they did help—at a price. "There's no contract. I just summoned him for his help, that's all."

"A high-level elemental?"

Valeta nodded her head. She turned to look outside and suppressed a chuckle at the darkening skies. She knew that she had been gone for a while, but she didn't think that it was already evening. No wonder. It felt like she had walked down the stairs for ages.

*If I can't summon them inside the tower, can I summon them outside?*

She slowly rose from the bed and walked toward the windows. Valeta had a full view of her surroundings thanks to the all-glass walls. She put her hand on the glass.

“Gene,” she murmured. A tornado suddenly formed outside. Before long, a clear and colorless hawk appeared in front of her.

*“What? What is this horrid place?”*

“So I can summon him while I’m still inside,” Valeta said.

“That’s supposed to be impossible, master,” Reinhart said, approaching her. He seemed a little taken aback. A rare sight. But it wasn’t long before he chuckled and started running his fingers across the back of Valeta’s neck.

“Just how much more valuable will you make yourself, master?”

Valeta frowned when she felt the warmth of his hand on her neck.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s impossible for a normal elementalist to summon an elemental without a contract. And it’s even more impossible to summon an elemental in a separate space like this.”

Impossible? But Valeta had just done that. She frowned as she met Reinhart’s gaze, which was reflected in the glass.

“Did you know that the imperial castle has been turned upside down, master?”

He wrapped his arms around her. Guiding her back to the bed, Reinhart then knelt by Valeta’s feet, looking up at her. He seemed to like this position, one where he was always looking up at her.

“The imperial castle?”

"Yes, they've discovered traces of magic in the manor and have submitted a request for cooperation. If the crown prince discovers that you're here, he'll probably ask me to return you, don't you think?"

"Probably. I'm supposed to be the crown princess, after all."

However, that was in name only. It didn't matter anymore now that the count was dead. Reinhart smiled as if he could read her thoughts. He reached out to cup her cheek in his hand.

"Regardless, you are still precious. The imperial family won't let you go so easily." He swept his thumb along her cheekbone, his lips melting into a beautiful smile.  
"Shall I kill them all?"

"What?"

"The imperial family are only human. If I snap their necks, that'll be the end of them. They'll probably come to take you away from me, so wouldn't it be better to kill them now before they even get the chance?"

"Are you trying to start a war?" *Crazy bastard*, Valeta thought. She knew he was crazy, but she didn't think that he was crazy enough to annihilate the imperial family.

"A war?" Reinhart asked with a tilt of his head. His long hair cascaded to one side, and his red eyes looked quizzical. "Calling it a war could be too grand," he said with a shrug.

In other words, even if the imperial family waged war on him, it would be nothing more than child's play to the magician. Valeta knew full well of Reinhart's ruthless abilities, but she didn't think that he would make light of war.

"Oh, but I did notice some vermin crawling around the tower."

"You mean that Balteer?"

"Are you a mind reader too, master? How impressive."

There was a hint of mischief in his eyes, an expression that Valeta had never seen on him before. He definitely seemed happier here than in the manor.

"I heard it in the library."

"I see. Shall I pull out his teeth? Rip his mouth apart? Which would you prefer, master?"

"Don't ask me."

"Well, I suppose it'd be faster just to rip out his tongue," Reinhart said coldly. She gave no answer. "Are you afraid of me, master?"

At the unexpected question, Valeta slowly turned to face Reinhart again. He was looking at her, his face grave, and his usual smile absent.

"You always try to avoid me when I treat you with kindness, even now."

"I..."

"Why?"

Valeta's mouth remained shut.

"You've avoided me from the start. Why?" he asked again.

Still, she gave no response.

"You were always trying to get rid of me. You treated mere animals with kindness and sympathy, but why not me?" He laughed. "Oh, but it wasn't just me, was it?"

Valeta thought for a moment.

"I'm scared of you," she said finally.

She was being honest. Valeta was scared of him. She was scared of the way he was portrayed in the novel, and she was scared of the way he never genuinely smiled. She was scared that he would grab her neck and snap it in an instant.

"Do you think I'm going to kill you?" Reinhart asked as he rose from his position, his cool gaze directed toward her.

It was rare to see him without a smile, but occasionally, he would drop it around her. This face may have been the closest that Valeta had seen of Reinhart's true self.

After a pause, she answered, "Yes."

"How do I make you understand?"

He slowly reached out, gently grabbing her neck. Reinhart slowly pushed Valeta back on the bed with his large hand still wrapped around her throat. He crawled on the bed, pushing a leg between her knees. He brought his face close to Valeta's, never once letting go of her. His nose brushed against hers, and their breaths mingled.

"I can't kill you, even when we're like this."

Valeta frowned. Was it her imagination or did Reinhart look a little... nervous?

He gazed down at the wordless Valeta, sighed, and said, "How can I make you see me, master?"

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 20

"If you're not going to kill me, then stop threatening me like this."

Reinhart's eyes widened at Valeta's unexpected response. He buried his head into her shoulder and let out a large laugh, his shoulders shaking. She sighed when she heard his laughter.

"You're heavy."

"Master."

Valeta rolled her eyes before she turned and looked at him. She could barely move because he was still leaning on her body. Reinhart's lips came close to her nose. His eyes curved into crescent moons as if he were trying to seduce her. Valeta put her hands on his shoulders and pushed him away. It wasn't a hard push, but Reinhart obediently backed away.

"Aren't you hungry, master?"

"How long are you going to stay here?" she asked.

"This is my room, master."

He shrugged. With a wave of his hand, a table appeared. He then snapped his fingers, and this time, the table was filled with food. The sweet and savory smell of a freshly prepared meal wafted over to Valeta.

"What do you mean, your room?"

"Oh. To be precise, this is *our* room," he said brightly, circling her.

"Are you crazy?"

"I know that's your way of complimenting me."

Valeta's face fell at Reinhart's gentle smile. How could one think being called crazy was a compliment? She needed to do something about this. His smile widened, seeing the glare on her face.

"Didn't I tell you before, master?"

She waited.

"You're the only one who ever looks me in the eye."

While everyone else would stiffen or tremble around him, doing everything they could to avoid his gaze, Valeta was the only one who didn't. She narrowed her eyes and frowned, unsure where he was going with this.

"Now, master. It's time to eat."

"I'm not your master."

"Valeta, then..."

She stiffened when she heard her name roll off Reinhart's tongue. Chills went down her spine. Was it the strange way he called her name? She forced herself to relax and took a seat at the table as if nothing had happened.

"If I call your name like this, will you call me by my name?" he asked.

"Just give me another room."

"We don't have any extra rooms." He gave her a light shrug.

How was it possible for a tower with a hundred floors not to have a single empty room? Reinhart shrugged his shoulders again and took the seat opposite her own as she scowled.

“What about a storage room?”

“If only, but they’re all filled to the brim.”

“You...”

“Don’t worry, master. I won’t kill you.”

“That’s not...”

The way he said it made Valeta feel like he would do anything *but* kill her. Suddenly, a light shined from behind Reinhart, illuminating him in a glow.

“What? I told you not to disturb us.”

Two more had joined the room: Silon and Kurt. They looked as though they had a message to deliver.

*I guess those two have permission to enter the sky room.*

The two men looked at Valeta for a moment before bowing.

“My apologies, my lord. I think you should come down and take a look.”

“Can’t you see that we’re eating?” Reinhart snapped.

“The magician that we sent to the imperial castle has returned with a message. It’s an important matter, my lord.”

Still glowering, Reinhart rose from his seat. Then, he reached out and ruffled Valeta’s hair.

“Sorry, master. Please start without me. Do people not realize how rude it is to interrupt someone when they’re eating? I guess I’ll have to teach them a f\*cking lesson.”

His lips were curved into a cold smile. A second later, he, Silon, and Kurt were gone.

"He's mad," Valeta said into the empty room.

If Reinhart cursed, that meant that he was beyond irritated. In the past ten years that Valeta had known him, she could count the number of times he had cursed on one hand.

*I don't know anymore.* She wondered if the Magicians' Tower would turn into a sea of blood, but then again, it was none of her business. It wasn't something she could stop in the first place. Indifferent, she started to eat the food cooling in front of her. It was a quiet dinner.

\* \* \*

A swarm of magicians stood before him. His eyes slowly swept across the crowd.

Reinhart didn't know what exactly was happening, but he was standing in a spacious hall. At the center stood a magician dressed in a fancy white robe trimmed with gold. Anyone could tell that this was the envoy that they had sent to the imperial castle.

"Pleased to meet you, my—"

"Hasn't anyone told you it's rude to interrupt people while they're eating?"

"What?" Merial, the magician they had sent, was surprised by the cutting remark. He faltered, unsure if he'd heard correctly.

"Are you looking down on me? Do you think I'm no better than a dog?" The beautiful smile remained fixed on Reinhart's face.

The envoy stared at the man in front of him, watching his mouth move, before looking around the room in search of another voice. But there was no doubt that the owner of the voice was none other than the very same man standing in front of him. Everyone stared at Reinhart, dumbstruck.

*If a celestial being came down from the heavens, would they look like this?* Merial thought to himself as he stood before the head of the Magicians' Tower.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you answering me? A magician sent to the imperial castle still belongs to the Magicians' Tower, does he not?" Reinhart said as he approached, a broad smile on his face.

Merial turned bright red at his pleasant voice and beautiful face. "Y-yes, my lord. I'm sorry."

He hastily bowed. He wasn't bowing because he genuinely felt sorry for his mistakes, but because he couldn't bring himself to look Reinhart in the eyes.

Count Delight was a greedy man, but he also had a great appreciation for beauty. With his discerning eye, honed from his years of dealing with beautiful slaves, he had discovered the young Reinhart stumbling around on the battlefield. The child was filthy and scrawny, but the count had somehow recognized the boy's beauty despite his disheveled state.

That was what he'd looked like back then, but now? Reinhart was neatly dressed and had long silver hair that cascaded down his back. His seductive ruby-red eyes were folded into crescent moons. Even the way the corners of his mouth quirked into a smile was enough to make a man like Merial lose all reason for a moment. How was it possible for such an alluring mouth to utter such filthy words? Merial didn't want to believe that a beautiful man like Reinhart could produce such foul language.

"Then..." Reinhart started.

He was beginning to get fed up with Merial's apology and looked around the room. It seemed that a lot of people had gathered to hear the message from the imperial castle. Judging by their robes, it was clear that they were all magicians. Reinhart smirked as if he could tell what they were thinking.

"Do you think this is funny?" he asked with a smile. If Valeta had been watching, she would have sensed impending danger and would have left the hall as quickly as possible, like an animal instinctively fleeing from disaster.

Sadly, not a single person in the Magicians' Tower knew what was coming.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 21

“N-not at all...” someone said in a shaky voice, cutting through the silence.

Reinhart started to raise his eyebrows when a voice boomed through the crowd.

“You can’t just do whatever you want!”

A magician in a gray robe pushed his way through the twenty or so magicians gathered in the hall.

“We’re not trying to look down on you, but we have some complaints,” he continued.

Reinhart wasn’t aware that this was one of the magicians Valeta had overheard complaining in the library. His eyes narrowed before crinkling with amusement.

“Complaints?”

“Many of us here question if you’re truly qualified to be the head of the Magicians’ Tower. The rumors say that you sold yourself to a socoro as a slave!” the man exclaimed.

Caspelios kept quiet despite the insult hurled against their leader. He was the keeper of the tower but also a bystander as well and, although he served the head of the Magicians’ Tower, he wasn’t loyal enough to defend him if he wasn’t ordered to do so.

No, the thing that he loved most was the tower itself, the tower that he and his eleven companions had built. Not the head of that tower.

"Sold myself? To whom?" Reinhart asked with a chuckle.

"That doesn't matter! The problem is that there are rumors like that in the first place!" the magician retorted. "If you want to be our king, you need to prove that you have the power."

Reinhart laughed after quietly listening to the man's insincere reply. His laugh was so bright and clear that, for a moment, it stunned everyone in the room, including the hostile man in the gray robe.

"Your king? I don't want to be the king of vermin."

"Vermin?"

"I needed some power because I felt so small next to her. That's all. What's so great about being the king of a nest that's teeming with bugs?"

"Are you looking down on us magicians? How dare you!" the man yelled in reply.

However, as soon as his glare rested upon Reinhart, he found that he could no longer move. It felt like an immense amount of energy was pressing down on him.

Reinhart grinned.

At the same time, the man in a gray robe let out the breath that he'd been holding. *Am I... imagining things?* He raised his head, a dazed expression on his face.

"What a shame. I was giving you a chance to say the right thing," Reinhart said lightly. Despite the smile tugging at the corners of his lips, his eyes were cold. Not a single person noticed the unsettling disconnect. Instead, they were captivated by his smile.

"Oh, let me correct myself." His words snapped everyone back to attention. "I

was giving you a chance to *save yourself*. I guess that's more accurate."

They had no idea what those moving, red lips were saying. Reinhart snapped his fingers. The man didn't have a chance to process what his lordship had just said. He couldn't even think anymore. Clutching his throat, he made sounds of gurgling, as though he were choking.

"Ack! Gah! Save me—!"

The magician in the gray robe fell to the floor, rolling around, still grabbing his throat as if he were suffocating. His face went from red to blue to white. Then, as though he were extremely itchy, the man started clawing at his neck.

Laughter rang out. The crowd, who had been watching the magician in horror, turned toward the sound. Some of the other magicians near the gray-robed magician attempted to cast a dispel. But it was impossible for them to dispel Reinhart's magic.

"Wh-what is the meaning of this, my lord?!"

Another young magician shouted as he stepped in front of Reinhart.

"Hmm." He smiled and snapped his fingers, and the magician in the gray robe was able to breathe again. Reinhart watched him for a moment as the man gasped for air before snapping his fingers again.

"Ahhh!"

This time, large shards of ice embedded themselves into both shoulders of another magician, the one who had confronted him, pinning him to the wall behind him. He dangled as if he were just another ornament tacked up for decoration.

The man screamed in pain. Reinhart burst into laughter as blood dripped from the man's shoulders, pooling into a puddle on the floor. He ambled over to the

magician in the gray robe and stood in front of him.

“Get up,” he ordered.

Reinhart always humbled himself in front of Valeta. However, that behavior was only limited to her. His back was straight as he stood in front of the magician. The man trembled. He realized now just how powerful Reinhart really was.

“Aren’t you going to get up?”

“Eek! Y-yes, I will!”

The magician’s neck was in pain from scratching at it just moments ago, but he managed to pull himself to his feet and stood before Reinhart, who watched impassively as the man took heaving breaths.

“Giving you only one chance was too cruel, I suppose.”

The corners of Reinhart’s mouth twitched upward as he approached, but the other man wasn’t fooled. Reinhart wasn’t smiling. Technically, though his lips were shaped into that of a smile, his eyes weren’t. The magician had finally realized that.

“So, who did you say I sold my body to?”

“I-it was a mistake! I made a mistake.”

Reinhart’s eyes narrowed. The corners of his mouth fell into a straight line. With a wave of his hand, another ice shard appeared out of nowhere and impaled the man.

“Wrong answer.”

The man in the gray robe didn’t even have a chance to scream before he was speared to the wall. The other magicians started trembling with fear after seeing

their companion's limbs skewered by shards of ice. Reinhart smiled.

"M-my lord! Don't you think this is going too— Ahh!"

A couple more magicians had stepped forward to voice their concerns, but they, too, found themselves pinned to the wall with icicles. Everyone backed away after that, their mouths shut.

As the people in the hall quieted, Reinhart slowly gazed around the room and took in his surroundings. Blood dripped from his cheek to the floor.

"Are you done blocking my view?" Reinhart asked with a tilt of his head. The other magicians held their breath. Had he turned those magicians into wall ornaments just because they'd blocked his line of sight?

Five magicians dangled from the walls, blood spilling from their wounds. They were still breathing, but losing a lot of blood.

"Hand," Reinhart said with his palm outstretched. The magicians' eyes filled with suspicion. A moment later, an answer came from behind the crowd.

"Yes... my lord," Caspelios said as he placed a hand on top of Reinhart's palm.

The magicians' mouths dropped open. Although they called Caspelios the watchdog of the tower, they had never seen him act this way before.

"There's a good boy. Do you think you know the answer to that question?"

He hesitated. "Are you talking about the person in the sky room?"

At his reply, Reinhart reached out and stroked the watchman's hooded head, petting him as if he were an obedient dog. Caspelios' eyes widened.

"As expected. Dogs are far better at listening than vermin. I thought the answer was obvious, but they've lost their chance to live."

Reinhart's words made the magicians want to tear their hair out. What was so obvious about that? They knew that someone was occupying the sky room, but how were they supposed to know whether or not that person was the one he had sold himself to?

"Remind me, how did you introduce yourself to me when we first met?" Reinhart asked the watchman.

"I said I was the Magicians' Tower's keeper and watchman."

"Right. So, a guard dog, no? You should be making sure that no insects are getting into this place."

The metaphor was a stretch, but Reinhart's meaning was clear: he saw Caspelios as no more than a dog.

"My apologies," Caspelios replied impassively. "That is my fault."

The head magician slightly clenched his fists. His eyes slowly scanned the room full of magicians.

"If I just..." Reinhart said as he splayed out his hand. Chills ran down the backs of the magicians at their lordship's icy demeanor. "It'd be rather troublesome, don't you agree?"

Reinhart seemed to be talking to Caspelios, but his gaze was directed toward the crowd of magicians. Not a single person in the room felt eased by the smile on Reinhart's face. They quivered with fear.

They couldn't sense his magic. If he was powerful enough to be the head of the Magicians' Tower, they should have been able to sense his strong magic. However, there was a reason why they couldn't. It wasn't that he didn't have mana. He was simply hiding it. Reinhart was hiding his power, just like a predator hiding its claws and fangs.

The magicians sighed as they realized this fact all too late.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 22

Reinhart was powerful enough to, with the silent snap of his fingers, cast a spell so strong that three magicians working together could not dispel it. The magicians realized that they had picked a fight with someone they shouldn't have, and that person was gazing at them now.

"Why isn't anyone answering me?" Reinhart asked. "If you don't need your tongue, I can pull it out for you."

"N-no, my lord!"

A chorus of voices shouted. Reinhart's age and the circumstances leading up to his awakening no longer mattered. The magicians had witnessed his madness and bloodlust firsthand. Unless they wanted to be speared by an icicle, they had lost all confidence to stand up against him.

"Good. Now, do you interrupt people while they're eating?"

"N-no, it's bad manners," a young magician replied, desperate to live.

"And?"

"We won't disturb you anymore, my lord!"

Reinhart smiled. Just when he was about to raise his hand, the young magician dropped to his knees and shrieked. The head magician let out a low chuckle at the boy's sudden reaction.

"Very well. You can bother anyone else, but not me."

"Yes, I understand."

"Good." Reinhart nodded, satisfied. He clenched his fist once before releasing it. There was a dull crack in the air as if something had exploded. A second later, something started raining down to the ground.

As the magicians tilted their heads to look around, the young magician voiced a question.

"Is that... flesh?"

The magicians gaped at what was raining down on them. Their heads turned. Apart from the limbs speared with ice, nothing remained of the gray-robed magician. His head and torso were gone.

"Because a promise is a promise," Reinhart said, smiling in front of the shocked crowd. But they couldn't see it—the blood made it impossible to see anything. With a quick wave of his hand, the blood vanished from his body.

"Would it be all right if I heard the report after my meal?"

"What? Oh, yes. Yes..." Merial, the envoy, replied as he sank to the floor, nodding frantically. Reinhart smiled before exclaiming,

"Oh."

He snapped his fingers three times. The pieces of flesh that had rained down on the crowd rose back into the air, rejoining the limbs still on the wall. Before long, a human body began to take shape and a moment later, the gray-robed man appeared, gasping for breath. The magicians stared in astonishment.

"A time reversal spell?"

"My goodness..."

Awe flashed in the eyes of the horrified men as they witnessed magic they had only heard about in legends. The current head of the Magicians' Tower was

unlike any they had seen before, and everyone in the hall was now realizing this.

"There won't be a second chance. Do you understand?" Reinhart said before disappearing with Caspelios.

"Who was it? Which bastard said that the new head of the tower was a weakling who knew nothing about the world?" a middle-aged magician asked long after Reinhart had gone.

The young magician shakily raised his head at the older man's question.

"H-he did..."

The young magician said as he held out his palm, revealing a piece of flesh. "Evil bastard." The young magician flinched at the sound of someone cursing. Although the whole ordeal was rather unpleasant, nobody had died. Well, someone had died, but they were resurrected now.

The magicians began to clean the hall, pulling their companions down from the wall with great difficulty. Their eyes were blank, unseeing, as if they had lost their minds. The gray-robed man didn't even scream as he recalled the terrible pain imprinted on his body. The only thing he could do was sit there and shiver.

"I'm alive..."

His mind, too, was now broken. He would never forget that memory for as long as he lived.

\* \* \*

After Reinhart disappeared, Valeta started to enjoy her meal. She frowned when she heard a loud thump against the glass wall. *A pretty shabby place for being so high up in the air.*

*Thump, thump.*

The sound of wind knocking against the glass walls continued. Just when she was about to reach for a tantalizing piece of roasted goat leg topped with butter, she turned her head.

“Oh,” she gasped and jumped from her seat, realizing that she’d forgotten something. So preoccupied with playing mental games with Reinhart, the girl had completely forgotten that she had summoned Gene.

“I’m so sorry.”

Valetta walked back toward the glass wall, a puzzled look on her face. The thumping sound she had been hearing must have been from Gene. She pursed her lips, apologetic. She was about to apologize again when the furious hawk flapped his wings, creating another tornado.

Three tornadoes, twice the size of Valeta, formed in the empty air and hit the windows of the tower. The wind was powerful enough to blow away an ordinary house, but the glass walls of the tower shook only slightly.

*The tower’s pretty strong,* Valeta noted, and she took back what she was thinking earlier about the tower being shabby. She sighed. It was no wonder why Gene was angry. She had summoned him only to ignore him in favor of dinner.

“I’m sorry.”

*“Are you looking down on me? First you summon me, only to immediately dismiss me! Now you’re ignoring me! We don’t even have a contract, yet I answer your calls! How can you be so cold and heartless?”*

The wind elemental was not one easy to anger. Valeta smiled awkwardly at the furious voice that thundered in her head.

*I guess that’s true. I shouldn’t be able to summon Gene since we don’t have a*

contract. Honestly, she hadn't thought much of it. She could summon Gene simply by calling his name. Once summoned, all Valeta had to do was make a request and pay the price for it. She smiled in an attempt to appease Gene who was beginning to look upset.

"I'll be more careful next time, Gene."

The wind elemental's anger began to die down when he saw Valeta's head lowered in a meek apology. Humans tended to keep their backs and shoulders straight. He thought this woman would do the same, but she wasn't. The hawk stared at Valeta through narrow eyes, now subdued, before snorting heavily.

*"Fine. Why did you summon me to this unpleasant place?"*

"I want to get out of here. Can you help me?"

*"Isn't this the Magicians' Tower? There's a spell that prevents elementals like me from entering. The Magicians'*

*Tower is a wicked place that sucks the power out of nature. It is impossible, of course."*

Valeta hadn't realized how feisty Gene really was back when all she had to do was trade a bit of her blood in exchange for his services. But now she saw—he was as rough as sandpaper. Valeta nodded. She didn't think that he'd actually be able to break in.

*"This is just like you. How did you summon me from this isolated place? Then again, it's unusual how you're able to summon me at all."*

"Is summoning an elemental that complicated?"

*"Certainly. An elemental can only be summoned by their name if the elementalist has a contract with them. They have to draw a magic circle and perform a summoning ceremony in nature for their first contract."*

"Does that mean I have to be in water to summon a water elemental?" Valeta asked casually. She had read something similar in other novels before. Gene looked at Valeta strangely, as if he was seeing her in a new light.

*"Indeed! In order to summon an elemental like me, many people would travel to places where typhoons are common or to the highest mountain peaks and then draw a summoning circle!"* Gene crowed as he boasted of his own greatness.

Valeta thought that might have been the case. If she were being honest, none of this felt like reality. It all still felt like she was reading a novel. Maybe that was the reason why she never bothered to memorize anyone's names or why she barely flinched when people died in front of her.

*That doesn't mean I want to go back to my old world, but...* Now that her memories of her past life were beginning to fade, she had no desire to go back.

"Is there another way for me to summon you in here?"

*"With your ability, it could be possible. That is, if you had a contract."*

"What if I don't make a contract?"

*"Well, who knows? If you're strong enough to summon an elemental just by calling their name, you could try to formally summon them from inside using a summoning circle,"* the hawk said as he tilted his head around. Then he burst out into laughter while shaking his head. *"No. That's impossible. No elemental has ever been summoned inside the Magicians' Tower before."*

"A summoning circle, hm?"

She remembered seeing an image of it in a book before. Truth was, the first time she'd summoned Gene, too lazy to draw a proper circle, Valeta had simply tried calling out his name for the fun of it, only to be incredibly surprised to find that

it actually worked.

*I'll give it a shot.* Feeling light-hearted, Valeta began to look around the room for a piece of paper and pen.

"I don't see anything."

The only thing in the room was the bed and the food Reinhart had laid out on the table. She frowned. This was the perfect chance to try summoning Gene before Reinhart returned. Suddenly, her eyes fell on the table. She strode toward it, grabbed a knife, and wiped it clean with a napkin. Then, she grabbed the hem of her dress with her other hand and plunged the knife into it.

Soon, the luxurious dress was in shreds. Valeta placed a scrap of fabric on the floor. Using the knife again, this time she made a small cut on her index finger.

Blood started dripping.

*"What do you think you're doing?!"*

Valeta, paying no attention to the voice, fell to the floor and started drawing a summoning circle with her blood on the fabric she had sheared off from her dress.

"I'm doing as you said. I'm going to summon you properly with a circle."

*"What barbarity!"*

The transparent hawk outside the window shook his head.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 23

Drawing summoning circles wasn't all that difficult and since Valeta had seen it so many times in books about elementals, she remembered what it looked like. Her pale finger traced out a red summoning circle on the scrap of fabric. It looked like she was summoning a demon. Gene's whole body quivered. Every feather on his body was bristling.

*"I don't want to be summoned with such a ghastly summoning circle!"*

Valeta gave a wry smile at Gene's squawk, looking as though she couldn't care less. "What do I do now?"

*"The summoning spell. All you have to do is recite the summoning spell for wind elementals,"* Gene replied sourly.

Valeta wracked her brains. She had a strong memory, but it wasn't good enough to memorize a summoning spell. In the end, she asked the hawk for help.

Gene conceded, but not before giving her a long lecture. *"You're probably the only elementalist in the world who has asked an elemental for their summoning spell."*

Valeta looked at the wind elemental. "Riding on the winds that blow through the heavens, I summon thee. The great wind elemental, Gene."

*"Impossible..."*

The summoning circle painted with crimson blood began to glow, and the transparent hawk behind the glass wall disappeared in a whirlwind. Before long, a small breeze began to blow above the summoning circle. It quickly picked up speed, turning into a tornado, and from within the tornado, a hawk twice the

size of Valeta appeared, crushing the summoning circle.

“Oh, it worked,” she said as she rose, brushing off her dress. The newly summoned hawk had a stunned look on his face. He kept opening and closing his short beak.

“Who would have thought...?” he stammered.

“Guess I can summon you,” Valeta muttered as she looked up at the elemental. She didn’t think it would be difficult to summon him in the future if she kept a piece of paper with the summoning circle drawn on it in her pocket. At least she’d be able to protect herself among the sea of magicians.

In that moment, a bright light flashed behind Gene’s transparent body. Before Valeta could move, the hawk was hurled into the wall. He collided with the wall with a loud bang.

“Gah...”

“Are you all right, master?”

Reinhart walked to Valeta, a murderous look in his eyes. No, Valeta couldn’t describe his approach as a walk. She blinked and before she knew it, the magician was standing right in front of her. She glanced at Gene, who was pinned to the wall, immobilized by some mysterious force.

“What happened to your hand, master?”

“It’s none of your business.”

At her cold words, Reinhart slowly reached out and grabbed Valeta’s wrist. As he lifted her hand, a stream of blood started trickling down her finger.

“You cut yourself, master,” Reinhart said, his eyes unsmiling. His gaze fell on the scrap of fabric with the summoning circle, and he looked around for the source

of the fabric. It wasn't hard to guess where it had come from as one of Valeta's thighs was exposed.

"If you needed a pen and some paper, you could have just asked."

Silence.

"Hm, master?" Reinhart slowly licked Valeta's finger. His lips parted, and a red tongue lapped up a single drop of blood. The hairs on Valeta's body stood up.

Still close to her, his eyes flashed dangerously.

"This breaks my heart," he said, his eyes glowing as he pressed his thumb against Valeta's wound.

Her face contorted, and she gasped in pain.

Reinhart stroked her finger. The dripping blood disappeared and the wound was no more. Her gaze darkened the moment the sudden pain disappeared. That skill was beyond the ability of humans, but that was who Reinhart was... A lonely existence, born with more powers than any other human, destined to live in solitude. She slowly turned to avoid his gaze

"Master."

When Valeta didn't respond, he pushed her toward the bed. Then, as usual, he knelt before her. He looked up at her with eyes that hadn't changed in the past ten years.

"Valeta." Reinhart's voice was sweet and seductive. He called to her, smiling, with the corners of his eyes crinkled, as if he was trying to prove how harmless he was.

Unaccustomed to the way he'd said her name, Valeta couldn't ignore it. She slowly turned to meet Reinhart's gaze.

"I'll get you anything you need. All you have to do is say it."

"I was just testing something out. Don't be so dramatic," she said with a sigh. She couldn't tell what Reinhart was thinking, but his red gaze made her uncomfortable.

"How could you hurt yourself like this? What if it makes me go crazy?"

Valeta gave no reply. Instead, she narrowed her eyes. She wanted to ask why it would make him go crazy, but she knew the conversation wouldn't go anywhere.

"I may end up killing whoever made this damned thing."

Valeta knew that crazy people couldn't be reasoned with. Reinhart was no different. She started brooding, wondering what to say next. She swallowed a sigh. "Then let Gene go."

"Gene?" Reinhart questioned.

"The wind elemental you've pinned to the wall."

"Oh, of course."

Reinhart nodded in response. He snapped his fingers and Gene, who was stuck to the wall like a taxidermied animal, fell to the floor with a plop.

"*Wh-why, that damn magician!*" Gene's angry voice filled Valeta's head. However, he made no move to attack

Reinhart, most likely recognizing the difference in their powers.

*Is he no match for him?* She had hoped that Gene would be powerful enough to take Reinhart on, but now it seemed unlikely. Through the corners of her eyes, she glanced at the magician and found that he had not reacted at all, as if he couldn't hear the wind elemental's voice.

"Master," Reinhart started.

"Stop calling me 'master,'" Valeta snapped.

"Why do you call that creature by its name?" he asked, his eyes curving into crescent moons. They burned with something akin to madness, as if they were lit with red-hot iron. Valeta swallowed yet another sigh.

"How can I make you mine, master?" Reinhart asked as he kissed her finger. "I want to have you completely. How do I do that?"

He held her hand, pressing his lips to her palm. It was a pleading kiss. Valeta flinched. It didn't seem like his dark red gaze would leave her any time soon. She could feel the barely suppressed madness behind those eyes. Without a word, she merely continued to watch him.

"Let me out of here."

"It's dangerous. Is there somewhere you want to go, master?"

"There is," Valeta replied with a nod. The magician slowly fiddled with the girl's fingers as he gazed up at her. His head tilted to one side as if in contemplation.

"You don't want to go to the crown prince, do you?"

"That doesn't concern you."

"If it doesn't concern me, then who else is there to care for you, master?"

Reinhart whispered sweetly. Valeta narrowed her eyes, unable to distinguish whether he was being sincere or not.

"I'm always so curious about what you think, to the point that I want to crack open your skull and take a peek inside."

One of his hands moved to cup her cheek while the other still held her hand. He

gave her a beautiful smile—a smile only meant for her. Her face hardened as she looked down at him. Reinhart sat on the floor and rested his head on her lap. He tilted his head and silently continued caressing her hand as Valeta remained staring at him silently.

There had been times when Reinhart would sit her down so that he could rest his head on her knees. Not just now, but also when they'd been back at the Delight Manor too. Every once in a blue moon, he would enter her room late at night under the pretense of waiting on her and then make her sit on the bed. Then, kneeling by her feet, he would rest his head on her knees or thighs.

*How is that waiting on me?*

She should have refused and pushed him away. However, she couldn't bring herself to do it. These were the actions of a desperate man, someone who was hanging on by a thread. She felt he would snap and do something drastic if she pushed him away. Though it didn't happen often, she knew that whenever he'd come to her, it was when he'd reached his limit.

So, she would let Reinhart do his own thing while she just looked away.

“Master.”

“What is it...?”

“Please, pet me,” he replied. He slowly gazed at Valeta, his eyes melting into hers.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 24

Valeta opened her mouth, ready to refuse. Instead, she let out a small sigh and reached out to stroke Reinhart's head—his hair was as smooth as silk.

*It's so soft, she thought with a twinge of jealousy. It hurt her pride a little to know that this man had better hair than her.*

"Sometimes, I feel like you're a god watching over from above," Reinhart said, his eyes still closed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He hummed noncommittally.

Valeta slowly continued petting his head. Eyes still closed, the magician let out a sigh and smiled.

"Even if someone dies in front of your eyes, even when you're hung upside down in the air, you have this look on your face like there's nothing you can do about it," he mumbled. "As if everything has been predetermined. As if it can't be helped."

Valeta's hand came to a stop. He'd hit the nail on the head. She looked down at Reinhart, her expression slightly stiff. Before she knew it, he was returning her stare, his eyes twinkling.

"I thought the same way too. I knew it was fate, but that didn't stop me from getting angry. But you never got angry, master. You were so patient."

"You knew it was... fate?" Valeta asked.

"You don't know what kind of path I would've taken if I left your arms, master."

Skillfully sidestepping her question, Reinhart smiled and slowly rose to his feet. He gently pushed Valeta backward onto the bed. His cold fingers trailed up her neck, eventually coming to rest on her forehead.

She calmly looked up at the man hovering over her.

"Every time I see you, master, I want to devour you, starting from your fingertips." The corners of his mouth twitched into a smile. "But I know that will make you mad, so I'll hold back until I get your permission."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, and since this is also my room, can I sleep next to you, master?"

"If I tell you no, will you listen?"

At her question, Reinhart's eyes flashed with spite. But the look of surprise on his face was quickly replaced with a smile alluring enough to seduce men and women alike.

"It looks like I won't be able to get any sleep until my master gives me permission."

Valeta said nothing.

"As expected of my wise master."

Though she hadn't answered, Reinhart immediately praised her, sensing that she was giving in. Valeta sighed and turned, avoiding the magician's eyes.

"Why don't you go to bed early today? You must be tired," he said, running his fingers through her hair.

Valeta could feel herself losing consciousness with every stroke. Then, as if

someone had turned off the lights, everything went black. The last thing that ran through her mind before she fell unconscious was *That crazy bastard...*

Her eyes closed before she could finish the thought. At the same time, Gene vanished as his summoner lost consciousness.

Reinhart laid Valeta in the middle of the bed and covered her with a blanket. With a single snap, black curtains appeared on all sides of the glass wall, preventing light from seeping in. Reinhart slowly ran his fingers through his master's dark brown hair. He stared at her sleeping figure, his red eyes gleaming in the dark.

"How nice would it be if you couldn't do anything."

*So you would depend on me for everything. So you would be utterly helpless without me.* Reinhart could feel his inner desires bubbling up inside him, about to spill over. He felt like he was about to make an irrevocable decision.

"If I wasn't the head of the Magicians' Tower, it'd be impossible for me to stay by your side, right?"

There was no way a pebble, fished from a muddy puddle, could hope to stand next to such a noble and beautiful star in the sky, one with an ability that everyone wished they had. If he didn't have power, he wouldn't have the excuse, the strength, or the ability to force her to stay by his side. He had no use for beauty. Beauty was bound to fade one day, like a flower withering under trampling feet.

"But I don't mind if that someone's you, master."

He'd let her run him through with a sword if she was the one who wanted him to wither. He would do anything for her. All she needed to do was give the order. Whatever it was, he would obediently follow it, like a loyal dog.

Reinhart kissed the sleeping girl's hand. Then, not letting go of her hand, he laid down next to her.

"Good night, master."

Reinhart laid on his side for a moment, watching Valeta, as if waiting for a response that would never come, before slowly closing his eyes. The two slept through the night, feeling warm for the first time in their lives.

\* \* \*

Valeta lay on the bed in silence.

She swallowed another sigh. Reinhart had been putting her to sleep first before falling asleep while holding her hand for a week now. He held her hand so tightly that she woke up with clammy, aching hands every morning.

On the other hand, the magician slept like a baby, breathing lightly and looking very comfortable. He appeared very different compared to his days at the Delight Manor, where he had no place to sleep and had to sleep curled up in the corner of the hallway or shivering away in a storage closet or the stables.

*Do we have to hold hands while we sleep?*

She had come across Reinhart sleeping in the hallway once. Believing that there was nothing she could do about it, she pretended not to have seen anything. However, it wasn't easy to erase that image from her mind, and she found herself pitying him a little even as she desperately tried to avoid getting attached to him.

She quietly sat up in bed. It was impossible for her to get out of bed while Reinhart was still holding her hand. The room, which had only contained a single bed a week ago, was now filled with a variety of things. On one side was a large bookshelf, large enough to cover the wall, filled with books, and a desk with

pens and sheaves of paper. A spacious bathroom was added as well.

Fresh fruit was on the table every day, served along with breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, and tea. The temperature in the room was pleasant, neither hot nor cold. The air wasn't dry either. The blankets were always soft and smelled like sunlight.

Reinhart provided everything for her.

He did everything she wanted.

Even if she wanted to eat a fruit that was out of season or one that was only available overseas, from a faraway land, he would have it ready for her in less than an hour. Afterward, he would kneel by the bed and ask Valeta for pets, desiring her praise.

Valeta gave up on sending him on petty errands, believing that there was nothing that he couldn't do.

*I'm running out of time.*

She needed to get to the slaves. Count Delight had kept them in a terrible place dubbed "the Nursery." She was sure the mercenaries hired to look after the slaves would abandon them the second their paychecks stopped coming in. It was likely that they had already sold the slaves to someplace terrible, or worse, left them to starve.

Valeta could have ignored it. She could do it if she really wanted to. However, she knew that it would bother her to no end. The mercenaries only had a week or so left on their contract.

*And besides...* From what she could recall, the child that would one day become the novel's hero, the male protagonist, was in there.

In the novel, the child had been freed when Reinhart destroyed the Nursery,

following the Delight Manor Massacre. But now Reinhart was busy lolling around Valeta all day. And, as far as she knew, there were no official records of the Nursery.

As expected of Count Delight. He was a thorough man. If it wasn't for Reinhart, he never would have met such a tragic end. *I need to release them so that Reinhart will focus on the protagonists instead.*

Valeta couldn't understand why the magician was so obsessed with her. He looked like such an innocent young man when he was sleeping, but the second he opened his eyes, he was the devil, disguised as an angel. No sooner than she finished the thought, Reinhart opened his eyes, almost as though on cue. He looked around, his sleepy eyes still unfocused, before they landed on Valeta. He closed his half-lidded eyes and smiled.

"Did you sleep well, master?"

Valeta turned away without a word at the sound of his morning voice. Thanks to Reinhart's magic, she was able to sleep soundly, without tossing and turning, and without any dreams. However, she didn't want to admit that to him, fearing that he would read too much into it if she did.

"Good morning, master."

Reinhart, now wide awake, brought her hand to his face. It seemed like he wasn't going to let her go unless she greeted him back. Valeta made a sour face.

"Good morning..."

At her reluctant greeting, Reinhart grinned and slowly brought her hand to his lips. He kissed the back of her hand and climbed out of bed. With the snap of his fingers, the black curtains covering the glass walls disappeared.

"I need to go to the Nursery," Valeta said, her eyes following the magician

around the room.

Reinhart's face contorted. "Why?"

"To free the slaves. They'll either die or be sold somewhere, so I want to set them free while they're still under my care." She didn't want to live with any unnecessary guilt.

Crossing his arms, the head of the Magicians' Tower stared at her. His mouth twisted into a humorless smile. "Do you have any idea what that place is like, master?"

"It doesn't matter. It's up to me to put an end to what Father started. I can't just let them starve to death."

Reinhart's expression buckled, his usual smile absent. "Don't tell me you still consider that f\*cking pig your father."

"Well, I don't know what else to call him."

He strode up to Valeta and cupped a large hand around her cheek. He was only inches from her face when he said, "It seems like you're kind to everyone but me. You even pity those who you've never even seen before."

"I'm not pitying them. I just..." She just didn't want to have a guilty conscience. Valeta was about to blurt out those words when she stopped herself. She refused to yield. She didn't feel like she had to explain herself to the man in front of her. "That place..."

Reinhart smirked as if a sudden thought had struck him. He shrugged his shoulders and snapped his fingers. Immediately, a table filled with hot food appeared.

"Let's have breakfast first, master."

With a sweet and gentle smile, the magician pulled out a chair for Valeta. He gestured for her to sit. Valeta took the seat Reinhart offered, feeling rather uneasy.

Breakfast was quieter than usual.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 25

\* \* \*

“P-please buy me, master!” a voice called out, panting.

“N-no! Buy me! Buy me instead! I’ll do anything you want me to! I promise!”

“No! Take me instead of them! I-I... I can do better!”

“Please save me!” another one wheezed.

After an uncomfortable breakfast, Valeta and Reinhart had arrived at the Nursery, the latter having transported them there.

Valeta stiffened as soon as she stepped into the room crowded with cells, hearing sounds coming from all directions. She knew it would be bad, but it was far worse than she expected. Pleading wails echoed from every corner as she walked forward. Valeta grimaced at the horrible cries and the pungent smell of medicine that was strong enough to induce dizziness.

It smelled simultaneously like a fragrant flower and the foul odor of garbage. Valeta was beginning to see double. As she stood, dazed, trying not to fall over, Reinhart wrapped a strong arm around her waist, steadying her with his body.

“Open your eyes, master. Didn’t you want to see this?”

She blinked dully as the voice whispered in her ear. She tried to lift her head but found it impossible to do so. There was a persistent buzzing in her head. Reinhart stepped in front of her, bent down so he was eye-level with her, and looked into her eyes.

A cheap hallucinogen, he thought.

It was a common drug used to break the minds of ordinary humans and turn them into slaves. He was used to this kind of drug because of all the things Count Delight had done to him behind his daughter's back. Valeta, however, wasn't. This was why he hadn't wanted to bring her here... But at the same time, he wanted her to face the reality of what this place was. And this was the result of his perverse desires.

Reinhart laughed at himself. He hated how Valeta took pity on other people, yet he, having never been on the receiving end of that pity, longed for at least her sympathy. If only he could get Valeta, the girl who was desperate to get rid of him, to look at him.

She was gasping for air. Reinhart stroked her forehead with his thumb and, in an instant, her breathing evened out.

It was easy to knock out the guards on watch. Even without the magician there, Valeta would have had the upper hand had she summoned the elementals. Since they were no longer in the Magicians' Tower, she could summon high-level elementals without the hassle of drawing summoning circles.

"I wish that you could be useless without me," Reinhart whispered, just as he had the other night.

She would have been far easier to handle if she had just been a powerless, foolish human with a strong sense of justice. If she asked him to save someone, he would do so without hesitation.

"You're the only one who can use me like this..." His voice trailed off. He dropped the hand that was resting on Valeta's neck. *I can't kill you. If I was going to, I should have done it back then.*

The day he killed Count Delight, he'd hesitated to kill her. Now, he couldn't do it, no matter what. He wanted to be her dog—a loyal one, constantly by its master's side. However, she never gave him orders. She didn't want anything

from him. Except for that time she'd passed out, she had never said his name.

Still, she was the only person who didn't avoid his gaze. Reinhart rubbed Valeta's forehead once before kissing it. A light flashed as it passed through her forehead.

Valeta's dazed eyes began to refocus. She blinked. Long eyelashes fluttered as she closed then opened her eyes a few more times, her awareness slowly coming back to her.

"I blocked the poison that's coming into this place. You won't feel dizzy anymore, master," Reinhart said as he smiled a smile warm enough to melt anyone's heart.

Valeta, still slightly dazed, brought a hand to her forehead and nodded absentmindedly. *What just happened? What the hell was that?* Her head was spinning. Yet, Reinhart looked utterly unfazed. She looked back at him and asked, "Are you all right?"

It was a simple question, but the man lit up like a candle.

"Are you worried about me, master?"

She said nothing when she saw the magician beside himself with joy. What was with that pretty smile? Valeta snapped her mouth shut and turned away. She wanted to pat her past self on the back for not letting herself be seduced by that face.

"I want to do something about this air first."

Valeta looked around, noticing the thick smoke. The Nursery was essentially a prison with people locked behind iron bars. There were many, many cells.

*Should I summon Gene?* She thought his wind would be powerful enough to air out the place. However, she was hesitant to summon him. After all, she hadn't

properly looked after him the last few times she'd called him, nor had she given him any orders.

"Just say the word, master," Reinhart said as he raised his finger into the air.

"It's fine," she replied.

Reinhart's face hardened, and he slowly lowered his hand. "Well, then there's nothing I can do."

He looked disappointed despite the smile on his face. Valeta glanced at him before shaking her head. There wasn't much she could do with her limited powers, and she couldn't think of a better idea. She'd probably get chewed out by Gene again. Valeta sighed and started to open her mouth.

*Wait... I don't have to call a high-level elemental, do I?* Her lips snapped together again. *Think about it.* All she wanted to do was air out the place, but calling a high-level elemental for that seemed like a waste of energy. It *absolutely* wasn't because she didn't want to hear one of Gene's lectures.

"Silph."

As soon as Valeta said the name, a small tornado appeared before her. It was practically a light gust of wind compared to the windstorm that Gene came out of. Judging by the glow, Valeta expected Silph to appear.

Instead, the tornado fizzled out.

Valeta looked at Reinhart, who shook his head in response. He shook his head again when Valeta narrowed her eyes at him.

"It wasn't you?"

"Oh, master. You wound me. It's obvious that someone else is interfering with your summoning. How could you suspect me of such a thing?"

Valeta had nothing to say. He swore it wasn't him, so what more was there that she could say? She rolled her eyes and tried again, "Silph."

Another tornado appeared, but it went out again, just like the first. It didn't even glow this time. Valeta crossed her arms, bewildered.

"Silph!" she shouted. Not even a tornado appeared this time. By now, the elementalist was feeling rather miserable. She looked at Reinhart, but he was looking elsewhere, his arms crossed. He looked like he was upset over the fact that she'd suspected him of interfering.

"Gene..." Valeta said dejectedly, recalling the hawk's sharp eyes. A large, glowing tornado appeared, and a huge, transparent hawk emerged from its center.

Gene's eyes flashed and his beak opened, ready to unleash everything he wanted to say to the girl who had summoned him.

*Ugh, I shouldn't have called him.* Valeta was starting to regret everything. She wondered if she should have just taken Reinhart up on his offer, but she felt slightly conflicted at that thought.

*"You heartless shrew! You ingrate! You thankless wretch!"*

Valeta grimaced as the summoned elemental began yelling immediately upon his arrival.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 26

It was remarkable how much the bird had to say.

*It seems like Reinhart can't hear Gene's voice, thought Valeta.*

There was no reaction from him both this time and the last. Maybe that was a good thing. She had no idea if elementals could die, but she had real concerns that Gene would be obliterated for the way he was screeching. She thought it better this way.

*"I've been summoned dozens and dozens of times by you, only for you to send me back! And now you have the nerve to call another elemental? You should be ashamed of yourself! In all my life, this is the first time I've been disrespected by a human like this! You don't need my help, is that what it is?!"*

*It wasn't dozens and dozens of times... What an exaggeration. But it seems he had caught her trying to summon another elemental. It wasn't hard for her to guess what he wanted.*

"Um, I'm sorry," she said, keeping her apology short and simple. There wasn't much she could say, for her head was empty. Valeta could feel her soul leaving her body as Gene continued to bombard her with his nagging.

*"Hmph! So you're ready to sign a contract with me now, are you?"*

The wind elemental gave a quick glance to Reinhart before flapping away, putting some distance between the two of them.

Reinhart smiled when he saw the hawk retreating. "Clear out the air. It would be great if you could send all this pollution outside."

“Very well. And the price?”

“I’ll give you my blood—” she started.

“No, master.” Reinhart smiled as he covered Valeta’s mouth. “You should give me your blood instead of that fledgling. I’ll lap it up without spilling a single drop.”

“You’ll do *what* with my blood?”

“It seems like it’d be delicious.”

Valeta’s face twisted into a scowl. The magician smiled softly. She looked at Gene with troubled eyes and found that he seemed even farther away than before. *I guess he really is afraid of Reinhart...*

But she couldn’t blame him after what had happened to him on their first meeting. While Reinhart continued to smile at Gene, his smile could only be described as a thin arc while his gaze remained cold. The transparent hawk shook his head once.

“*I’ll do this once as a favor...*” Gene mumbled to the girl as he gave the man another quick glance.

“You can do that?” Valeta asked.

The hawk gave no reply. With one final furtive look toward Reinhart, the elemental flew upward, his wings flapping. A strong wind started blowing from deeper within the passageway, breezing past Valeta and Reinhart, and exiting through the doors behind them.

Reinhart caught his master, who began teetering from the force of the wind and covered her squinting eyes with his hand. He lifted his head to Gene. The hawk flinched at the magician’s cold, emotionless stare and retreated. Then, the three heard the sound of a sword being drawn outside.

"It looks like there's someone in there!"

"Seize them! We need any clues we can get on Lady Valeta's whereabouts!"

Valeta's face fell with dismay when she heard the familiar voice. At the same time, the smile was wiped from Reinhart's face.

"If you're in there, surrender! I am Miloyd Siliance, the investigating officer of the Delight Manor Massacre!"

Valeta brought her hand to her forehead when she heard the magnanimous voice. It was her fiancé, the crown prince. *How did he find this place?*

Did that mean there were records after all? Then again, Valeta had never gotten involved with Count Delight's work, so she couldn't say for sure if there were any records at all. But she would never have expected to run into Miloyd here.

*Not a single thing can go right, can it?* Valeta had every intention to resolve the issue of her engagement... except the situation was a little uncertain.

"Can I kill them, master?"

"Don't make things more complicated."

"Don't worry. I can kill them all without making things more complicated," Reinhart said with a smile. Valeta knew all too well that the magician was more than capable of doing just that. However, she hadn't even gotten the chance to free the slaves yet.

After a moment's hesitation, she decided that it was best to simply ignore the people outside for the time being. It would be faster to release the slaves while they remained outside, cautiously inspecting the scene before they chanced a hasty break-in.

The commotion grew louder. Searching through the guard's pocket, Valeta

pulled out a key. Reinhart looked at her hand and smiled bitterly. If she had simply given the command, he could have turned the cells, not to mention the building, into dust with a single snap of his fingers. However, she wasn't taking advantage of him. For some reason, that made the magician's stomach turn.

He reached out and grabbed her by the wrist with his outstretched hand.

"Give me the command, master."

"I'm not your master."

"Don't tell me you are going to try to open all these cells one by one. Or were you planning on using that stupid bird to blow up this whole place?"

He gazed down at her, his eyes unamused. He was right, of course. Valeta gritted her teeth. He was right about all of it. The people outside were seconds away from breaking in. They were running out of time.

Reinhart gave the back of her hand a light peck then stepped back as she scowled. She just couldn't get used to the otherworldly presence of this man who stood before her, beaming.

*Is there no other option?* Valeta slowly rubbed her face, a deep sigh escaping from her lips. "Open the cell doors."

"Who are you asking?"

"What?"

"You need to say the name properly," Reinhart said. "If you don't, then how am I supposed to know if you're talking to me or that birdbrain?"

His whispers had grown deep and breathy. Valeta glanced at him before she clicked her tongue. Why was he so obsessed with her calling his name?

After a moment's pause, she whispered, "Reinhart..."

A large smile spread across his face, as if he'd clearly heard her despite her low voice. Soon, his eyes started glowing bright red. He didn't even have to snap his fingers. The ruby glow of his eyes alone was more than enough.

*Bang!*

*Clang!*

*Bang!*

The sounds of iron bars and chains twisting followed one after another. It was frightening the way the scraps of iron flew everywhere. An iron lock bounced off a nearby wall, sailing past Valeta's nose. Reinhart lightly stepped in front of the girl, shielding her.

With another snap, the flying pieces of iron disintegrated into dust, leaving no traces behind. He spun in one smooth motion and smiled.

"Are you injured?" he asked as he gently stroked her hair. Valeta shook her head.

Some of the slaves seemed hesitant to leave, but there were also others who remained altogether frozen, lingering in their cells.

"Your captor is dead," Valeta said. "You're all free. Escape through the back and live your lives!"

At first, the slaves still seemed uncertain, but the slaves who had been recently captured immediately understood the weight of her words. They turned on their heels and ran from the prison. The only people who remained in the cells were children or those who had been enslaved for far too long that they were unable to fend for themselves.

*Well, I did what I could. She couldn't afford to take care of these people. She*

turned from them with indifference. There was a commotion at the prison's entrance.

"We're coming in!"

It seemed that the guards outside had decided to break their way in, spurred by the sounds coming from within the prison. Reinhart had a relaxed smile on his face as he looked toward Valeta.

"What should I do, master? Should I kill them all? Or... spare them?"

His gaze was unwavering as he spoke in a deep rumble. Valeta wanted no part in this conflict. But on the other hand, she had no desire to follow Reinhart back to the Magicians' Tower.

"I'm not going back to the tower with you."

"You don't have a say in that, master."

The gentle smile was still on his face.

Valeta clenched her fists. He was patronizing her as if she were an upset child. She resisted the urge to hit him.

"I'm yours and you're mine, master. It's always been that way from the start. In that manor, I was the only person who ever understood you and you were the only person who understood me."

Valeta couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"I'm happy to accept any of your orders, but don't try to run from me. It makes me want to lock you up like a bird in a cage."

Reinhart's thumb slowly grazed along her wrist. Valeta flinched and tried to pull back, but the magician wrapped his hand around her wrist carefully so as not to

hurt her.

She was so lovely that Reinhart could eat her up. The thought flashed through his head as he looked at the woman.

*Bang!*

At that moment, the door burst open. Or more specifically, the door that Reinhart had sealed with his magic burst open—the door should have been impossible to open without his permission. The dark prison flooded with light.

*They have a priest with them, Reinhart thought with narrowed eyes.*

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 27

Reinhart gave Valeta a quick hug and a big smile before releasing her. Then, striding over to one of the cells, he picked up one of the young children by the scruff of his neck and walked back out.

“What are you doing...?”

“Oh, this?” Reinhart placed the child, shabbily dressed and paralyzed with fear, back on the floor.

Valeta was a little surprised. She had never seen Reinhart treat someone with such care before. He was always either murdering people or, with those he didn’t kill, treating them recklessly.

“The head of the Magicians’ Tower can’t kill a magician who hasn’t awokened yet or turn a blind eye to them either, as annoying as it may be.”

“A magician...?”

The child began to quiver under Reinhart’s red glare and ran to hide behind Valeta’s legs. Reinhart scowled at the boy who was desperately trying to disappear behind her skirt. With a sigh, Valeta moved to put her arm around the boy, shielding him from the magician. Only then did Reinhart smile.

“It seems that your kindness extends to everyone but me, master.”

Valeta looked up at the sound of his annoyed voice, but he had already turned away to face the door where light was leaking in. She looked down at the trembling child. *I’m not good with children...* But it was hard to ignore the child clinging onto her skirt, shaking like a leaf. He couldn’t have been any older than seven or eight years old. Fumbling around to grab the child by his forearm,

Valeta instead took him by the hand. The moment her hand wrapped around his, the child's eyes grew wide.

Reinhart glanced at them once before walking toward the door, and with the child's hand in hers, Valeta followed behind the magician. She wanted to run away, but she also knew that there was no other way out of this place.

*It's like Reinhart said. It won't do me any good if I go to the imperial castle.* Valeta pondered for a moment. She had to let the imperial castle know. They had to know that they couldn't easily put their hands on her, even if she was alone. Her reflection was short, her conclusion simple.

"Gene, Nereid."

A tornado and a whirlpool materialized in front of Valeta's eyes. The transparent hawk, who had been watching from a distance, emerged from the tornado, while a mermaid with a human torso and a fishtail appeared from the whirlpool. She was about the size of one of Gene's wings.

*"Oh, what's this? What strange creatures. How did you summon me without a summoning circle?"*

*"This human can summon elementals without a circle just by calling our names,"* the wind elemental said.

*"Hm? Gene? What are you doing here? Were we summoned at the same time? But we're high-level elementals!"*

The mermaid began swimming in the air around Valeta, sending droplets of water splashing with every turn. Gene had a sour look on his face and moved behind the girl.

*"So what do you want, summoner?"*

"I want you to protect me."

At her words, the mermaid pointed a finger at Reinhart walking up ahead. Valeta shook her head. Of course, her biggest wish was to be protected from Reinhart, but she remembered reading a line about him being able to subjugate the king of elementals with a single flick of his hand.

"Who are you talking to, master?" The magician was right in front of Valeta, seemingly having popped out of nowhere. She shook her head. His cold eyes swept over Nereid and Gene. "If we don't get out of here soon, those annoying pests will break through my defensive shield."

### *Defensive shield?*

She knew that the door had been open for some time, but that must have been the reason why they hadn't entered yet. Valeta left the prison with an inquisitive look on her face. Her face then scrunched up, suddenly blinded by the light.

"Valeta!"

She slowly opened her eyes at the all too familiar voice. Luckily, her eyes were quick to adjust to the bright light.

"Your Highness..."

"You're safe! Do you... Do you have any idea how worried I was? You should have let me know that you were alive. No, no. I'm sure you had your reasons, my lady. It doesn't matter now that we're together again."

Miloyd gazed at her with a look of pure relief on his face. Valeta felt a twinge of guilt. It had never crossed her mind to let the crown prince know of her survival.

When she gave no response, Miloyd's deep blue eyes moved past her to fall on the man standing behind her. "You're that... Aren't you Count Delight's sla—"

"Not at all," Reinhart said, lightly cutting off Miloyd's thick voice with a single breath. It was incredibly rude and disrespectful behavior to interrupt the crown

prince mid-sentence.

“What did you say?”

“I am my master’s slave,” Reinhart said as he beamed at Valeta, who was taken aback. What kind of person would happily declare that they were someone’s slave? “I’m simply saying I’m not that idiot’s slave.”

“So the rumors are...”

“Your Highness, it would be best that we apprehend Lady Valeta at once as a suspect!”

Valeta’s expression darkened. She glanced at Reinhart, her eyes filled with despair. He was scanning the room, looking at all the soldiers with an unreadable expression on his face. His red gaze darkened.

*What should I do? He’s going to kill them.* For Valeta, it wasn’t hard for her to guess what Reinhart would do. Killing the guards was one thing, but he couldn’t do that to the crown prince. She didn’t want to get caught up in this. *Judging by their reactions, they probably think that I’m commanding Reinhart.*

She wasn’t sure if she should consider them naive or just pathetic.

“Then are you the person who massacred all those people at Delight Manor?”

“And what if I am?”

“And is it true that you’ve awakened as the head of the Magicians’ Tower?”

“I suppose,” Reinhart replied with a snort. What was the point of turning such obvious facts into a boring question-and-answer?

“You may be the head of the Magicians’ Tower, but that doesn’t give you the right to treat His Highness this way!”

"Exactly! And how could you do such a wicked thing at the Delight Manor?!"

Miloyd's soldiers began to bristle under Reinhart's mocking attitude. The magician's eyebrow twitched. It was clear his mood was turning foul. Sure enough, he turned to Valeta with his hand raised, ready to snap his fingers. And as he looked at her, he wondered what she was thinking, then lowered his hand.

"Master, why don't you head back to the tower first? I don't want to sully your eyes with this sight." He spoke with warmth as he slowly shielded Valeta's eyes. Then, he snapped his fingers. A magic circle suddenly appeared on the ground.

"Valeta!"

Miloyd rushed toward his betrothed, who was standing in the center of the magic circle with a puzzled look, but the magic circle activated before he could reach it.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 28

Gene, Nereid, Valeta, and the child clinging to her legs all disappeared at once. Reinhart stepped in front of Miloyd, blocking him. Reinhart chuckled once Valeta vanished. With a single crook of his finger, Miloyd started floating in midair.

“What the hell are you— Ack!”

“Your Highness!”

Miloyd was now fully airborne. With a snicker, Reinhart flicked his finger this way and that, the prince’s body following with each move.

The prince continued to shout, his face beginning to grow blue.

“I can’t kill him, but if I let him live, he’ll just go running to my master with his tail wagging. I can’t let that happen. What should I do? Hm?” Reinhart quizzically asked the knights, a twisted smile on his face.

Among the crown prince’s party were both priests and elementalists—the complete opposite of magicians, for they had the ability to destroy magic. However, that was only possible if the priest’s abilities were on par with the magician’s, or stronger.

“How dare you! Do you have any idea who you’re doing that to? You may have awakened as the head of the Magicians’ Tower, but you’re still under the jurisdiction of the empire!”

“I know who he is. He’s the crown prince,” Reinhart replied innocently, tilting his head. He ceased waving his finger and clenched his fist.

Miloyd, who was flailing around in the air, came to a stop. He was still, perhaps having fainted from shouting until he was blue in the face. He made no sound, not even a whimper. As soon as they saw this, the priests and elementalists rushed forward to use their powers and elementals to try and break the magician's spell.

There were five priests, two low-level elementalists, and one mid-level elementalist. The mighty party gathered, pouring all their strength into freeing the crown prince from the hands of the magician, but Miloyd didn't move an inch.

"How can you all be so stupid and pathetic? Is it even possible to be that ignorant?" Reinhart asked, as though he were genuinely curious. Then he smiled.

With a crook of a finger, the magic was dispelled. Miloyd began to plummet to the ground, the levitation spell now broken. Perhaps there was a wind elementalist within the party, for a gust of wind suddenly caught Miloyd, setting him gently on the ground. Surprisingly, he was still conscious, though it was clear that he was having a hard time moving.

"Are you all right?"

"Y-yes." Miloyd struggled to his feet, his sword shaking in his hand.

"One, two, three, four, five. Five of you, hm?" Reinhart murmured, pointing to the five people who had tried to help their crown prince. The five were among the fifty or so people gathered in the prison. "Who's the one that broke the defensive shield that I made—the one I put my heart and soul into for my master?

Those red eyes of his glistened with madness. A smile graced his face, a thin arc that was as beautiful and natural as ever. His beauty shook the hostile men,

with some even slapping their own cheeks, willing themselves free from his hold.

"We were here first. How dare you barge into this place?" Reinhart made a grand, exaggerated shrug as he slowly turned on Miloyd. Suddenly, he bent forward at the waist, laughing. Then, he slowly raised his head. His laughter ended abruptly and his cold gaze swept over the elementalists and priests. "Is that so hard to answer? Fine. Answer me this. Who touched the shield first?"

"What do you plan to do with that information?" Miloyd asked, standing in front of Reinhart.

It had taken him a moment to pull himself together. Reinhart's eyes narrowed.

"I, for one, would have respected you if you had awakened as the head of the Magicians' Tower," Reinhart snickered. He was beginning to find these little ants chattering away before him irritating. Didn't they have any idea who they were dealing with?

The crown prince's expression hardened when he heard Reinhart laugh. He took a deep breath, struggling to keep a straight face, and spoke. "I know that magicians don't like ordinary humans. But shouldn't we treat each other with respect, as decent human beings?"

"Are you implying that I'm not human?" Reinhart shrugged, a smile on his face. "Oh, right. Slaves aren't human, are they? They're livestock," he continued, his eyes wide, a sarcastic look on his face.

Miloyd's eye twitched. He was aware of how peculiar magicians were. Ordinary people hated magicians. Whether it was because of their innate magical ability or because of the potential they held upon awakening, he knew that people would never accept them. The problem was, that same repulsion applied to magicians who hadn't awakened yet, and unawakened magicians were weak. With the constant mistreatment they received from people, they were often a

sorry sight.

Reinhart had been able to take advantage of his looks, but magicians who weren't as blessed were trampled on again and again.

"If you're talking about your time as a slave—" Miloyd started.

"You stupid, dim-witted blond," Reinhart cut in. "It might do you some good to realize that just because you bear the title of crown prince, it isn't going to protect you from everything." He reached out and grabbed one of the priests in the crowd, pulling him forward by his collar until he stood right in front of the magician. Forcing the man to look into his eyes, he smiled. "If you do something so foolish as to put your hands on my magic again, this is what will happen to you, understood?"

Reinhart's pale fingers slowly brushed along the back of the man's neck, and goosebumps appeared under his touch. The priest, who had been trembling and muttering for help, nodded his head vigorously. For a moment, a look of relief passed between the priests and elementalists in the party. Reinhart reached out again, about to snap the neck of the man he had dragged out when he suddenly stopped.

*"Can I kill them, master?"*

*"Don't make things more complicated."*

As their brief exchange came to mind, Reinhart's hand wavered over the man's neck, hesitating. He couldn't believe what he was considering.

"Ahhh!"

All at once, the other priests and elementalists who weren't in Reinhart's clutches screamed. All eyes turned to the priests and elementalists.

The first thing they saw was the elementals disintegrating into dust. Their

summoners fell and rolled across the floor as the death of their elementals forcibly ended their contracts. Meanwhile, the priests were clutching their chests, gasping for breath. Reinhart hurled the priest he was holding to the ground. Quivering, he looked up at the magician. Their lives were spared, but they would no longer be able to use their powers for the rest of their lives.

"Let this be a warning." His cold gaze swept across the people on the floor before landing on Miloyd. "It's obvious what you people plan to do to that girl because of her abilities. She must look like sweet fruit, ripe for the picking, now that she has no backer."

Miloyd clenched his fists. The priest who was on the floor shivered. There were alchemists capable of producing potions that could replenish mana or holy powers. Occasionally, there were some alchemists capable of turning stone into gold. However, compared to the demand, supply was low. If an alchemist wasn't affiliated with some group, they lived as a recluse, selling their wares on the black market.

The reason for that was quite simple. Alchemists were usually affiliated with or belonged to the imperial family, some even regretting ever having entered the imperial castle after being forced to make potions day in and day out. So some of the more seasoned alchemists chose to live as hermits, only making enough to earn a living. If they were affiliated, they were kept under watch and key, forced to make potions to reach a quota.

"Never!" Miloyd shouted. "She's my fiancé! I was worried about her disappearance! I've simply come to save her, that's all!"

"You must have rocks for brains. I've never met anyone as stupid as you. You may not have those intentions, but can you say the same for your old man?"

"Watch your mouth," Miloyd replied harshly. His narrowed eyes were filled with a sense of justice and Reinhart's eyes were blank with disinterest.

"You had countless chances to catch my master's eyes, but you couldn't because you were this foolish." Reinhart's lips curved into a faint smirk that was almost becoming habitual to him.

"Nonsense! Return Valeta to me at once!"

"She's mine."

"She's not an object!"

"I'm the one who saw and discovered her first. Of course she's mine. Face it. You can't even lift a single finger against me." Reinhart scoffed. "You don't deserve her," he added with a whisper. His face glowed with beauty as he looked down at Miloyd's twisted scowl. Then, he slowly turned to look at the people on the floor.

"I swear, if you ever look at my master or dare harm her, I will give you a life worse than death."

When Reinhart finished speaking, a white magic circle appeared at his feet.

"Next time, I'll cut off all your limbs, only leaving you with your torso. Think carefully."

With these parting words, the magic circle engulfed him in a bright white light. The last visible part of Reinhart, right before he disappeared, was his glowing red eyes.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 29

\* \* \*

"Master," Reinhart called as he arrived in the sky room, a smile on his face. But met with a frosty chill, the magician froze. There was a cold breeze in the room that should have always been warm.

He slowly scanned his surroundings. There wasn't a single soul in the sky room. It was completely empty. Well, to be precise, there *was* one other person in the room. Caspelios was standing quietly, looking at the hole in the glass wall. Reinhart's gaze narrowed.

"I guess she enjoys playing hide and seek. My master has some strange hobbies," he said as he gazed up at the hole.

"What the hell were you doing?" Reinhart asked, directing his cold stare at Caspelios. With a sigh, he moved to sit on the bed that he and Valeta shared, while Caspelios silently remained standing.

The head of the Magicians' Tower was surprisingly calm. The watchman, who had been watching the quirk of Reinhart's lips, ducked his head. "My apologies. I thought that it would have been better to let her go than to force her to stay."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm glad that you're not stupid. It's a good skill knowing what to prioritize."

Reinhart slowly leaned back against the bed and crossed his legs. He had a few guesses as to where she might have gone. It had been ten years, after all—he had watched her carefully for ten years.

"Shouldn't you follow her?"

"She'll probably scold me. I'll just have to be patient. Master never liked being in suffocating places anyway."

Even when she was hanging upside down in a dark place. Although Valeta looked to be indifferent, she had always touched her neck, as if there was something she could do to stop the feeling of suffocation, and tried to loosen her clothing. She hated wearing tight clothes and covering herself with a blanket.

"I have ways of finding her..." Reinhart trailed off as he caught sight of something on the ground. It was a bloody bracelet, broken into two pieces. With the lazy snap of his fingers, the broken pieces floated toward him. The bracelet briefly hovered above Reinhart's hand before merging back together as if it had never been broken. Blood still stained the bracelet.

"She's a smart person. I'm sure she's finding another way," Reinhart said as he licked the still-wet blood off the piece of jewelry. The lingering presence of elemental energy suggested that Valeta had borrowed the power of the stupid bird to break it. Reinhart's red eyes flashed.

"Watchdog."

"Yes, my lord."

"Would someone get angry if I put a chain on their ankle?"

It wasn't made clear who he was referring to, but Caspelios knew that he was talking about Valeta. It wasn't hard to guess. The woman who had said his name like it was nothing, a name that nobody knew.

"Yes," Caspelios replied after a moment's pause. He was answering for Valeta too.

Reinhart gave a disappointed sigh at Caspelios' firm reply. "The empire has an

official alchemist association, but there's also another one run by rats, isn't there?"

It wasn't a difficult question for the watchman. Not only was he the head of the Magicians' Tower's watchdog, but he was also required to provide him with all the knowledge he required. With ease, Caspelios recalled the memories of the recent past to find the answer. "Yes. As the alchemist hunting in the empire grew worse, the alchemists went into hiding to protect themselves and created an underground association of their own."

"Just thinking of them struggling to live makes me curious enough to want to watch them."

Reinhart dropped his head and chuckled. He had grown to be quite twisted, having witnessed the suffering of others and having faced the same suffering himself. However, someone born as the head of the Magicians' Tower always had to be rational. Because of that, perhaps they were slow at recognizing emotions compared to most people.

They felt none of the same emotions that most would feel when they saw something that would typically make others happy or scared. That was why they needed stimulation. The only time they could feel emotion was if there was something especially thrilling or exciting, hence why the former heads of the Magicians' Tower were always killing, torturing, and trampling over people to feel some semblance of emotion.

They wanted to feel alive in a time when everything seemed stagnant and dull, relishing in the pleasure of feeling their own pain and the pain of those they subjugated. But there had been a time, just once, when Reinhart had felt something—a feeling that had shaken him to the core. He remembered how it felt like there was a ringing in his ears. How it felt like all time had stopped.

"Have you ever had candy before, watchdog?"

"Yes," the keeper replied after a moment.

It was a strange question, but Caspelios obediently answered. He hadn't eaten it since his body had taken this form, but he used to eat it often when he was stressed, back when he was still human. Who hadn't tried candy?

While Caspelios was lost in thought, Reinhart's lips quirked up into a smile as he gazed at the hole in the wall. "I've had it once. It was really sweet." He continued, "I tried it a few more times after that, but it was disgustingly sweet and it stuck to the inside of my mouth. It wasn't pleasant."

There was a slight pause.

"But she never gave me another piece after that. I've been waiting to see if I can ever have something that sweet again. I thought she'd give me a piece if I behaved well enough, but..."

She hadn't given him a single piece in the past ten years.

*"I don't really like this. You can have it."*

Even if it was something she didn't want. Even if it was something she tossed to him out of pity for never having tried it. He still remembered the electric feel of the orange candy that she had placed in his palm.

Caspelios kept his mouth shut, making no reply as didn't want to release the sound of scratching iron. Not a single person liked his voice. All the previous heads of the Magicians' Tower used to look at him with disgust every time he spoke.

"Watchdog."

"Yes."

"You should respond to me when I'm speaking. I don't like being ignored. I need

to know if my dog is listening to me.”

Caspelios felt a strange emotion growing within him at Reinhart’s words. Up until now, the former heads had all told him to keep his mouth shut. It became natural over time. He slowly turned to look at Reinhart and nodded.

“I understand.”

“Good.”

Pale fingers reached out—seemingly about to strangle someone—then suddenly dropped as if they had lost all strength. Reinhart kissed Valeta’s bracelet before sliding it onto his wrist.

“The way my master ran away even though she knows she can’t escape is so lovely.”

With a wave of his hand, the window that Valeta had broken restored itself. Instantly, the messy room was made clean.

Reinhart placed his hand on the window and laughed.

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# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 30

\* \* \*

“Ngh...”

“Are you all right?”

“Y-yes! I’m fine,” the child answered as he clung to Gene’s feathers with trembling fingers. After making sure the child was okay, Valeta turned away with disinterested eyes.

From on top of the hawk’s back, she threw back her head. With the help of the two elementals, breaking the glass window had been easier than she thought. According to the elementals, Valeta had a unique ability to mediate the relationship between magicians and elementals. That was why she was even able to summon the spirits within the tower.

*Is it because I’m an alchemist?* Either way, she was glad that she was capable of doing something that Reinhart couldn’t. Though, it would all be futile if he really wanted to capture her.

“I-is your wrist okay, master?”

Valeta’s face twisted oddly at the sudden question.

“I’m not your master. Just call me Valeta,” she said, saying the same thing that she’d been telling Reinhart all these years to the child. She looked down at her wrist. She had managed to cut the bracelet off thanks to the wind knife made by Gene. Blood was still spilling from her wound as the knife had pierced her quite deeply, and though she’d tied the gash with a cloth, the bleeding didn’t

stop.

"Where are we going?"

"Who knows?" Valeta replied, untroubled. She'd packed a few common items from the room before they left, things that were easily disposable such as jewelry and gold, even taking a few of the spoons that were also made of gold. *But I'm always going to be hunted down because of my alchemist abilities*, Valeta mulled. She'd probably never be comfortable anywhere she went.

Gene descended down to a sparsely populated area by a nearby village. Valeta silently looked down at the child who was still grabbing onto her leg and sighed. *Maybe I shouldn't have brought him.*

She had fully intended to leave the child behind in the sky room until she was struck with the possibility that Reinhart would blame the child for her disappearance, and who knew if that would put the child's life at risk. The child was also smart enough to cling onto her skirt, tearfully begging Valeta to take him as well.

In the end, she'd placed him on Gene's back and they flew off together without a plan in mind. Basically, she was out of ideas—and money. All she had were the jewels and gold taken from the sky room. She looked at the trinkets that she'd placed in a cloth bag before showing them to Gene.

"Are there any gems in here that have magical properties or seem out of the ordinary?" she asked, in case one of them could track her. Valeta was as cautious as they came.

Gene took a look at the gems that were in the bag before shaking his head.

She nodded while staring at his protruding beak. "Then I'll go to the jeweler's first."

She had heard of it only once long before, but if there were official alchemist associations, there was also an unofficial one as well—underground.

Once someone was confirmed to be an alchemist, they were usually whisked away to the imperial castle. In order to combat that, an underground organization of alchemists had formed. While they couldn't get a license that would identify them as an official association, there was an internal network that members could use if they had a marker. Through the association, underground alchemists could trade new recipes, buy and sell materials, or distribute potions to foreign countries.

*Does that mean there are a lot of alchemists in hiding?* She heard that alchemists could only enter the association through referral and then by passing a test. However, Valeta's world was only as big as Count Delight had let it be. She'd only met people at their respective homes or occasionally at high-society functions, where she was treated like a circus monkey.

It was difficult to meet other alchemists like herself. Once, she had met the president of the Imperial Alchemist Association, but that was it. Even then, she didn't get the chance to have a proper conversation with him.

“You can go back now, Gene. Thank you for your help.”

*“Just so you know, I’m going to ask for a big price next time.”*

Valeta nodded calmly at the wind elemental’s blunt response. Giving up a few drops of blood was no big deal. She watched Gene as he disappeared before turning toward the village.

“Are you going somewhere where that man can’t find you?” the child asked.

“There’s no such place.”

“What?”

"It's impossible to run from Reinhart. He'll find us sooner or later."

Valeta knew full well what Reinhart was capable of. The moment he awakened as a transcendent, there would be no one he wouldn't be able to find in the empire. However, since he hadn't awakened as one yet, it would probably prove to be at least a minor inconvenience. But she was sure that he had multiple ways of finding her. He was a smart man. She recalled that in the novel, Reinhart, with his magic, had been able to track someone who had escaped from him, using just a few teleportation spells.

"If you can't run, then why...?" the boy asked, blinking his eyes. Valeta wasn't a fast walker, so the child was able to keep up with her pace.

"Because I feel like I'll go crazy if I stay with him any longer."

"What? But if you run away from such a scary person, won't he kill you if he catches you?"

"He won't kill me... probably," she said.

"Why not...?"

"Because he knows that I'll hate him for it, that's why. And I'm sure he's well aware of that already," Valeta said cryptically as they entered the village. The problem was... the village wasn't just any village.

*This is the capital.*

She had asked Gene to drop them off somewhere where it wouldn't be too deserted, and he'd taken them to the capital. Not that it was necessarily a bad thing. The headquarters of the underground alchemist association were probably located in the capital. No, the problem was...

*This is Miloyd's territory.* This went without saying but the capital, along with the imperial palace, was incredibly safe. In terms of safety, Valeta couldn't ask for

more. But that also meant that people knew her here.

Especially if they were debutantes or other nobles. In fact, because of the alchemy shows her father had forced her to put on, there were probably a lot of people who could recognize her even if she didn't know them herself. She walked into a nearby store and donned the first robe that she could find, paying for it with a few coins—using all the cash she had.

She pulled the hood over her head to conceal her face. Then, she entered the first jewelry store she saw. Pulling out a rather normal-looking gem that she had taken from the sky room, she placed it on the counter.

“I’d like to sell this.”

“Sell?” The jeweler was dressed humbly, but it was clear that she made enough money to make a decent living. The old lady glanced at Valeta first before surveying the gem she’d placed on the counter with narrowed eyes. She shook her head. “I don’t have enough money to buy such a fine jewel. If you go to the center of the capital, you’ll find a jewelry store with two stories. They’ll help you there.”

“Just pay me what you can now. That’s fine.”

The old lady stroked her chin with a withered hand before shaking her head again. The gem that the girl was trying to sell was too pure and the craftsmanship first-rate. It would be difficult for her to even handle. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. If it’s been stolen and you need a fence, go underground.”

“Stolen?”

But the old woman wasn’t wrong. Stolen goods were stolen goods. But even if she wanted to sell it, she didn’t know anyone in the underworld. Valeta had expected that the items in the sky room were of high quality since they belonged to the head of the Magicians’ Tower, but she’d never expected

someone to turn away such valuable items.

"By any chance, do you know if there are any alchemists underground?"

"Why do you ask?" The old woman's voice remained neutral, but her eyes narrowed.

Valeta kept her mouth shut and looked at the lady with innocent eyes. She didn't know where to get that information, but the woman's recommendation to go underground suggested that she might know something about it.

"I'm looking for an alchemist I know."

The old lady's lips curled upward into a sneer. She chuckled then turned away from the gem altogether. Valeta held her breath as she watched the old lady sit back in her chair and pick up her knitting needles.

"If you want information, you're gonna have to have more than that. Tell that alchemist to meet you in person."

"So you do know them?"

At her question, the woman's expressionless face twisted into a glower.

"Listen, lady. I don't know where you're from, but I suggest you watch your mouth unless you want to vanish without a trace. Don't just run your mouth out of curiosity."

While the older woman wasn't exactly friendly, Valeta hadn't sensed any animosity—until now.

She was downright hostile.

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Valeta snapped her mouth shut. *I suppose they can't just let anyone know how to access the underground.*

They were probably protecting the route at their own risk. Alchemists who weren't affiliated with the imperial castle were particularly hostile toward the empire. If the imperial castle learned of an unaffiliated alchemist, they would threaten to take their friends and family hostage and then force them to officially register themselves. Once they had registered with the official alchemist association, they belonged to the empire and could no longer refuse the empire's orders. It was understandable why alchemists were so skittish.

After a moment's reflection, Valeta nodded her head. She didn't feel like arguing with the old woman, but it didn't feel right to just run away either. "It seems that I was being rude. Please forgive me."

The old woman's eyes narrowed at Valeta's docile reply.

"It's just that I don't have any money at all. I'd appreciate it if you can give me what you can. You can resell this underground if you want," she said, pushing the gem toward the woman.

The old woman sighed. She took out a heavy, wooden strongbox from a cupboard and held it out to Valeta. "This is all I can give you right now. That gem can go for four times as much, you know. And you're fine with that?"

*I'll never have to worry about money ever again,* the elementalist thought as she mulled over the woman's words. She could see that there were a lot of coins in the strongbox.

Valeta didn't know much about money, but she could tell that the sparkling gold

ones were worth more than a penny or two. She hadn't been expecting much to begin with and was satisfied. The head of the Magicians' Tower wasn't going to become destitute over a few missing jewels.

"Yes," Valeta replied with brevity as she reached out and placed the coins and bills that were tucked in an envelope into her cloth bag.

She gave a nod, and the old lady then asked, "Why are you looking for the alchemist association?"

"I need to get a marker and some information. I want to open a shop."

"A shop?"

"Yes. People are desperate for alchemist-made potions because of the imperial castle's monopoly over them. That's why I want to open a shop and sell them."

They didn't have to be top-tier potions capable of regenerating lost limbs. For Valeta, creating potions that could heal minor cuts and bruises was a breeze. She had even considered the option of making a top-tier potion and simply diluting it.

If Valeta didn't overexert herself, she figured she could produce about ten top-tier potions a day. Of course, it was difficult for most alchemists to make even a single potion of this caliber, making her more valuable than even she realized. She had tested it before. If a top-tier potion was diluted to a ratio of 1:50, it could still cure broken legs or non-threatening injuries, such as stab wounds.

If the ratio was lower, the recovery rate would be even faster. A ratio of 1:25 could heal most serious injuries. Top-tier potions were capable of curing almost any injury as long as the recipient wasn't dead.

*I've never tried a 1:100 ratio before, though. A potion of that ratio could probably quickly heal minor ailments or bruises. She was determined—if potions weren't*

common, she'd just have to make them common. And if she became famous for them—a public figure that was a permanent fixture among the civilians—the imperial castle wouldn't be able to arrest her so easily. The people wouldn't stand for the imperial palace suppressing an alchemist who sold them affordable potions.

Valeta believed in the power of the people. One or two of them might not be a threat, but hundreds and thousands? That was power. A power that the imperial castle couldn't take lightly. That was why the emperor respected the public's opinion. Even the nobles couldn't turn their backs on the people, even if they were no better than scum. They knew how powerful the masses could be when united. And the fact that the vast majority of people who died from infected wounds were commoners... They would gladly shield Valeta if it meant ensuring their own safety and access to her potions.

*It's a little cowardly, though...* But if there wasn't a single person out there who would help her take on the imperial castle, then Valeta would do whatever it took to leverage the power she had.

"Not that it'd matter to him, but..." She left the thought unfinished.

*Reinhart.* Even if all the people in the world offered to become her shield, he'd be able to cut through them all without even breaking a sweat. She could imagine his face lighting up as he walked over the bodies that had put their lives on the line to protect her.

The mental image was so vivid a bitter laugh escaped her. She still couldn't tell if his seemingly blind love was genuine or not. Valeta, still lost in thought, reached out to put her hand on the brass door knob when the old lady called out.

"You're going to sell potions made by an alchemist?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Well," Valeta started. "That's what I'd like to discuss." She bit her lip. She didn't think the old lady was trying to sound her out, but she'd basically just exposed herself as an alchemist. Valeta grabbed the hood of her robe and pulled it down with more force than intended.

"Well, then. Thank you," she said before turning to the boy and waving to him.  
"Let's go."

"Okay," he replied as he rejoined her side.

Out in the sun, Valeta realized the child was bigger than he looked. She had thought him seven or eight years old, but he must have been nine or ten instead. Then again, from his time at the Nursery, he wasn't exactly in good shape. His bones protruded painfully from his malnourished body.

"Go to the second largest tavern in the capital and show the bartender the potion," the woman called out from behind them.

Valeta glanced back at her and nodded. "Thank you for your kindness."

She turned and left the jeweler without another look back.

\* \* \*

Valeta started looking for the tavern as soon as she left the jeweler.

"Where the hell is the second-largest tavern in the capital?" Valeta muttered from under the hood drawn low over her face.

The capital was bigger than she thought, and she was realizing now just how little she had paid attention to her surroundings during her previous trips downtown. In her eyes, all the inns and taverns looked the same. She looked around once more with indifferent eyes before sighing again. Feeling a light tug

at the hem of her robe, Valeta lowered her gaze to the source. Her eyes fell on the boy who lifted a finger and pointed. She looked to see where he was pointing.

"Miss Valeta, if you take a left at that intersection, you'll see the second-largest tavern. I asked someone."

"Thanks," she replied.

She knew she was bad at dealing with people. Ever since she'd fallen into this world and started building wall after wall, she found that her emotions were dulled. She felt like a cutlass, rusted and weathered by the sea breeze.

Neither happy nor sad, all Valeta felt was a sense of obligation. Was it a good thing or a bad thing that her emotions were dampened in this world? She couldn't figure it out.

"I'm glad I could help!" the child chirped with a bright look on his face. Valeta nodded slightly, pulled down her hood again, and then walked in the direction the child had pointed in.

Sure enough, as soon as she turned at the intersection, a fairly large building appeared before them. Though, there was nothing about it that indicated it as the "second-largest" tavern. *I'll have to lay low for a while.* If her memories served her right, Reinhart was still unstable. He hadn't awakened as a transcendent yet, which meant that he wouldn't be able to find her so quickly. He certainly could if he tried, but he wasn't going to make a move right away.

*If he laid his hands on the prince, the imperial family would start lodging complaints against the Magicians' Tower in earnest. He'll be busy dealing with that for the time being.* Reinhart might have been haughty and egotistic, but he wouldn't be able to resort to mass murder in response to the imperial family's complaints.

The sign that hung from a long chain above the building read "The Honey &

Wool Inn." She pushed open the door of the old but clean and well-maintained inn and entered.

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\* \* \*

*Ding.*

The door chime jingled as Valeta opened the door. Inside, she found the inn to be both larger and cleaner than expected. It was packed with people too. Directly across the door was a counter with several people milling around it. One side of the inn was composed of a dining room, bustling with occupants.

Opposite the dining room was a set of stairs, which probably led to the rooms where travelers could lodge for the night. Valeta wordlessly walked to the counter.

"Welcome to The Honey & Wool Inn," the clerk sitting behind the counter said. "This counter is if you're looking to lodge. If you're here to eat, feel free to take a seat over there, and one of our waiters will help you."

"I'd like to stay the night, please."

"How many people?"

"One adult... and a child," Valeta said as she glanced down at the boy who barely came up to her waist.

The clerk peeked over the counter to see who she was looking at before giving them her best business smile. She slid a sheet of paper to Valeta. "Here are the terms and conditions for your stay. Please read through carefully before signing at the bottom. What would you like to do for meals?"

"We'll eat here, but please bring the meals up to our room. Also, I heard there

was a bar here," Valeta said as she read the agreement.

"The bar is in the dining room," came the prompt reply. The well-trained employee smiled, appearing unfazed by Valeta's sudden question. Hearing the answer she wanted, Valeta scrawled her signature on the agreement and nodded.

"Your room is 314, on the third floor."

Nodding, Valeta immediately turned to the stairs, the boy quickly trailing behind after her. She waited until she could sense the boy behind her before she started climbing.

Although the inn was very old, the faint but ubiquitous scent of wood that lingered in the hallway was enough to ease Valeta's fatigue. Her eyes were dry and heavy, but the tension that she had been holding onto the whole day seemed to melt away the instant she stepped foot in the corridor. Yet, the third floor was so far away.

*If I knew that it would be this far, I would've asked for a room on the second floor.* She brought a hand to her forehead and sighed in regret. As she forced her legs up the stairs, step by step, she felt as though she were a poorly-oiled, rusty machine. And was that the sound of her joints creaking?

"Are you okay, Miss Valeta?"

"Yeah," she replied noncommittally, and they entered room 314.

The scrap of fabric that had been hastily tied around her wrist was soaked with blood. It looked as if it had been dyed red. Valeta knew the sensible thing to do was to remove the makeshift bandage and run her wound under clean water, but she didn't feel like it. The room came with two beds, and Valeta collapsed into one of them.

*I did it.*

She'd run away from Reinhart. Of course it wouldn't last. She knew that much, knew that this brief reprieve would last only as long as Reinhart's patience, but it meant a lot to Valeta. She'd gotten away from the man whom she had spent her entire life believing would one day choke her to death.

Unable to fight off the sudden bout of drowsiness, Valeta closed her eyes. Before she knew it, darkness had consumed her.

\* \* \*

Reinhart and Valeta had a strange relationship: he had an unusual obsession with her, and she'd consistently ignored him. One day, Valeta had stopped talking entirely to him, but the more she ignored Reinhart, the more obsessed he became with her. Even as they gradually came to stop interacting with one another, the growing madness in his eyes was proof of this. It was possible that Valeta had just brought this disaster upon herself.

"Still, did you have to go and do such a crazy thing?"

Though she meant to close her eyes for only a bit, it was morning when Valeta opened them again. The boy was fast asleep on the other bed. On the desk was the dinner he must have brought up for her, no doubt completely cold by now.

Valeta washed up, donned her robe, and went down to the dining room, leaving the boy to continue sleeping on the bed. There was a noticeboard in the dining room, and Valeta found two posters with her face on them posted up.

*Are they out of their minds?* Valeta knew that Reinhart was crazy, but she didn't think he was *this* crazy. That being said, the imperial family wasn't in their right mind either.

Of the two posters on the noticeboard, one read MISSING while the other read

WANTED. She had no idea when these portraits were drawn, but Valeta didn't like either of them. And the fact that she was a wanted person at all... She tugged her hood down, making sure it was firmly in place, instinctively realizing that she had to hide her face. She could only pray that the clerk from yesterday didn't remember what she looked like.

One poster was clearly from the Magicians' Tower and the other from the imperial family, and although they were separate parties, their mutual desperation to catch Valeta was obvious.

*I can avoid the imperial family.* Valeta was confident in her ability to stay hidden and in her ability to evade the imperial family—unless they framed her as a suspect in the Delight Manor Massacre, dispatched a large army to catch her, and placed a large bounty on her head. She might not be able to live in a village anymore, but she had her elementals and could live out her days as an alchemist, making and selling potions, as long as she found her way underground.

If not, she could mobilize the people and fight back against the imperial family. In fact, she could think of a few ways to resist the imperial family. All one had to do was use their brain a little to win in a fight against others.

The real problem was Reinhart. The head of the Magicians' Tower came with a whole host of obstacles. The only reason Valeta could hide right now was because he seemed to have no interest in coming after her.

Who knew? It was possible that he already knew where she was. She could only guess what he was thinking right now. Valeta knew Reinhart well, and Reinhart knew Valeta better than anyone. If someone had asked them to pick a person that they thought knew them best, they would've picked each other without hesitation. Was it ironic that she was trying to get away from the person who knew her best?

*Is that the bar?* Valeta turned away from the noticeboard and headed toward the dining room. She could worry about the wanted posters later. She figured that in the world of the underground, most people would have a wanted poster or two to their names.

*I don't have much information about the alchemist association...* It hadn't been mentioned in the novel, and it wasn't like she could have gathered information about it under her father's watch. A bartender wearing a crisp white shirt and a black vest stood at the bar wiping glasses one by one with a handkerchief. Valeta kept her eyes on the sparkling glasses as she slid onto a stool.

"Good morning," she said.

"Yes, good morning. Though I must say, it's a little too early to be drinking..."

"I have something to show you," Valeta replied as she gave a furtive glance around the room. The dining room was busy with folk breaking their fast. Nobody was looking at them.

She pulled out a potion she had prepared from deep inside her robes and slid it toward the bartender. His eyes widened slightly before narrowing into a frown. Then, picking up the potion as if it were the most natural thing to do, he set it on a table behind the bar. With his head bowed, he slowly examined the red potion before he opened the bottle and poured the contents into a wine glass.

Valeta couldn't hide her surprise. The bartender was handling the potion as if he were a skilled sommelier. Any alchemist could check the purity of a refined potion by holding it up against the light. However, he was examining the potion so casually in front of all these people, as if he were inspecting a new wine. It was clear that this wasn't the first time he had done this.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 33

The bartender held the potion up to the light, swirling it around in the glass as if examining fine wine. Then, he poured it back into the bottle and closed the lid. Valeta was surprised. He had managed to pour the potion back through the small opening without spilling a single drop.

"This is a high-quality potion," the bartender said. "It's been a long time since I've seen such a fine one."

"Thank you for your evaluation. Would this be enough to garner an introduction to the alchemists underground?"

"I haven't heard anything about a newcomer, but..." The bartender hesitated. "How will you be able to prove that you made the potion, miss?" he asked in a soft, polite voice.

Valeta couldn't sense any hostility in his smile, but his eyes were pointed sharper than a finely honed blade. The middle-aged bartender, who had black hair that was beginning to go gray around the temples, made no unnecessary movements. Each action of his was as deliberate as those of a well-trained butler.

"It's a little difficult to show you here, but I could if you prepare a simple space for me. I just don't have a lot of time right now, so I'll need to hear a definite answer that you can give me the time and place where I can prove myself."

"Everyone who tries to hide in the shadows has their own story. What's yours?"

"I shouldn't have to answer a man who wears a mask even in the shadows," Valeta replied impassively. The man narrowed his eyes ever so slightly as if he'd caught the barb of her voice.

She turned her head, pretending not to notice. She found it rather unpleasant that he was expecting her to give him information when he was offering none in return. She couldn't trust anybody right now.

Though she could say nothing about the welcome she would or would not receive from the underground, Valeta still believed that it had to be better than the imperial palace, but in the end, they were both no different than a wild jungle, uncharted and dangerous. She thought it wise to disclose as little information as possible when traversing through an invisible jungle with unmarked bogs and paths, especially when there was a bounty on her head as both a wanted *and* missing person.

Her head was worth a lot of money now, and somewhere out there, someone was after her neck. The only person she could trust was herself. There was no one else she could trust, not even her family. Her abilities were both her weapon and what made her delicious prey.

"The bar shift rotates at midnight. If it's all right with you, would you like to have a drink with me then?" the man asked.

"Okay."

Valeta nodded in response. She took the potion back from the bartender's outstretched hand, gave him a wave, and turned away. Then after placing an order of food with a waiter that was to be sent up to her room, she dropped by the counter to extend her stay by a day.

After that, having completed all the business that was required of her that day, Valeta returned to her room. But the moment she opened the door, she was taken aback. Her gaze fell on the boy who was tearfully packing his things. His eyes widened as they made eye contact.

"Miss Valeta..." he stuttered.

"What are you doing?" Valeta asked, frowning. She didn't have much interest in policing the child's behavior, but she was frequently surprised by the things he did, especially since neither Valeta nor Reinhart had had a normal childhood.

"Oh... I-I thought you left me behind..." The child put his things on top of the dining table and lowered his head as if embarrassed.

She gave the boy a puzzled look. He was wringing his hands with his head bowed. "If I ever have to abandon you, I'll let you know. We'll figure out what to do with you then. If I leave without telling you anything, that just means I stepped out for a bit."

"Okay..."

The child jumped as if he had been hit with the harsh reality of Valeta's cold words and nodded his head. Then he burst out into laughter, relieved. Valeta's heart suddenly felt heavy as she listened to the child's innocent laughter. She turned away. "I ordered some food from the dining room. Let's eat when it gets here."

"Yes!"

A short sigh escaped from Valeta's lips as she took a seat by the window. *After our meal, I should...* She needed to gather the supplies necessary for her alchemy. It was best to keep a store of potions in the case of an emergency. She couldn't use the materials and books Count Delight had gotten for her.

"Wandering outside doesn't seem like the best idea, though." Propping her chin on her hand, Valeta gazed out of the window, her eyes falling on the soldiers and knights in silver armor. It didn't seem like they were looking for her. They probably thought that she was with Reinhart.

*The crown prince is too honest.* He was inferior to Reinhart in many ways; truthfully they were complete opposites of each other. Reinhart was someone

who did anything he wanted, and the crown prince was someone who did whatever he thought was just—he could never become her shield.

“Come to think of it, I wonder if the hero got away...”

Everything had happened so quickly since their time in the Nursery that it had never crossed Valeta’s mind. According to the novel, Reinhart should have encountered the hero of the story during his destruction of the Nursery and then developed an interest in him. The male lead was meant to be the sole survivor of the destruction, spared only by Reinhart’s mercy.

*But I changed that a little, didn’t I?* She hadn’t even gotten a chance to see the face of the main character. Would Reinhart lose interest in Valeta if she found this character and brought him to Reinhart? However, she didn’t even know his name, let alone his age and appearance. The only descriptions the novel provided were that the male protagonist was “a squalid, clear-eyed boy” and “young.”

*It wasn’t very specific at all.* Or at least, she couldn’t remember anything else. If she wanted to distract Reinhart, she’d have to find the hero as soon as possible. The problem was that Valeta had spent so long trying to remember the scenes with Reinhart, she’d forgotten what the plot of the original story was.

*Knock, knock.*

Valeta had her head in her hands when she heard the knock at the door. She looked up. The child had already opened the door and was bringing in the food. Watching warily, Valeta stood and rearranged the hood around her face before taking the plate from the child.

“Oh! Thank you.”

The boy nodded before going over to pick up the other plate. Valeta followed suit, taking the rest of the plates, and closed the door. She watched as the child

arranged the food on the table for a moment before taking a seat across from him.

"Thank you for the food."

Valeta didn't respond. Instead, she knit her brows. She knew that she was bad at dealing with people, but she didn't realize how uncomfortable she was at having someone express their gratitude toward her.

Despite Valeta's silence, the child simply smiled before grabbing a fork and diving into his food with gusto. Valeta took in the child's disheveled, light gray hair along with his deep blue eyes. He had strong features and a high nose bridge. Although he couldn't be compared to Reinhart, the woman thought that he might grow up to be a handsome young man one day. He wasn't as plump as other kids his age, she thought, and his skin was pale after the grime had been washed away from it, his cheeks slightly reddened. That's how Valeta knew that the child was content.

*Gulp.*

Perhaps feeling Valeta's gaze upon him, the child swallowed his food and peeked up at her.

"Do you have a name?" Valeta asked.

"Ah, yes!" the child exclaimed. "It's Terion."

"Terion..." Valeta murmured. "That's a good name."

"Yup!" the child replied cheerfully. The name, though common, also sounded strangely familiar to her ears. Valeta looked into the child's sparkling eyes before shrugging her shoulders. She lowered her gaze and started eating.

"Miss Valeta... Is that man your friend?" Terion asked.

"No."

"Then is he your enemy?"

Valeta paused for a moment, considering the child's question. It would have been so much nicer if he was her enemy. She wouldn't have anything to worry about if she could truly hate or resent him.

"No," she replied simply.

"Then...?"

Valeta shrugged. Their relationship couldn't be defined. Reinhart would have probably said the same. However, one thing was certain: he could not harm her. Even if he broke her limbs or cut them off, only leaving her torso, Reinhart wouldn't be able to bear the sight of her heart stopping. He couldn't even stand it when she refused to look in his direction.

"It's just a relationship where we can look at each other and know what the other person is thinking and doing."

The child tilted his head as if he were having trouble understanding Valeta's words. "How is that different from a friend?"

She shook her head. "We'll never be friends for as long as we live."

People could only be friends if they cared for each other and took on each other's interests. However, Valeta couldn't bear to take on Reinhart's cruelty, and Reinhart could never dare to even think of matching Valeta's sense of justice. They were standing on different planes of reality. Even their abilities were fundamentally different. Alchemy had the power to save people, while magic held the power to destroy.

In this way, Valeta and Reinhart had a complicated and strange relationship. It was undefinable, which was why Valeta had long given up on doing so, and why

Reinhart had decided to keep her by his side heedlessly and without question. Their lives were parallel circles, forever running side by side.

“Finish your meal if you’re done with your questions.”

“Ah, I’m sorry.” Terion lowered his head and focused on his food again.

Valeta slowly dropped her gaze. She picked at her food for a bit before lowering her fork. “I’m going to get some sleep again. If someone comes, don’t open the door. Wake me up first, understand?”

“Okay! I hope you sleep well.”

“If you get bored, you can read those books over there.”

“All right!”

Valeta took off her robe and went to lie on the bed again. Thankfully, she managed to fall asleep despite the sun streaming in.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 34

It was late in the evening when Valeta woke again, and the first thing that caught her attention was her injured hand. She slowly rose from her bed to take a closer look at the wound. Thankfully, the wound wasn't very big or infected. Though it was rather deep, Valeta, who had been constantly running on adrenaline, did not find it very painful.

*There's still lots of time before midnight.* She sighed. It was hard staying cooped up in the room. The child was sleeping on the bed with a book in his hands, as if he'd tired himself out by playing. As she moved closer to the boy, she caught a glimpse of the book he was reading: *The Origin of God and His Doctrine*.

Valeta held back a smirk at the plain, utilitarian title. Upon closer inspection, the bookshelf was filled with books on theology. Valeta scratched the back of her head, embarrassed. She couldn't say she was an expert on education, but even she could tell that this book was too difficult for a child to read. Yet the boy had clearly made an effort to read the book, seeing as how several of the pages had been turned.

She placed the book on the table and began to slowly read it, her chin propped on her hand. It may not have been ideal for a child, but Valeta thought it would be a good way to pass the time. She dove into the book.

"This... is boring."

Less than ten minutes into the book, she closed it with an apathetic look on her face. She felt like she was reading the same words over and over again. *The Origin of God and His Doctrine*... It was a bad choice for someone who didn't even believe in God.

*What should I do until midnight?* There was nothing to do. It was already evening and Valeta didn't feel particularly inclined to visit the market. She sighed as she considered her options. Eventually, she opened the book again.

Terion woke up twenty minutes before midnight. Perhaps he had sensed that Valeta was staring at him, but the moment they made eye contact, Terion flinched and turned away.

"Why are you looking away?" Valeta asked.

"Doesn't... it feel bad? My eyes are disgusting, right?"

"Is that so?"

Valeta propped her hand on her chin and stared at the child. Reinhart had said he was a magician, but Valeta couldn't sense anything about Terion that was supposed to disgust her. *Am I immune to him because of that bastard?* Ordinary humans felt uncomfortable around magicians, but Valeta felt nothing no matter how much she looked at the boy. *Maybe I'm the weird one.*

When she thought about it, she was uncomfortable around Reinhart because she knew what he was going to do in the future, but she had never felt that it was particularly unpleasant to look into his eyes. But if that was how other people felt about the unawakened boy, then there was nothing he could do but keep his head down until he was strong enough to defend himself.

"It is what it is," Valeta stated. Terion remained silent.

Valeta didn't bother to comfort the child or tell him otherwise. The boy had to come to terms with reality. It was the only way he could protect himself. The memories of having to lower his head to others would give him the insight needed to navigate the world, which would then become the wisdom that would guide him onto the right path as an adult.

Reinhart had gone through it—Valeta as well. They had both knelt before those they were powerless to, bowing their heads in subservience. That was how they had survived to be where they were today, and why Valeta didn't think it was necessarily a bad thing to take a few losses.

Just because he had to be servile now didn't mean he was going to have a bleak and dark future ahead of him.

"Ah, it's about time. I have an appointment. Would you like to stay here? I might be gone until morning."

Terion's eyes grew wide, and he shook his head hurriedly. His sky-blue eyes filled with tears, but he didn't cry.

Valeta nodded as she watched him desperately shake his head.

"Then get ready. We're going to leave soon."

"Okay!"

Terion bounced up from his bed and scurried into the bathroom. Valeta rested her chin on her hand as she watched the child run around the small room. *I hope Reinhart meets the hero soon.*

Reinhart was probably only interested in her because he found her unique. It was possible that he'd just grown attached to her, too, after all they'd been through together. However, the hero of the story was someone who was just as unique—unique enough to capture the interest of the head of the Magicians' Tower.

As far as Valeta could remember, there was a scene in the novel where the male lead made eye contact with Reinhart and confronted him, voicing his anger. At the very least, it would divert some of the magician's interest in her.

Valeta slowly blinked as the scene flashed across her mind.

*—Reinhart's eyes were filled with boredom as he killed the prisoners in the Nursery one by one. With his spears of ice, each of the “dolls” sitting in their cells was eliminated.*

*The prisoners didn't even try to run when Reinhart approached them. They had lost their senses because of that wicked drug and were incapable of recognizing that death was upon them, although there were a few screams from those who had entered the Nursery not that long ago.*

*However, even if they had been able to escape, it would've been impossible for them to live normal lives as the poison that spread through the prison like a thick fog was meant to ruin them, completely and irreversibly. In other words, Reinhart's slaughter could have been seen as a mercy.*

**“Stop!”**

*Reinhart's eyes widened when he heard the shout of a young boy. By now, he had already killed half the people in the Nursery, but he stopped what he was doing and approached the voice. His red eyes gleamed dangerously with interest.*

**“Oh, dear.”**

**His eyes fell on the boy.**

**“I can't kill this,” he muttered, as if the child couldn't hear.**

*The beautiful man, completely unmarred by the drugs swirling around in the darkness, snapped his fingers once. The smell of blood spilled from every direction. He had killed the remaining occupants of the Nursery. All except for the child in front of him. The blood of a countless number of people pooled together, creating a sea of blood.*

*Like an angel descended from the heavens, Reinhart smiled down at the child who was now covered in the blood of the people he had been imprisoned with.*

*“This could be fun.”*

*“You...” the child started, but Reinhart cut in.*

*“You need to be strong if you want to take revenge. You’re capable of it.”*

*Reinhart gently poked the child on his cheek before turning around and disappearing in the glow of a magic circle. The only thing left in the Nursery was the boy standing in a sea of blood, his blue eyes burning with rage.*

Valeta frowned as she recalled the scene of Reinhart’s first encounter with the hero. Occasionally, scenes from the novel flashed across her mind like this. Yet it was hard to recall anything when she actively tried. *But why did Reinhart say he couldn’t kill the boy?*

The moment the scene had played out in her mind, she knew... The Reinhart of her fuzzy memories hadn’t spared the boy because of his interest in him. He had said “*I can’t kill this*” and that was exactly what he meant. Reinhart never lied. If he said that he couldn’t kill him, it meant that he really couldn’t.

*But why?* Valeta knitted her brows.

“I’m ready, Miss Valeta,” Terion said as he approached the woman.

“Oh, right.”

She had been concentrating deeply, but Terion broke her train of thought. The bright smile on his face made it hard for her to believe that this was the same child who had been in the Nursery not too long ago. *What a resilient child.*

“Let’s go.”

Valeta put on her robes, and they went downstairs. The bar was full of drunk people at midnight. Scared by the smell of alcohol, the boy grabbed the hem of Valeta's robe and stuck closely to her.

"Hey, this ain't no place for kids!" a stranger called out, laughing boisterously.

"You here to eat with your mom, kiddo?" a drunkard slurred as he staggered toward Valeta. Terion's eyes trembled, paralyzed with fear. Then, he clenched his fists. He glanced at Valeta to see what she was thinking.

"And you, lady. Don't you know it's dangerous to be wandering around this late at night?"

The drunk man was barely capable of holding himself together. His breath reeked of alcohol. Valeta grimaced at the stench. It wasn't even that she thought the man particularly offensive—it was merely a physiological reaction.

Valeta's uninterested gaze swept past the man and fell to the bar behind him. *What? He's not there.*

The bar was empty. If the person who had told her to come to the bar at midnight wasn't there, who was she supposed to talk to? Valeta looked around the room, ignoring the drunk man in front of her. She noticed a familiar figure sitting off to one side. Valeta's expression relaxed a little, relieved.

"Over there."

"What? Oh!"

Taking the boy by the hand, Valeta sidestepped around the man, completely ignoring his existence. The other patrons burst into laughter as the man stiffened.

"Hahaha! What the hell was that?!"

“Pathetic bastard!”

“Shut up!” the man yelled.

“Hey, you!”

Valeta strode toward the bartender without giving a second glance to the ruckus behind her. The bartender, expecting her arrival, looked utterly unsurprised. But his eyes wandered over her shoulder and, with evident disapproval, focused in on the man behind her.

“Listen, you f\*cking b\*tch! Did you just ignore me?”

The man grabbed Valeta’s shoulder and turned her around. Valeta lifted her head the moment the man’s rough hand touched her shoulder. She looked around the room before glancing at the gruff, drunk man and then looked down at Terion.

“Me?” Valeta asked, pointing a finger at herself.

Terion nodded quickly.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 35

"Oh..." Valeta said as she rolled her eyes. She rubbed her neck and gave the man a wary look. "What do you want?"

"What? You should apologize for ignoring people!"

"Oh, okay. I'm sorry," she replied, obediently and without hesitation. Then, brushing the man's hand off her shoulder, she turned back around.

The bartender sat there with his head lowered, silent. His shoulders were shaking and, for a moment, Valeta wondered if he was unwell.

*This isn't going to stop us, is it?* She didn't want to reschedule.

"You... You ugly b\*tch!" the man cried as he raised his hand.

Seeing the man's hand quickly coming down in an arc, she stepped to the side. The man's hand cut through the air.

"What?!"

"Take it easy on the drinks," Valeta scoffed. She clicked her tongue. The man's jaw dropped wide open.

Even the bystanders fell silent. *Why are people so quick to raise a hand when they're drunk?* Valeta was used to people raising a hand against her. Thanks to Count Delight, Valeta had become quite good at dodging. Of course, she had never avoided her father's strikes so openly as she did the drunk's.

"Come on."

"Y-yes!"

Valeta took Terion and approached the bartender who was sitting there with a slightly startled look on his face.

"Shouldn't the inn be in charge of dealing with drunk customers?" she asked.

"My apologies, miss. We'll take care of it."

The bartender gave a meaningful glance to two employees who were standing off to the side. They rushed forward and dragged away the angry drunk.

Valeta brushed off her shoulder.

"This way, please."

"All right."

Valeta followed the bartender out through the back door, and the inn grew quiet after their departure, not just because of what had happened, but more so because of what it meant to have one of their own dragged out of the inn.

*That's the end of him.*

Everyone had the same thought. This bar was a place where not only a variety of information circulated but where various connections could be forged. Not being allowed back in the bar meant that the man was essentially barred from being a mercenary, a life where information was everything. Everyone who knew that silently drank.

"This way," the bartender said as he guided them through an alley.

At some point, he had put on a robe and was leading Valeta and Terion through the alleyways of a crowded market. As they turned into the less-populated streets, Valeta noticed that the people there were dressed rather shabbily. And once they passed through that area, the number of people started decreasing more and more. Valeta glanced at the boy, who was doing his best to keep up, before turning back toward the bartender.

At last, the man stopped in front of a pub at the end of a twisting road that would have been impossible to find for even those who had been actively searching for it.

"We're here."

Valeta paused for a moment and looked at the bartender. She'd followed him of her own volition, but now she wasn't sure if that was the wisest thing to do. Her violet eyes slowly took in the exterior of the pub. There was a sign to one side that was barely hanging on. It was so worn that it was impossible to tell what it might've once said. She could even see rats scurrying around in the more dilapidated parts of the pub.

*This isn't a trap, right?* Still, Valeta wasn't too worried. She had Gene and Nereid, after all.

"Come to think of it, we haven't introduced ourselves. My apologies. My name is Roman. And yours, miss?" the bartender asked when he noticed Valeta hesitating by the doorway. After giving the man who had just introduced himself the briefest glance, the elementalist silently stepped foot into the pub, her face expressionless.

Terion, who was still hanging onto Valeta's skirt as if it were a lifeline, glanced here and there before hurrying after her on his thin little legs. The door closed with an eerie creak as soon as Valeta and Terion entered the building, suggesting that the door hadn't been oiled properly in a long time. The old wooden floors also groaned with every step, and the smell of burning oil from the lamplights, which strained to illuminate the interior of the pub, was giving her a headache.

Valeta sighed deeply. Like Reinhart, she didn't like loud noises or strong smells. She looked around the pub slowly. They weren't the only ones there. A few people, nursing their drinks, looked their way. The lamplights that were

scattered throughout the bar flickered with the breeze that accompanied the three inside.

"Won't you introduce yourself?

"I'm Valeta."

"Miss Valeta, you seem like you're used to this kind of thing. I noticed that back at the inn."

*If I said it was my first time, would it seem like I'm being spiteful?* Valeta had never been good at this kind of thing. She silently watched Roman and shrugged her shoulders.

"I didn't come here to introduce myself," she said.

"Of course. You can show me what you can do here."

"Here...?"

She knitted her brows as she glanced at the people in the pub, slowly assessing the room, the flames from the lamplights reflecting in her violet eyes. There were two possible situations: either this was a spot for human trafficking, or everyone here was an alchemist.

"Miss Valeta..." Terion's voice wavered as he clung to the hem of her skirt.

Valeta reached down to stroke the child's head. He immediately stopped trembling, and she sighed.

"What kind of potion should I make?"

"Anything's fine. Perhaps one that you're most confident in making."

"I'll go with the most basic one, then." She was used to people watching her and knew that she need not let her pride get in the way. She was used to being

treated as a circus monkey. This was nothing for her.

Roman procured a pen, paper, and an empty vial and handed them to her. He pointed to a chair. "Feel free to sit at this table. Take your time."

Valeta remained standing and flipped to a clean page in the notebook. Then, using the pen, she drew the symbol that had been ingrained into her memories, the one that was required for this formula.

Despite the fact that she hadn't taken a seat, the lines of her symbol were clean and straight. She drew without hesitation. The eyes of the people who were watching her widened with surprise. After she finished drawing the formula, she reached into her side bag and, from a vial, pulled out a few herbs that had been left over from making the potion that she had shown to Roman.

*I didn't realize I would be using it for this.* Everyone in the pub was watching her now. Valeta could feel their eyes upon her even in the dim light. She placed the vial on top of the formula.

"Extract."

The moment she said the word, an ancient magic circle appeared in her eyes. As the potion continued to glow, the symbol in her eyes faded. The room stirred with excitement. Once the light fully faded, Valeta held out the vial to Roman. Instead of herbs, a bright blue liquid filled the vial.

"These are the only herbs I have. Will this be enough?"

"Yes, of course," Roman said as he carefully took the potion from Valeta with both hands.

"If I've proven myself, I'd like a proper introduction again."

"Please, excuse me." Roman took a step back and threw back his hood. He placed a hand on his chest and gave a small bow. "I am Roysman, evaluator of

the unofficial alchemist association.”

Valeta responded with a nod.

*Evaluator, huh?* It was an appropriate title as Roysman was the one who judged the alchemists, identifying the authentic ones from among the countless people who sought out the unofficial alchemist association.

“I’m Valeta. Valeta Delight.” She took off the hood of her robe. She felt that it was only respectful. Roysman’s gray eyes widened with surprise.

“Delight? As in... Count Delight? From the massacre?”

“What? Isn’t this dangerous?”

“I heard that the count’s daughter was a talented alchemist.”

A chorus of voices rose from the onlookers, a mixture of agitation and surprise. Valeta knew that she would garner attention the moment she revealed her identity. However, her gaze never left Roman. He didn’t seem as startled as the others in the pub.

“Is that why the president of the unofficial alchemist association is here in person? We have a very important guest,” Roman said under his breath, as if he had just realized something. He bowed again as a formality. Valeta ignored it. She was more interested in what he had just said.

“The president?”

“Yes. I told him about your story and he sent a message that he’d be here himself.”

“My story?”

“I described you to him, your age and general appearance. I’ll take you to him

now that I confirmed that you are indeed an alchemist."

Roman opened the door behind the counter and entered.

*I thought that was just the kitchen.* When she walked through the door, she noticed that it was actually a storage room. There was a large, old grandfather clock off to one side. It seemed to be broken as none of the hands were moving. Roman opened the face of the clock and began moving the hands around.

4:27... and 42 seconds?

It was a very specific time. *What could it possibly mean?* Valeta tilted her head, puzzled. A sudden click came from inside the clock as if something had locked into place. At the same time, the face of the grandfather clock swung open like a door.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 36

Roman opened the grandfather clock with practiced ease. The door swung open, revealing a long, dark passageway.

*This couldn't have been cheap,* Valeta thought. They must've hired an engineer for this kind of work—a skilled one, but also one who knew how to keep secrets.

"Let's go."

"M-miss Valeta..." Terion called.

"What's wrong? Are you tired?" She was just about to enter the passageway when she heard the small voice and looked down at the boy. There was no trace of warmth in her voice; she was more than willing to leave the child behind if he couldn't keep up.

"You can wait here if you're tired—"

"N-no!" Terion cried. "I'm fine! P-please don't leave me."

Valeta did not reply. Instead, she frowned at the child's desperate cries. *Does he have separation anxiety?* She couldn't help the situation that they were in, but neither did she have the time nor the patience to deal with Terion acting like a baby. He anxiously looked up at her and she curtly nodded in response. As soon as she gave her permission, the boy rushed to her and clung to her legs.

Roman, who had been watching quietly, smiled as he knelt in front of the boy. "I can carry you if your legs hurt."

"Oh..." Valeta said with sudden realization. A slight look of dismay crossed her face. That explained why Terion had stopped her. Feeling her gaze on him, the

boy ducked his head and blushed as though embarrassed.

"This way," Roman called, leading them through a passageway that was long and dark. Here and there, lamps illuminated the dark hall, at the end of which was a large door. It was an antique piece, clean and well-kept. It struck Valeta that the run-down and shabby pub might have been just for show.

As soon as the door opened, her suspicions were proven right. This was no ordinary room. They had entered an entirely new space, like a large, underground manor fit for a noble.

"Where are we?"

"You could call it a hideout for alchemists."

"You must have a very wealthy sponsor," Valeta lightly said as she looked around the room. Roman, who was carrying Terion with one arm, didn't hide his surprise.

"You're quite observant," he mused.

*What's so observant about that?* Valeta tilted her head. Anyone could tell that building and maintaining a manor of this scale required a great deal of money. It was amazing that they had managed to build this at all under that ramshackle pub upstairs. *Their backer... has to be a noble of some sort.* She had no idea how the association's alchemists were making money off of their potions, but even if they were able to make enough without getting caught by the imperial castle, it should have been impossible to afford a place like this.

"Thank you for coming all this way, Lady Valeta."

A calm voice, serene like a tranquil lake, drifted over from the top of the stairs. As Valeta looked up, her eyes widened slightly as they landed on a man with ice-blue eyes.

"You're..."

"So you know who I am," the man replied.

"I can't say I know much about the world, but even I know that there are only two dukes in the whole empire," Valeta said matter-of-factly as the man, Duke Carlon Delphine, descended the stairs. The duke's long hair, a shade of blue that could only be found at the point in the horizon where the sky met the sea, swayed at his waist.

His skin was so pale it was almost translucent, and he had a calm, soft voice that was extremely pleasant to listen to. His beauty was always the talk of the town. *This man is in his early forties? He looks like he could be in his late twenties or early thirties.* Valeta's eyes never strayed from the man as he came down the stairs to come stand in front of her. His face remained impassive, mirroring Valeta's. He was, after all, famous for his composure.

"I never imagined I'd find Count Delight's most coveted jewel here," the duke said.

"Well, the jewelry box has been smashed to pieces."

"Double entendres, I see. Anyway, I'm glad that you're safe and sou—."

"Would you prefer to exchange empty platitudes than to speak in innuendos, Your Grace?" Valeta said, interrupting the duke.

The man looked at her silently, and the two stared at each other for a long moment. She relented first. *I hate these dumb intimidation tactics.* She let out a sigh and looked away. Her head hurt, and she was tired. She hated things that made her uncomfortable, and she didn't like getting into emotionally charged fights either.

"Would you like to have a cup of tea with me?"

"If you so please."

Duke Delphine turned to Roman. "Roman, to the reception room, please."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Roman turned with Terion still in his arms. Valeta said nothing as he walked away with the child.

The duke turned back to her. "Lady Valeta, this way, please."

"You can just call me Valeta."

"As you wish." Just when she was about to follow the duke up the stairs, Valeta heard a voice coming from behind her.

"Miss Valeta! Take me too!" Terion shouted

"Oh, do you want to go with them?" Roman asked.

"Yes!"

Roman set the boy down and the moment his feet touched the ground, he ran to Valeta's side. *He's just like a puppy*, she thought.

She had once had a puppy she adored when she was young. Count Delight had killed it. Punishment for disobeying him, he had claimed. Initially, her father had ordered her to kill it with her own two hands, but she'd refused. She couldn't kill the puppy that she had raised with love and care. Because of that, Count Delight had resorted to an even more despicable method of killing it. After that incident, Valeta had never considered raising another pet again.

*Ah, I don't want to remember these unpleasant memories.* She found that she was anxiously fiddling with her hair. She looked away from the child clinging to her legs. A subtle look crossed the boy's face as he gazed up at her.

"Who is the child?"

"A magician—in incubation."

She wasn't wrong. Terion *was* a magician, just one that hadn't "hatched" yet. Despite Valeta's cryptic reply, Duke Delphine understood exactly what she meant.

"Did you take him from the Magicians' Tower?" he asked.

Valeta nodded. "Yes. Is that a problem?"

More accurately, she had taken him from the room belonging to the head of the Magicians' Tower, but mentioning it would only lead to more inquiry. She decided to keep her mouth shut.

"I heard that magicians are quite careful with their young ones. Is that not so?"

"I suppose. I'm not really sure."

"The Magicians' Tower won't stand by if you've taken a child from them for your own protection," the duke warned. However, he didn't sound nervous at all.

Duke Delphine opened the door to the reception room. Once Valeta was through the door, he closed it and walked after her. With the motion of his hand, as smooth and graceful as that of a flowing river, he offered the girl a seat. Valeta sat across from him while the child carefully took the place next to her. The duke waited until the child was comfortable before taking a seat himself, adjusting his clothes around him.

"No one will lay a hand on me as long as that man is the head of the Magicians' Tower," Valeta said.

"Are you talking about the new head of the Magicians' Tower?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But I'm not here to talk about him."

Valeta was beginning to get a little nervous. She wanted to cut to the chase, but the duke looked like he was in no rush.

He nodded, his smile as faint as fog. "I can't help but have questions because of what I know about your circumstances. I hope you'll understand."

Valeta nodded her head without question. She was expecting this.

"What would you like to know?" she asked.

"The truth behind the Delight Manor Massacre."

As the leader of an organization, he probably had no choice but to ask. In his eyes, Valeta posed a security risk. She bit her lip.

"Most of it is true. That man killed everyone in the manor. There's nothing much else to say."

"Were you involved?"

"If you're asking me if I played a part in killing my father and all the servants, then no. He did that all on his own." Valeta shrugged.

"So, why didn't he kill you?" The duke's eyes were narrowed.

Valeta paused. This was probably the question that he had been meaning to ask, the whole reason why they were having this conversation in the first place.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 37

"Excuse me," Roman said, interrupting the two as he set tea and juice down on the table. Instead of answering, Valeta looked straight into Duke Carlon Delphine's glacial eyes.

"Would my answer make any difference?" she asked.

"Perhaps."

Valeta looked down at the steaming cup in front of her. "He thinks that I'm the only one who understands him... Also... He wants me to call him by his name."

"Sorry...?"

Valeta's reply sent a small ripple through Duke Delphine's otherwise expressionless face. His eyebrows drew up in confusion.

She shrugged. "And I think he knew that I was going to come here. He's probably thinking about the best way he can make a dramatic entrance."

"It sounds as though you expect to be carried off by him again."

Valeta had no response to the duke's sharp observation. The only reason why Reinhart hadn't come to whisk her away yet was because he had decided to let her roam free for now.

Of course, she had taken the magician by surprise this time, but that would be a rare occurrence. If he wanted, he could have chased after her the moment he realized she was gone, but he hadn't. And since he hadn't come after her yet, that meant he was going to sit back and keep an eye on her for now. *Is this pity? Or is this a new type of game for him?*

"Or I could return to him on my own," Valeta continued.

"How come?"

"He's the only shield I have left, and he knows that."

"If he's your shield, just who exactly is he shielding you from?"

Valeta quietly lifted her head, and the duke stared into her lifeless eyes. He was often told that he was unemotional, but the woman sitting in front of him was like a desert.

"The imperial castle... or any other sort of cage."

Her voice was impassive and just as emotionless as her eyes. Duke Delphine realized that the young woman sitting before him might just be as twisted as the head of the Magicians' Tower, whom he had never met.

*Count Delight was a treacherous man,* he thought. Other people believed him to be a good parent. However, to the duke, he was a vile man who'd only viewed his child as his own personal golden goose, there to lay him eggs of priceless value. That was why the duke had tried to reach out to Valeta, but Count Delight had been remarkably protective of the girl. Though he may have been horrible and greedy, the count wasn't stupid. He wasn't a man who would lose out on an investment due to momentary greed.

"I've had the chance to witness your abilities many times, Lady Valeta," he said.

"That's because I was treated like a circus monkey at the imperial castle," she replied offhandedly, as if it made no difference to her. "If we have established that I'm no longer a risk, I'd like to move on now. I don't want to talk about it."

The duke was quiet for a moment. He looked at Valeta as if trying to piece

together her thoughts. Then, nodding, he motioned for her to go on.

"I want two things from the association," she said, thinking about the conditions she had come up with. "First, I need a place to stay. I don't have anywhere to stay right now, and I need to be protected from the imperial family."

She glanced at the duke, assessing his reaction before continuing. It appeared that the cautious man wasn't planning to say a word until she was finished.

"Second..." She stopped and sighed heavily, pinching her brows as if she were tired. "I'd like to open a pharmacy of sorts where I can sell my potions. You might be aware, but I know very little about the real world because I've been locked up for so long."

Count Delight had controlled every single aspect of Valeta's education and what she was allowed to learn. Honestly, she had no idea how much apples cost, how much gems or potions were worth, or even how often people needed potions to begin with. It was hard for her to guess how much the gem she had pawned earlier was worth. Even then, she was sure that she had sold it at a steep discount. All Valeta knew was that she was a very useful fool. She had nothing to her name, so the only thing she could use was her body.

"That's why, if it's all right with you, I'd like you to introduce me to someone who could advise me on this."

"Hmm..."

"Of course," Valeta continued, "I'm not asking for these to be provided for free. I'll compensate the advisor for their time as well. It's just that this is all I have right now."

She then showed the duke the expensive-looking jewels she'd taken from the sky room, everything she had swiped from Reinhart's room. She had already sold one of the gems for gold and thought that it might be enough to live on for

now.

Duke Delphine stared down at the gemstones for quite a while before he looked back up at her. Valeta took that as a sign to continue.

"But of course, I understand that things like this mean nothing to you, Your Grace."

"If you knew, then why did you offer them?"

"I have another proposal. I can't say I know exactly how much potions are worth, but I do know that high-quality potions are worth a lot."

The expression on the duke's face was unreadable as he listened to Valeta with his arms crossed. "If you have a potion you wish for me to make, I can give it to you on a weekly or a monthly basis, as long as it's a reasonable amount."

"High-quality potions are valuable, yes... but most alchemists can only ever dream about making them. Those who manage to produce even a single bottle tend to fall sick for days afterward."

Valeta nodded in agreement. She knew that much. To his credit, Count Delight had gone to great lengths to learn about alchemy so that Valeta could learn about it herself.

"Did you not consider that I'd lock you up and force you to make potions for me?" he said.

"Your Grace?"

"Well, I'm only human, after all."

"Would you? I never considered that you might."

Even if that were the case, Valeta could just summon Gene, and that would be

the end of that. Carlon's eyes widened for a moment at her droll tone.

"Look at us. Somehow we've already managed to become great, trusting friends. Then, shall we talk about the details? Could you make a hundred high-quality potions for me? Of course, I'll provide you with all the materials you need."

Valeta knitted her brows as she pondered for a moment in silence.

The duke didn't say anything either. If she had simply asked for help, he would have been willing to give her whatever she wanted, no conditions attached. He knew all too well about the situation she was in and felt sorry for her. He also felt it was an opportunity to recruit a talented alchemist into the association. However, he didn't like the way Valeta was putting a price on her skills and then offering herself as the product, putting him, uncharacteristically, in a poor mood.

*One hundred potions, huh?* Valeta thought. That was about three potions a day. The truth was that she had the ability to produce about ten top-tier potions a day without straining herself. If she could manage that, even though she had no idea how much a hundred of them were worth, she knew that she could also manage to make enough high-quality potions. It would be a little tiring, but it wouldn't be all that difficult for her. Though she had to admit, making a hundred potions a month was a little excessive, even for herself.

"I'm sorry. A hundred potions is too much," Valeta responded.

The duke crossed his arms and nodded. He knew it was an unreasonable amount, so it came as no surprise to him that she would reject it.

*I first saw this child when she was seven years old.* Count Delight had brought out a blank-faced child and, as though she were a trained pet, ordered her to show off her abilities. Maybe that was why she still looked like a child to him. This girl had no idea how to lean on someone for support. The fact that every social interaction was transactional was deeply ingrained in her.

The moment the duke was about to agree with her, Valeta spoke up.

"But... I can make around two a day, so up to sixty potions a month. How does that sound to you?"

He paused. "Sixty?"

"Yes. I feel like that is more than enough for the kindness that you have shown me. Is it not?"

Sixty high-quality potions a month? It was more than enough. No, it was too much. The girl sitting in front of him didn't seem to realize how astronomical that amount was.

*She really doesn't know anything,* he thought as he sat back in his seat. His mood soured further. He couldn't stand injustice, especially inhumane acts directed at the weak. And the more he talked to Valeta, the more he saw the aftermath of Count Delight's barbarity.

The count had covered his daughter's eyes and ears, preventing her from realizing her worth. She knew so little of her true value.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 38

“Excuse me, Lady Valeta. May I ask how old you are?”

“My father passed away on my twentieth birthday. Why do you ask?”

Duke Delphine was silent for a moment. After a long while, he spoke again. “I know a good place where you can stay.”

There were a lot of issues involved with sending someone who had no experience in the real world out on her own. She seemed to know a lot about the rules of decorum, but that was all. She wasn’t prepared for the realities of life.

“All you have to do is go to this address, Lady Valeta. I’ll arrange it so that you can stay there. There will also be someone who can advise you on your goals.”

“I understand. When would you like me to deliver the potions?”

“You’ll... find that out once you get there.”

Valeta quietly nodded. Sensing that their conversation was finished, she rose from her seat without hesitation. The deal was made, and she had no qualms about it.

“You’ll learn more about the details and alchemists once you arrive at the manor.”

“Great. Then, if you’ll excuse me, Your Grace.”

“You said you don’t have a place to stay. You’re more than welcome to rest here for the night in one of the many empty rooms, if you’d like.”

The only thing the duke received in response was a stony look. She smiled at him with emotionless eyes, her smile painted on—she was drawing a clear line. Her response was respectful but cold.

“No, I’m fine, thank you.”

After declining, Valeta turned and left the reception room without a second glance. The duke remained on the sofa, looking at the gems that the young woman had left behind. Had she sold them, she would’ve had enough money to buy a modest house that she could have lived in comfortably for the rest of her life.

*Come to think of it, I didn’t get a chance to ask...* He had missed the opportunity to ask her why she wanted to sell potions and what her motives were. Duke Delphine let out a small sigh as he thought about how the girl who knew so little of the world had misconstrued his small suggestion as a threat.

“What exactly did Count Delight create?”

The man had most likely never even realized what he had done, blinded by money and status. The duke stood and wrapped up the items that Valeta left behind in a cloth. He thought about the boy she had with her. There was no pity or affection in her eyes when she looked at him—only a sense of duty. The duke had no choice but to accept that he had been talking to an inanimate doll, void of emotions. What’s more, he found that this made him very unhappy.

\* \* \*

“I’m going back to the room,” Valeta told the child.

“Okay.”

“You don’t have to follow me around if you’re having a hard time,” she said.

"I'm fine, Miss Valeta!" Terion cried out as he trembled and clenched his fists. The way he shook his head was as desperate as ever. She wasn't planning on leaving him behind, but the child's face was full of worry.

Valeta, looking down at the boy, was about to explain to him that she was going to step out for a bit but stopped herself. She knew she wasn't particularly gifted at getting people to do what she wanted, so she had no idea what would be the best way to shake off the boy who was giving her his best puppy-dog eyes.

*Why do I feel like he's going to die?* Just as how each and everything she had ever shown affection for had perished at the hands of Count Delight. She felt like she had once known how to interact with people without hurting their feelings, but, for the life of her, she couldn't remember anymore. Reinhart was uninterested in that and Valeta never had reason to care for it either.

*Father's dead now...* He wouldn't be able to take anything away from her anymore. Valeta reached out her hand to the boy who was still clinging onto the hem of her robe.

"Do you want me to hold your hand?"

Terion's face lit up like a ray of sunshine at her question. His blue eyes sparkled as he vigorously nodded his head. "Yes!"

Valeta gave a small shrug at the boy's enthusiastic answer. Immediately, the child was holding Valeta's loose hand so tightly that it was beginning to hurt. "Let's go."

"Okay!"

Valeta's breath hitched the moment she stepped foot into their room at the inn. An intense pressure suddenly weighed down on her. A familiar scent lingered in the air. She was sure that it was late dawn, yet...

"Hello, master. How have you been?"

She had no idea how he was sitting by the windowsill, basking in moonlight. There was no daylight coming in from behind him, but he was radiant.

Terion, who was still holding onto her hand, gave a small squeak before hiding behind her legs.

"Why did you have to run away and break my tender heart?" he asked.

"You crazy bastard..." Caught off guard, Valeta didn't even try to hold in her curses. "Don't you have any patience?"

Reinhart's eyes grew wide. He burst into laughter, and Valeta frowned as she watched his shoulders tremble. "You've become quite foul-mouthed since the last time I saw you."

"It hasn't been that long."

"I didn't mean to find you so soon. I wanted to give you more time too, but..." Reinhart gave an exaggerated sigh as he shook his head, jumped off the windowsill, and took a step toward her.

Valeta gestured to Terion to move to the bed. The child nodded his head and obeyed. Reinhart didn't even spare him a glance.

"It's just that this poor slave needs his master."

He took Valeta into his arms. The magician was so close that it was hard to breathe. He buried his face into the crook of her neck and took a deep breath. Something else must have been bothering him. Valeta frowned, still trapped in his arms like a boulder, stiff and unmoving.

"I told you that you're not my slave," she said.

“Then... How about a pet?”

“I never raised a huge and disgusting pet like you.”

“You’re so cruel.”

“Move.”

Reinhart gave another great sigh but did as she requested. Valeta knew that he was impatient, but she didn’t think that he’d come this early. She had assumed that she would have time to relax for a while. Evidently, she didn’t.

“Master, have you seen the wanted poster issued by the imperial castle?”

“If you’re talking about the missing poster, then yes. I also saw your poster as well.”

Reinhart’s eyes twitched at the mention of his poster. He flashed her a smile so full of warmth that it would’ve been enough to melt ice, but Valeta continued to frown with displeasure.

“That decrepit royal geezer has put a bounty on my innocent master’s head,” the magician continued, ignoring Valeta’s comment.

*Hold on.* Was there a reason why the emperor had taken such measures?

“Did you... What did you do to the crown prince?”

“Dear me. Don’t you have any faith in me, master?” he replied slyly.

Valeta didn’t bother to hide her suspicion.

Reinhart began to pout. “I’ve let them go unscathed. I didn’t kill or hurt anyone.”

Indeed, that had been very gracious of him. Very few people could have understood how much Reinhart had to hold back from killing those who

annoyed him. However...

"You would understand, master. You know how hard I tried." Reinhart knew that his lovely master would understand him. "Please tell me I was good, master."

"What was the point if I still ended up with a bounty on my head?" She knew that she currently had a missing poster, but there was no telling when that would turn into a bounty.

"Um..." Reinhart, at a loss for words, said nothing more and simply looked down at his hands, a sorry look on his face.

Valeta's gaze lifted to meet his and when their eyes locked, Reinhart's eyes instinctively melted into the shape of crescent moons.

"If that's all you have to say, then go back," she said.

"Don't you want to know how I found you, master?"

"I know you can find me no matter where I am."

Upon hearing her reply, Reinhart's eyes widened for just a moment. Valeta's mood slipped when she saw him beaming. She had no idea why he was so happy. *I've known him for so long, but I still don't understand his mood swings.*

His lips curved into a small, satisfied smile. "It would've been nice if you were a doll or a precious jewel."

"What are you talking about?"

In response, he lifted a hand and carefully cupped her cheek. She found that his fingers were freezing compared to the warmth of her own cheek.

"Then... I could own you completely," he whispered.

A jewel couldn't walk around or wander off on its own. He could possess it entirely. Reinhart licked his lips before he stepped back, his hand falling from her face. If Valeta were a jewel, he wouldn't have to worry about her breaking or shattering or suddenly disappearing from his sight.

"I said this before... but if you're going to kill me, make it quick and painless. Please, show me at least that bit of mercy."

Reinhart tilted his head. "And *I* said *this* before, master, if I wanted to kill you, I would've done so on that day."

"Fine. If you're not going to kill me, then get out. I have a headache because I haven't been able to sleep properly for days."

Reinhart looked at her for a moment, then snapped his fingers. Valeta's body, now floating in midair, drifted over to him, before falling back down into his arms. She had no idea where his strength came from, but he carried her over to her bed and lowered her onto it without a single change in his expression. Her eyes narrowed when she felt her back hit the soft mattress.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just casting a spell I sometimes use on you." He gently rubbed Valeta's forehead with his thumb.

"You..."

"Good night, master."

Valeta could feel herself slipping away as Reinhart's voice trailed off.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 39

Just like that, Valeta helplessly drifted off. The sound of her breathing changed in an instant. Terion's eyes widened.

"Stop!"

Reinhart narrowed his eyes at the boy's outburst but was thankful to find that his master did not stir. Valeta was fast asleep. He caressed her earlobe once before glancing down at the child. The tenderness in his crescent-shaped eyes was gone, replaced by an icy red glare. Reinhart's hand slowly reached toward the child's neck and, grabbing onto it, albeit not painfully, said, "You should be quiet when the master's sleeping."

The magician's voice washed coldly over the child. His red eyes seemed to glow in the dark room. Terrified, Terion gulped and nodded his head.

Reinhart released the child and stood up. "You'll be quite useful..."

"Huh...?"

"This is rather unusual, but you're better off learning the sword rather than magic."

Terion tilted his head. His eyes were filled with bewilderment, but Reinhart didn't elaborate any further. His job here was done. He had already taken care of the few things he'd come here for and now had even seen Valeta's face.

*"Don't you have any patience?"*

His shoulders started shaking with laughter as he recalled her words. The memory of it would keep him entertained for a while. How was it that only she

could stir up emotions that he had never felt before? That was precisely why she had to take responsibility for everything that had happened up until this point. He would not forgive her for running away.

"She won't be able to hear anything until morning. Don't wake her up."

"Oh..."

Terion glanced between the magician and the sleeping woman. The man tapped his foot on the ground as he kept an eye on the dazed child. Suddenly, a magic circle appeared on the ground. Just as Reinhart was about to disappear, Terion grabbed the hem of his robe.

"Um! A-am I... not a magician?"

The boy raised his head and looked Reinhart directly in the eyes. Reinhart frowned at the way the child was looking at him unflinchingly. He could brush him off if he wanted to, but...

"You could be, or not," he said.

"What?"

"It's your choice whether you're satisfied being a chrysalis or a butterfly."

And just like that, Reinhart vanished. Terion's eyes blazed like blue flames under a soft dawn.

\* \* \*

Before she was even fully conscious, Valeta was aware of how much better she felt. The sun was already high in the sky by the time she opened her eyes. It was as if her body were trying to make up for all her prior sleepless nights by sleeping in late. Terion was already awake and sitting at the table, his legs dangling from the chair.

"You should've woken me up."

"Oh..."

"I suppose he told you not to."

Valeta got up, ruffling her hair. In response, Terion smiled awkwardly. She didn't have to question him to know exactly what had happened. It was annoying how quickly the answer came to her.

*But more importantly...* She was upset by the realization that had come to her yesterday. Valeta had long been plagued with insomnia, her sleeplessness partially induced by the inherent stress of being born into this world and partially from the abuse she suffered at the hands of Count Delight.

She couldn't block out the countless thoughts that ran through her head at night, and the sleepless nights would grow longer and longer, leading to even more unnecessary thoughts in her head. Occasionally, Reinhart had found her on those long nights, quietly approaching her, kneeling next to her, and gently stroking her on the forehead. And for some reason, she could fall asleep on those days.

"To think that it was magic," Valeta mumbled, her face in her hands. She couldn't believe she hadn't realized it until now. The thought sent chills down her spine. It was a good thing she hadn't though. If she had, she might have waited on those exhausting nights for Reinhart to show up.

"Did he say anything to you?" Valeta turned to Terion.

"Yes. He said that I should learn how to use a sword instead of magic."

*A sword? Isn't he a magician?* Her eyes narrowed. Reinhart had spared the child because he was an unawakened magician, so why did he want him to learn how to wield a sword? *Well, at least he didn't kill him.*

The fact that the child had all four limbs still intact and looked otherwise unscathed meant that Reinhart wasn't annoyed with him. Either the child had a good head on his shoulders, or Reinhart had taken a shine to him.

"Let's head to the address the duke gave me yesterday. We're going to stay there from now on," she said.

"Okay."

"I don't know what the place is like, but it'll be better than staying cooped up in an inn like this."

There would be more freedom there. What's more, she needed time to prepare. Whether it was building the store, making money, or fighting back against the imperial castle, she needed a place to return to every night. She would never be able to establish roots if she was left to wander aimlessly.

"Okay!"

"Get ready, then. We'll leave as soon as I wash up."

"Yes, Miss Valeta."

Valeta nodded and went to the bathroom to freshen up. She washed and put on a new robe, and when she emerged, the boy approached her, ready to go. When they returned to the counter at the tavern entrance to return the key, the clerk returned part of Valeta's original payment.

*Do they have security deposits here too?* Valeta had had no idea, even though she had lived in this world for twenty years. Then again, she reasoned, in an inn where most of their customers were drifters of mysterious backgrounds, they wouldn't just give out a key without receiving any collateral.

She pulled out a torn piece of notebook paper from her robe. The writing on the paper was impeccable, written without spilling a single drop of ink, the

penmanship so fine that it could've been ripped straight from a printed book.

*This is a problem.*

The truth was that Valeta didn't know how to read addresses. She had never needed to visit anyone's house, and none of her tutors had bothered to teach her.

"Hey, kid. Do you know how to read an address?"

"Huh?"

She handed the piece of paper out toward Terion, hoping that he would know how. She wanted to avoid having to deal with a stranger.

Terion's eyes widened with surprise at Valeta's question, but then he nodded enthusiastically with a bright smile on his face. "Yes, I can!"

"Good. Show me how to read one, then."

Nodding, he immediately looked down at the address written on the paper.

"The first word is the name of the city or town, and the second word is the name of the street."

Valeta nodded along at Terion's explanation.

"This part tells you what the street number is, and this number tells you which house it is on that street."

"Really? That's a lot easier than I thought."

It was intuitive and easy to understand, and the format seemed logical enough as the buildings in this city weren't tightly packed, and the roads were rather straight. The street names were indicated by signs placed at the street entrances or along the middle of the road, and a large number of shops in the

area had their addresses hanging in front of their storefronts. It wouldn't be that hard to find. However, as the two headed off to their new location, the look and feel of each passing neighborhood began to shift dramatically before their eyes.

"Don't tell me this is it," Valeta muttered under her breath. She frowned as she looked at the manor they had stopped in front of. It seemed like everyone in this world had a penchant for catching her off guard.

*I had my suspicions when he called it a manor, but...* She hadn't taken the duke for a jokester. Valeta let out a long sigh. The place clearly belonged to a noble, and right there, engraved on the entrance, was the duke's crest.

Valeta couldn't tell if she was naïve or just oblivious, willingly sticking her head in the sand.

"I always forget," she said with a sigh.

"Forget what?"

"That you shouldn't trust people."

Terion cocked his head at Valeta's murmuring. It was clear that she had been hasty. Normally, she would have taken the time to mull over her options before coming to a decision.

*Pathetic...* Valeta wrapped her robe around herself, mentally kicking herself for her own stupidity. The hood cast a shadow over her face.

"This works out. You should go inside."

"M-Miss Valeta?"

"I'm sorry, kid, but I need to start moving more quickly now."

"N-no! I- I want to go with you! I can keep up. I won't complain!" Terion cried as

he clung onto her robe, sudden tears springing to his eyes.

Valeta frowned at the trembling child and found him to resemble an abandoned puppy. Surprised by her indifference, the child dropped the hem of her robe. Valeta let out another sigh. "I can't take care of you. I'm not in a situation where I can bring you along. Both that man and the imperial castle are looking for me. I'm sure the alchemists will start too."

"But..."

"As far as I know, the duke is a benevolent man. He won't be cruel to you. In fact, he seemed to feel sorry for you, so I know he'll protect you."

Still trembling, Terion lowered his head.

"I appreciate your kind words."

Valeta stiffened when she heard the voice coming from behind her.

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### Chapter 40

\* \* \*

“However, I promised to protect both you and the child.”

“That is unnecessary,” Valeta responded.

“I don’t think you have another place to go.” Duke Delphine’s voice, though calm, proved to be a thorn in her sore spot. She had nothing to say because she knew it was true.

“I’m fine on my own. Just please take care of this boy.”

“You don’t have to put on a brave front.”

“A brave front?” Valeta frowned.

She kept trying to find the right words to say but was coming up short. She bit her lip. The corners of the duke’s eyes crinkled as he smiled in a manner that one would take to soothe a child.

“Think about it,” he continued, his tone tranquil. Perhaps it was due to their significant age difference, but it seemed as though the duke couldn’t help but treat Valeta as a child. Although he had a rather expressionless face, he had a knack for pacifying people and steering the conversation in his favor. “You’ll benefit a lot by coming under my wing.”

Valeta had nothing to say. Instead, she took a deep breath. Images of the potential benefits flashed through her mind—along with the worst possible outcomes. *Father only saw me as a product that he could sell.* What would this man see her as? Would the situation be any better? If she voluntarily stuck her

head in the sand, what would she stand to lose in exchange for the benefits that she'd gain? *He probably sees me as his golden goose too.*

How would this owner treat his goose? Valeta knew the answer immediately: he wouldn't treat it poorly. Count Delight, too, had been good to her, because she could bring him status and wealth—but only when Valeta didn't rebel against him or disobey his orders.

*The duke wouldn't raise his hand against me or order me to kill animals.* No, his threats would be more sophisticated, perhaps threatening the child's safety rather than her own. If not that, he'd find some other way of keeping her shackled. When Duke Delphine realized that Valeta still wasn't saying anything, he opened his mouth again with a worried look on his face.

"If I reveal that I'm your patron, the emperor won't be able to put his hands on you. If you're under my care, then you'll be free to roam around outside too," he said.

Valeta looked at the duke with narrowed eyes. She was well aware of that fact. He had found the only loophole in getting her out of trouble that the wanted poster posed for her. *At least I can be certain that he's not a bad man.* He'd get to safely keep the golden goose in his manor in exchange for potions. It wasn't so bad trading some of her freedom for the promise of security.

"Of course, things would be different if the imperial family had put out a wanted poster instead of a missing person one," he said with a shrug.

Valeta nodded in acknowledgment.

"That pharmacy I wanted to open..." she started.

"There's no need to worry. I will keep my promise. The imperial castle won't be able to touch a ward of the duke, so you'll be able to do whatever you want, my lady."

Clever man. The duke hadn't said anything about money. The price of his patronage would probably come from the profits of the pharmacy. Maybe he'd demand exclusive rights. Giving him a share didn't seem like a bad idea. They would probably have to mention that in the contract.

Valeta narrowed her eyes. She spoke slowly, as if hesitant. "I'm not a fan of verbal promises. I'll only enter your manor if I can have this in writing."

"Well, well. I'm trying to do you a favor, but you're making it seem like I'm the villain. What a strange feeling."

How was this a favor? They were clearly making a business deal. Duke Delphine nodded his head in assent when he realized that Valeta wasn't going to say anything.

She sighed with relief.

\* \* \*

The contract, drawn up that very day, was straightforward and uncomplicated. In fact, the duke had asked Valeta to set most of the conditions. In exchange for sixty potions a month, she would get food, clothing, and shelter—all the basic necessities of life. It was mutually beneficial. And fair. The contract also included a clause concerning the duke's protection.

Duke Carlon Delphine looked over the well-written contract with a strange expression on his face but, without another word, signed it. He had added nothing to the contract, and Valeta found it most unusual. If he wanted something from her, this was the time to bring it up. But she didn't question it. She didn't want to say anything that could put her at a disadvantage, so she kept her mouth shut.

And just like that, two weeks passed by since the day she had signed the

contract with the duke.

"I'm bored..."

The duke was as righteous as the rumors said he was and living at his manor was better than she could have imagined. She was provided with three meals a day, and he didn't try to force or demand her to do anything.

In fact, he had instructed her to focus on resting, even going as far as to create an environment for her to do just that. As a result, Terion, whose health had always looked a little precarious, was also beginning to gain some weight and had a healthier complexion.

However, they couldn't leave the manor. Duke Delphine explained that it wasn't possible for them just yet because they hadn't completed the preparations for such an outing, and Valeta obediently listened. She didn't care if it was an excuse to keep her in the manor or not. No, the most important thing bothering her was that... *This is a waste of time.*

She felt like she had to start putting her plans in motion. Otherwise, she was simply wasting away, and it was a feeling she just couldn't stand. The duke hadn't wanted her to make any potions during the past two weeks. Not only was she not allowed to use alchemy, but whenever she tried to do something, a maid or an attendant would come by insisting that they do it for her instead. She was effectively forced to take a break from doing anything at all. But this had been going on for days already and Valeta, who was used to always being on edge, felt like she was sitting on a bed of nails.

*I have to do something!* Valeta was spacing out on her bed when she forced herself to get up. *Typically they want to know how soon they can get their hands on my potions...* But the duke had not mentioned it at all. Valeta had asked him once when she'd run out of patience, but he simply replied that there was no rush for her to get the potions to him anytime soon.

As she descended the stairs, she crossed paths with an attendant who smiled and bowed to her. Valeta nodded back, begrudgingly.

"Do you happen to know where the duke is?" she asked.

"His Grace is in his office, I believe."

"He's not busy or occupied with a guest, is he?"

"No. I don't think we have any honored guests visiting the manor today."

The attendant gave off an air that was similar to the duke's. Even the way he spoke reminded Valeta of the duke. She wondered if all the attendants of this household resembled their employer. They all treated her like a child.

"So I won't be disturbing him if I visit?"

"Not at all, my lady. In fact, I think he will be pleased." The attendant smiled.

Everyone in the manor, from the attendants to the duke himself, seemed to treat Valeta as though she were helpless. She couldn't shake the feeling that they truly did view her as nothing more than an adorable child, and she didn't know how to feel about it.

"Also, you don't have to speak so formally to us attendants."

"Okay. You can also just call me Valeta, then."

"Yes, Miss Valeta."

"Well, I won't keep you."

Valeta continued down the stairs. Standing in front of the office doors, she fixed her bangs as she let out a small sigh. Then, she gave the door a soft knock.

"It's Valeta Delight."

There was nothing but silence. She waited, but the silence continued. Just as she was about to turn away and forget the whole thing, she heard someone call from inside.

“Come in.”

The voice was as calm as ever.

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### Chapter 41

The smell of freshly brewed tea hit Valeta's nose as soon as she walked in. She looked at the man sitting behind the deep mahogany desk with a pen in his hand. *He's the only one here.*

She had assumed that the chamberlain, or at least another attendant, would be present, judging by the smell of tea, but none had been set out. Duke Delphine was the only person in the dull office filled with documents and books. Valeta took a step inside.

"What a surprise, Lady Valeta. I didn't think you'd visit me, not in a million years," the duke said. "I suppose you have something to discuss with me. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please."

Suggesting that they sit at a table by the window, the duke then brought out tea, teacups, and light refreshments from the cupboard and sat across from Valeta. She watched as the elegant man poured her cup with a careful hand before she turned her head to look out the window. It was all very peaceful.

*Come to think of it, it's been a while since I saw that fellow,* she mused. He was probably busy with other matters. He couldn't direct all of his attention to her. It was a good thing. Yet, at the same time, it felt a little strange. When was the last time they'd been apart like this?

"It's been a while since we last had tea, Lady Valeta."

"Please, just call me Valeta."

Duke Delphine's eyebrows rose in a peculiar expression.

"My title as a lady died along with the Delight family. You can just call me Valeta."

"If that is what you wish." He nodded, then continued, "I hope the tea is to your liking."

"Thank you," Valeta picked up her cup and took a sip. She could feel it traveling down her throat, warming up her body. She frowned slightly at the unfamiliar sensation and looked up at the duke.

"Your Grace."

"Hm?"

"Thank you for providing this relaxing environment. I appreciate the thought. However, given my situation, I don't feel comfortable taking a break."

The duke took a sip of tea and looked at Valeta. With one leg crossed over the other, he nodded, indicating for her to continue.

"I think it's time we *both* start fulfilling our ends of the bargain," she said.

"Valeta," the duke said. "You're like a rabbit that's being hunted, a rabbit that continues to run without rest, even after the hunter has died because it doesn't know how to stop."

"I won't deny it. I don't have that luxury," Valeta replied grimly. She honestly couldn't relax. Daily life was overwhelming for her.

Just thinking about Reinhart, the crown prince, and the imperial family was too much. It was impossible to tell who was friend or foe. The only ally she had in the world was herself. She felt like she was walking on a tightrope without rest, constantly trying to find her balance.

"The imperial family will be holding a banquet next week. What do you think

about going?"

Valeta paused. "I thought I asked you to hide me from the imperial family."

"Sometimes, it's better to step out into the open than to hide in the shadows."

Frowning, she studied the duke as if to figure out his real intentions, a hundred thoughts running through her head. She imagined how much money he would get if he sold her off.

"You'll hurt my feelings if you keep glaring at me like that. Listen, child. I'm not going to hurt you. I promised that I'd be your patron, didn't I?"

"Who are you calling a child?"

"Ahem, that was a mistake," Duke Delphine stuttered in surprise. "Anyway, wouldn't it be a good idea to show the people who want to take advantage of you who's protecting you?"

Valeta knitted her brows at the duke's words. She slowly rubbed her face. It wasn't hard to grasp the situation. The imperial family wasn't the only one after her. Other nobles were targeting her too. There were a lot of people out there who wanted a piece of the golden goose now that it had escaped from its cage.

"What are the chances that the imperial family won't whisk me away right as I step foot out in the open?"

"I don't like speaking in certainties, but..." Looking at Valeta's anxious expression, Duke Delphine felt the need to reassure her. Although she acted like an adult, she was still a child who knew nothing of the world. At least, that was how he viewed her. "There's no chance that they will take you."

"I don't believe you," Valeta retorted.

"This is the first time I've ever said something like that, and I never go back on

my word."

Despite the duke's soothing voice, Valeta sighed in frustration. There was only one way she saw this conversation ending. It was clear that she didn't have a lot of options.

"Fine, then."

"Valeta, if you don't mind me asking, how much do you know about alchemy?"

"I think I read all the books they have available on the market. Though they don't have that many these days."

"Does that mean you know about alchemic rebound or failure? How about the full extent of your powers? How many formulas do you know? Do you know what your specialty is? What about taboos?"

Although the duke spoke in a calm and composed manner, Valeta's eyes started twitching in response to the flood of questions. Slowly, she mulled over the questions, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't come up with an answer.

The room was silent.

"Have you ever had a teacher?"

"I was taught by an alchemist from the imperial castle once," Valeta replied without hesitation. Finally, a question she had an answer to.

Duke Delphine contemplated her response. "What was the first thing they taught you?"

"How to use formulas," Valeta replied, again, without hesitation. Another question she had an answer to. The duke frowned this time.

"I don't know who your teacher was, but I can tell that he's a fool," he said with a small sigh. "I say that because they have taught you how to run before you learned to walk. You're missing the basics."

"I haven't had any problems so far," Valeta replied.

"That's because you were making a limited amount of things in a controlled environment, but that won't always be the case in the future."

"This isn't what I asked for. I didn't ask you to teach me the basics of alchemy."

Duke Delphine looked at Valeta, defensive and bristling with thorns. It wasn't her fault, he knew. The greed of others had turned her this way. She had simply followed the path that they set for her, and it did not help that Count Delight had instilled her with no sense of feeling or morals.

The duke racked his brain looking for the right words. "I'm sorry, but I have no intention of handing a sword to a child who only knows how to run."

*What is he talking about?* Valeta felt like she had just been stabbed in the heart with a needle. A surge of emotions ran through her. She clenched her fists. What was so bad about that? She didn't have much time. She had so many people after her. Asking her to go back to the basics was, in her opinion, ridiculous in this situation.

"Your Grace, I think I'm a rather reasonable person. I can distinguish between those who deserve to die from the people who don't."

Duke Delphine raised a sharp eyebrow in response.

"How?" he countered.

Valeta swallowed nervously at his question. He was still as courteous as ever, but Valeta didn't realize how different he could be depending on his mood. His voice remained calm and soft, and his expression barely changed. However, it

felt like he was no longer picking and choosing his words.

"Because I can tell between friend and foe. If it comes down to it, I can wield a sword and even kill people if I have to. So please, stop treating me like a child," she said.

"But you don't even know how to properly wield a sword, let alone use it. If you only know how to hold a sword and stab someone with it..." He turned to look at Valeta as he spoke. His kind eyes held no ill-will in them, but they were full of determination. "Well, I suppose any child could do that."

The implicit meaning of his words made Valeta gasp.

"So, are you telling me to start from the beginning again?" she asked. "Don't we have a contract? A business relationship?"

"Valeta, you can think of it that way if it makes you feel better."

His voice was gentle, as if he were soothing a child. She could feel something ticklish growing inside her, and it was altogether unpleasant.

She clenched her fists. The unexplainable feeling in her chest made her frown, but in the end, she couldn't say a word.

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## Chapter 42

"Anyway, acquiring the permit to open a business and establishing a store will take a fair amount of time. You have a good head on your shoulders, so you'll catch up in no time."

"Fine. I understand."

Valeta obediently gave up at the duke's gentle prodding. A heavy sigh escaped her. She was disappointed that she had to do something she was reluctant to do.

"You're more than welcome to talk to me if you need anything else."

"When will the lessons begin?" she asked.

"I think three days from now. There are a few things I need to prepare first."

To Valeta, that meant three more days going to waste. However, wasting three days was a thousand times better than wasting two weeks without any plans. She nodded her head.

"Do you have any alchemy tools?" Duke Delphine asked.

"I have simple ones," Valeta replied. "But the rest are..."

Some tools were essential for alchemists. An alchemist's workroom always contained pen and paper for drawing formulas, empty vials for potions, and containers full of preserved herbs. Circles were fundamental whether you were a magician or an alchemist.

A user couldn't utilize their full power with a poorly drawn or asymmetrical circle, and magicians could use magic to draw magic circles, but an alchemist's

circles had to be drawn by hand, which was why many alchemist workrooms also included drawing instruments and compasses. However, Valeta felt that she didn't need to have tools because she didn't use them often, and she'd lost most of her instruments when she'd left home.

"Didn't you have any tools at the Delight Manor? Alchemists tend to get rather attached to their tools..."

Valeta frowned at the duke's strange statement. Her head tilted to the side, a puzzled expression on her face. "Why would I get attached to my tools?"

"Wouldn't you develop a fondness for something you've used for a long time? Sentimental value?"

Valeta's frown continued to deepen. She didn't understand what the duke was talking about. "I'm not sure. I never really paid much attention to the tools I used."

Her tools were often switched or taken away. Count Delight, always doing as he pleased, had changed the tools in her workroom regularly, so she had never had the chance to get attached to any particular one.

"Oh, I see." Duke Delphine nodded. "Then we should take you to purchase some tools and materials. It'd be a good idea for you to try them out for yourself."

"I thought you said I couldn't go out."

"It's fine as long as you're with me. Of course, you'd still need to wear a robe," he added with a small chuckle.

Valeta took a sip of her now cold tea. "I understand."

"We should also go to the dressmaker's and get you new clothes. You need clothes for the banquet and some daily outfits as well."

"Do you not have tailors come to the manor?"

"I can arrange that if that is what you prefer. But I don't like having strangers enter my home."

Valeta nodded silently as thoughts flooded her mind. Buying new dresses would cost money. And they would have to be adequately lavish if she wanted to look like she was actually the duke's ward. *I'm glad I, at the very least, have the ability to make money.*

"Can I ask you a question?" Valeta asked.

"Of course."

"How are potion prices usually determined? I know they are divided by purity such as low, mid, high, and top qualities. I'm curious how much they would typically go for."

At Valeta's question, Duke Delphine set his cup of tea down and leaned back in his chair. This was common knowledge for any citizen. How was it that she had no one teaching her these things?

"As the number of alchemists started decreasing and the imperial monopoly over potions grew, it became difficult for commoners to buy potions."

"I see."

"Nobles can buy low and mid-quality potions as long as they have the money because the imperial family sells them directly."

Valeta's eyes widened, taken aback by what she was hearing. She knew that the imperial family had a monopoly on potions, but to think they were also in the business of selling them to nobles. This was the first time she had heard of it. She could clearly imagine what would've happened had she married the crown prince.

"The imperial family charges about five million bels for a low-quality potion. In other words, about five gold coins. Mid-quality potions can go for ten million, or ten gold coins."

Valeta frowned and bit her lip as she listened to Duke Delphine's explanation. She couldn't grasp what he was saying. *What does that mean? How much is five million bels worth?*

She'd have to figure out the value of that on her next outing. Maybe she could ask an attendant instead. Only when she knew the true value of her potions could she pay Duke Delphine back properly. The duke smiled bitterly as he watched Valeta silently nodding her head along as if she understood what he was saying.

*She could just ask if she needed help,* he thought. It was evident that she had been burned one too many times when asking for help. She didn't hold any expectations now. It had been ingrained in her, having to keep to herself, enduring, and remaining silent when she didn't know what else to do.

"A million bels is the average monthly expense for a family of four. A low-quality or a mid-quality potion is about five or ten months' worth of living expenses, respectively."

Valeta's eyes widened. She hadn't been expecting him to explain. "What about high-quality or top-tier potions?"

"The seller typically sets the price. The imperial family only owns a few top-tier potions. Alchemists who can make them are few and far between."

"Oh..."

Valeta swallowed a sigh. She was glad she hadn't revealed that she was fully capable of it. It would have been bad if she had told him that she could produce sixty top-tier potions a month.

"The imperial family tries not to sell high-quality potions. They're not as rare as top-tier potions, which they only procure once or twice a year, but they are still few in number as mid-grade potions can heal most ailments."

Valeta was listening carefully. The quality of the information she was learning now that she was in the world outside of her own home was definitely different from what she had managed to piece together over the years.

"Sometimes, they're put up for auction."

"Auction?"

"Yes, they're capitalizing on human lives," he said.

"I suppose it's not a bad idea to create competition by selling limited items at high prices," Valeta murmured, as if realizing something, and Duke Delphine's eyes widened. He looked as if he had just heard something unexpected.

Valeta's eyes, in turn, also widened when she saw his expression. Oh...

She slowly pondered over what she had just said. Then she blinked. She rubbed her forehead as if realizing the reason for the duke's reaction.

A wry smile flashed across the duke's face as he watched her. It was a thought befitting of a child who hadn't developed the ability to sympathize. It was as if the world was divided into two categories: things that were beneficial and things that were not. The more the duke talked to her and the more he observed her, the more he could see that what seemed like a perfectly normal child was actually rotting away at her core. Yet, she didn't seem to realize it herself.

"So, how much is it usually?" she pressed.

"High-quality potions tend to start around twenty million bels, but the average selling price is around thirty-five million, depending on supply and demand. I've

seen potions go for up to fifty million bels."

"And top-tier potions?"

"Those have never been put up for auction, but they would probably start at one hundred million. I have no idea how high they would go, though."

That meant a top-tier potion would go for at least one hundred gold coins. It could provide the living expenses for a family for ninety months, or about eight years if the family didn't spend any of their money. It felt like an absurd amount for a potion and definitely not something that a commoner family could afford.

A noble, on the other hand, could buy anything as long as they had the money.

Top-tier potions were dangerous. They had the power to regenerate severed limbs. Being able to create ten top-tier potions a day felt like she was setting the world off-balance. *Is this how the world is trying to compensate for everything that has happened to me?*

Frustrated, Valeta slowly ran her hand down her face. *This man doesn't know I can make top-tier potions yet.* Count Delight had known that she could and forced her to demonstrate her alchemy skills often in front of groups of people so that it was impossible for her to hide it. It was impossible to keep the extent of her abilities a complete secret. Someone out there would know her true value.

"Are the prices of potions different underground?"

"They're not all that different, though there is a premium attached," Duke Delphine replied.

Valeta nodded at his answer. She had no idea how much formal dresses or everyday clothes cost, but two high-quality potions would be more than enough. She'd even have enough to buy the child new clothes.

"Thank you for letting me know. I'll keep that in mind. I think I better get going now."

"Come to think of it, Terion said that he wanted to learn swordsmanship. I'm thinking about getting him a teacher. How does that sound to you?" the duke asked.

Valeta was rising from her seat as he spoke. She tilted her head to one side and looked quizzically at the duke. He gazed back at her puzzled expression. "If he wants to do it, then he can do it. Why are you asking me?"

"Aren't you his guardian?"

Guardian? No, this was different. Valeta had no intention of being the boy's guardian. She was more than willing to leave the boy behind if they were at risk.

"No. He just followed me out of the Magicians' Tower. That's all."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. And it was he who recommended that the boy learn how to use a sword..." Valeta said, trailing off. It probably meant Reinhart saw that the boy had potential. "He might have the talent for it."

After all, Reinhart wasn't one to waste words or extend empty compliments.

Valeta blinked slowly. Duke Delphine gave a heavy nod, and she dropped her indifferent gaze before leaving.

*I guess... I really am twisted.* She was someone who had no love in her, someone who drew a clear line between her and other people, and never let anyone cross that line. She could cut people out of her life as if she were a pair of scissors. She even had the look of someone who was used to ruining any and all of her relationships.

The duke gazed down at the teacup Valeta had finished out of courtesy. He sat there alone for a long time.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 43

\* \* \*

“Father! What is the meaning of that wanted poster? Valeta... I mean, Lady Valeta is innocent!” Miloyd cried.

The emperor sighed as he gazed at his son who had just burst into his office. The boy worked hard at everything he did and was well-rounded. It hadn’t taken him long to push his other brothers out of the way to become crown prince. The only problem was that stiff, stubborn personality of his. He was a just and righteous child who had no room for flexibility.

“We can’t ignore what happened at the Magicians’ Tower. Do you know how many high priests have been affected by this?” the emperor replied.

“But what does that have to do with Valeta? That heartless man, he—”

*Bang!*

The emperor slammed his pen down. Miloyd flinched, his mouth snapping shut.

“Miloyd, if you want something, you need to know how to use your power to get it. If you think you can win against the Magicians’ Tower by having goodness and justice on your side, you are terribly mistaken.”

“But...”

“I know that you genuinely like Lady Valeta. How great would it be if the woman you loved could be the next empress, someone who will stay by your side the rest of your life.”

Miloyd took a deep breath as he listened to his father speak. He had used to fantasize about just that. But when he had finally reunited with Valeta, she was colder than he expected. In fact, she wasn't very happy to see him. It was a huge blow.

He had been attentive to her, and although she had yet to call him by his name, he believed they were still growing closer to one another. However, when they met again, she had looked troubled, as though at a loss, and a little awkward, as if she didn't know what to do.

"You will be the next emperor. There will be nothing that you can't obtain. Luckily, the engagement is still on even though Count Delight is dead. Nothing can stop us from going through with this marriage."

"But I... I want to make Valeta happy. I don't want to force her to do anything."

The emperor let out an aggravated sigh. How much more frustrating could he be? His son had all the qualities of an emperor, but the emperor wished that he was less stubborn, like his brothers.

"That child has been conditioned by Count Delight ever since she was young. No matter how much you love her with all your heart, she will never be able to accept that."

"What... What is that supposed to mean?"

"Even if you give your heart to her, she was trained to refuse it. She cannot disobey any orders."

The wrinkles around the emperor's eyes crinkled, then he sighed as if he were dealing with a pitiful child.

"For generations, the head of the Magicians' Tower has been born without emotions. The absence of emotions is what helps them make logical decisions in

any given situation. That is innate to the head of the Magicians' Tower."

"Yes, it seemed like he didn't have any remorse for doing something so heartless."

"Indeed. He has no morals. But that child has also learned to become like that."

Miloyd frowned. No matter what he did or how affectionate he was, Valeta's expression never changed. Her inscrutable expression and monotone voice had become her trademarks.

"How could he do such a—"

"Because she has great power. Guilian, the best alchemist in the empire, can only produce about three top-tier potions a year. However, I heard that the girl can make two of them a day."

"Top-tier potions?" Miloyd's deep-blue eyes widened.

The emperor noticed his son's hesitation. A child with a strong sense of justice only had to get their feet muddied a little to realize that it was not as dirty as they originally feared.

"Yes. And who would want to leave a treasure like that unguarded? The head of the Magicians' Tower has his sights set on her as well, it seems. Having that girl is like having a fortune in your hands," the emperor said, masking his greed with a smile. "More people will be after her once they realize how much she is worth. Only the imperial family will be able to protect her from the greed of other people."

Miloyd clenched his fists. It was obvious that Valeta was utterly powerless. Even when they'd reunited, it seemed like she was being controlled by the head of the Magicians' Tower. Of course, she had always looked frail and tired, even as a child.

"If we leave her alone, it'll only be a matter of time before she falls into the clutches of a stranger and is exploited for the rest of her life. Don't you think it would be better to protect her as the empress?"

"But a wanted poster? That's too much."

"It's not a wanted poster. It's a missing-person poster. The Magicians' Tower must have put out the other one. That means she must've escaped from them."

Miloyd roughly rubbed his face. It would have been a lot easier if she had stayed in one place. She had never been one to rely on other people, taking on every burden herself. It must have been frustrating and upsetting, but she never let it show. But that slave who had become the head of the Magicians' Tower would occasionally step in to help her without being asked, he remembered.

*He's always been a little overbearing,* Miloyd thought. He was strange, even as a slave. Though he had lowered himself before her, it always felt like the two were on equal standing, and Valeta had always naturally accepted that strangeness.

"Don't forget, Miloyd. You must always protect the imperial family first."

"It won't be easy finding her if she's determined to hide, but the search will go on."

"Good. I'm trusting you to handle this."

"Yes, Father," Miloyd said.

He gave the emperor a nod before turning away. The emperor let out a long sigh as he watched his son leave after making such a scene. Perfect as he was, he was lacking a pinch of something.

"Are you there, Guilian?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

A man in a black robe appeared out of nowhere and bowed to the emperor, who looked at the man with a pleased expression. He was the president of the imperial family's alchemist association.

"We need to find her," the emperor said. "You'll have to retire at some point, and it's time we find you a successor."

"There's a chance that she is being protected underground."

"Tsk, those vermin," the emperor scoffed. "No, she's smart. It's possible that she found another way."

He stroked his chin in contemplation. It wouldn't be a bad idea for him to find the girl first since his son had a soft spot for her. The emperor's murky blue eyes flashed with greed.

"We'll find her," Guilian replied.

"Yes. I expect you will, Guilian."

"Your Highness."

Guilian slowly slipped away into the dark.

\* \* \*

Blue eyes flashed in the darkness. After that day, the boy practiced with the sword, wishing for only one thing. By now, he had become a man. His skinny body had become muscular, and his eyes had grown fierce.

The sharp tip of the sword, drawn from its scabbard and aimed at his opponent, glinted in the moonlight. A blue flame surrounded his blade, overflowing with

murderous intent. An unwelcome guest that had disturbed his meditation.

The other man gradually turned. With his back now to the moonlight, Reinhart slowly blinked. A bright smile flashed across his face as he assessed the situation. His eyes sparkled with excitement.

"You... It's been seven years, hasn't it? I've been asleep for a long time, and the first thing I see as I step back into this world is you? I see that you're still alive," he said in a low voice, chuckling. "How fun. I didn't expect you to grow this much. In fact, I completely forgot about you. I had a lot of other people I needed to crush in the meantime. Anyway, I suppose I can spare you some attention now. What's your name again?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Things of value should have names. I can't call you 'Bastard Number Two' now, can I?"

Reinhart, who had been floating in midair, drifted down toward the boy, gently landing before him. The boy swallowed as he gazed at the dangerous-looking man, his robe fluttering majestically behind him.

"I vowed to kill you that day," the boy said.

Reinhart's expression cooled, and he gave a shrug. Each movement of his gave off an air of elegance, as if he had been born entitled to everything in the world.

"I don't know why you're so upset that I killed all those people. They wouldn't have been able to survive out there in the world."

"People who are born with everything in the world like you wouldn't understand! Some of those people may have wanted to live!"

"Ah..."

"Power, ability, and authority. You were born to the head of the Magicians' Tower. Have you ever had to bow your head to someone before?"

Reinhart let out a breathy laugh at the boy's spirited words. He looked up silently at the full moon before lightly turning on his feet.

"So, your name?"

"It's Terion. Terion Leon."

"Hm. A new last name, I see. Fine, then. I've decided."

Reinhart smiled and snapped his fingers. The sword in Terion's hand instantly crumbled into dust, as if it had rusted away, and sank into his arm.

"Ahhh!"

The disintegrated iron swirled down his arm, and the boy cried as the sharp specks of dust sank deeper into his skin until it was finally branded into his arm like a tattoo. It took the shape of a gray snake wrapping around his arm.

Reinhart smiled brightly as he quietly watched the man roll around in the dirt, groaning in pain. "You'll have to entertain me for some time, Terion."

"You bastard!"

"There's something I want to do, but it's not something I can do with my own hands. I've been wanting to raise something, so this works out," Reinhart said mysteriously as he took a light step back. "From now on, you'll be my sword. We can crush those vermin together," he whispered, his voice sweet.

The last thing Terion saw was the fading image of a beautiful man, his face smug with satisfaction.

\* \* \*

“Ah!”

Valeta gasped as she suddenly woke up in her plush bed. Her bed was cold and damp with sweat. She stiffened as she took in her surroundings.

“Oh...”

The day had broken and her room was no longer dark, the sun just peeking above the horizon. Valeta’s fingers were shaking. She slowly lowered her head as she gulped.

“It’s just a dream... Or maybe not.”

It was clear the dream was actually a scene from the novel.

“Terion... Leon...”

She finally remembered. The name of the male protagonist in the novel was Terion. At some point, the Leon family had recognized Terion’s talents and adopted him, becoming his sponsor. Terion must have taken their name as well.

*But what about now?*

He had blue eyes, and Reinhart had said he had a talent for the sword. He’d even been found in the Nursery. Everything was falling into place.

Valeta gave a weak laugh.

She wanted so badly to redirect some of Reinhart’s interest in her. Who would have thought that the solution she’d been searching for was by her side all along? Or did this mean that Reinhart’s interest in her would only double?

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 44

*So that's what happened...*

After that encounter, Reinhart would put the main hero, no, the child, through ordeal after ordeal. Nearly halfway through the novel, Reinhart had suddenly disappeared after the collapse of the Magicians' Tower, only to remain absent from the story until he reunited with the hero in the very scene she'd just witnessed. After that, he'd transformed the child into a hero, as if he were controlling him through a simulation game.

When Valeta thought about it, Reinhart had gotten what he wanted in the end. He'd always pushed the child into the crossroads of life and death, but the tenacious child always came back, raising his sword at the magician.

In the process, the child grew, forged friendships, and even found love. Reinhart had lost interest once everything had been accomplished, and the male lead began to settle into a normal life, about to get married. Once again, his life became dull.

"Maybe I shouldn't have brought him," Valeta murmured, her voice full of regret. She forced herself to move, her body still damp with sweat, and got a drink of water.

*Tomorrow's the banquet.*

Valeta sat on her bed, looking at the three high-quality potions she had made. These had been made to pay Duke Delphine back for the clothes and dresses he'd bought for her.

"My head hurts..."

It had been a long time since she slept through the night, but she hadn't known that she'd have to suffer in her dreams for it. It felt like she hadn't gotten any sleep at all. Valeta slowly rose from her bed and went to her desk. *Let's make some more while I have the time.*

Ever since she'd arrived here, she felt like her body was rotting away from not being able to make use of her alchemy. She didn't want to feel useless. She put a hand on the desk and pulled out the chair with the other. Then at that moment, in the humid air of the dim dawn, Valeta could smell the faint scent of blood. A gust of wind suddenly blew in through the open window. She let out a deep sigh.

"Don't you get any sleep?" she asked.

She was expecting a clever reply, but this time there was nothing. Valeta turned, frowning. There was no hand to stop her.

She looked at the man standing across from her. Speechlessly, she stared at the beautiful man drenched in blood at the break of dawn. This must be a trick. The hem of Reinhart's robe was dripping with blood. Their eyes met and Reinhart smiled, though his face was slightly weary.

"Good morning, master."

"It's only dawn."

"Then, good dawn, master," he replied without missing a beat.

Valeta didn't answer. She simply stared at him.

The magician's red eyes widened. "Can I hug you?"

He was beaming at her, but Valeta could still tell that he was tired. This man was always so composed. What in the world had happened to him?

"No."

Reinhart, who started to approach Valeta, suddenly came to a halt. A bitter smile flashed across his face, disappearing just as quickly as it had appeared.

"You're so cruel, master. So heartless."

Valeta sighed as she watched Reinhart grumble. "If you want to hug me, get rid of the blood first. These clothes are brand new."

Reinhart's eyes widened for a moment before he grinned with satisfaction. With a light snap, the smell of blood that was permeating the room disappeared.

*What is he, an air purifier?*

Then in two short strides, Reinhart had Valeta in his arms. Her brows knitted together when her head suddenly hit his chest, and he gingerly kissed the top of her head.

"It looks like you didn't get any sleep again, master."

"That's none of your business."

"You're still caught in the shadows even though that greedy pig's dead. Maybe I should've given you a better view of me killing him."

It was a shame that he couldn't resurrect the dead and kill them again. If he had known that she would still be tangled in the shadows like this, he would've had her kill the count for herself.

"I didn't get any sleep either. Should we sleep together, master?"

"Are you crazy? This is someone else's house."

"Is that a problem?"

Even as he spoke, Reinhart was picking Valeta up and setting her on the bed.

The bed, which had been damp with sweat, was now dry and fresh as if it had been sitting in the sun.

*What doesn't he use his magic on?* Valeta wondered with a sigh. With her still in his arms, Reinhart tucked himself in with the blanket, and the girl found herself buried in his chest. The moment she tried to move, Reinhart swept a thumb over her forehead. She frowned. She knew that he was using magic again.

"Did something happen?"

The magician paused before answering. "No. Nothing happened. Sweet dreams, master."

"Hey, wait—"

Valeta could feel herself drifting off the moment she started yelling. Her face contorted with annoyance. Reinhart gazed down at her sleeping form. He let out a quiet sigh and closed his eyes. Immediately, as if his own insomnia was all just a lie, he fell asleep as well.

\* \* \*

"Miss Valeta... Ahh!"

A loud shriek echoed through the manor, so loud that even Valeta stirred from her deep sleep. Before long, she could hear multiple people murmuring as if a small crowd had gathered. Above all the voices, she could hear a low sigh.

"Miss Valeta..."

"Yes...?" Her voice was still thick with sleep.

She looked up to find the voice that had called to her, but when she opened her eyes, all she could see was Reinhart's chest. She slowly sat up in bed. Fixing her

bed hair with one hand, Valeta looked at the crowd of stunned servants, Duke Delphine, who had a troubled expression on his face, and Reinhart, who was holding her hand tightly.

"Oh..." Valeta groaned. "It's not what you think it is," she explained, her voice an exasperated sigh.

Reinhart looked like he was having the time of his life. He wrapped his arms around Valeta's waist. "Are you awake, master?"

"Oh my!"

The crowd was abuzz. She knew that this had to be a truly shocking scene if even Duke Delphine's composed servants were causing a stir. Valeta looked down. Fortunately, she was still fully clothed. She glanced at Reinhart. Thanks to the unfortunate timing of Reinhart's words, even the ever-composed Duke Delphine was finding it hard to hide his agitation.

"I know what you're thinking, but you have it all wrong," Valeta repeated, more firmly this time. She hadn't known that this man would still be here. Throwing Reinhart's arms away from her, she crawled out of bed.

Reinhart drew his brows together. He clicked his tongue and sat up, quickly assessing the situation, and exhaled breathily. "I didn't know that vermin could bark. Don't you know that you should never wake your master while she's sleeping?"

"I'm not the master of anyone here."

"Oh, is that so? Then I can make you their master. I just need to kill this one, right?" Reinhart's hand slowly reached for Duke Delphine's neck. The duke narrowed his eyes. He reached out and grabbed the magician by the wrist.

*Whoosh.*

A deep blue light lit up the room. It was so bright that Valeta had to shield herself from it. She could feel a chill in the air that hadn't been there before. The moment the light faded, she opened her eyes to see what had happened and was rendered speechless by what she saw.

"You need to know how to control yourself if you have such power," the duke said.

"I see there's another interesting fellow here..." Reinhart replied, his tone carefree, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. He seemed to be having fun despite the fact that his wrist was now completely encased in ice.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 45

Reinhart narrowed his eyes as he looked down at the lump of ice that was his hand. He raised his other hand and snapped his fingers.

*Crack.*

The ice shattered, the shards settling on the floor. Duke Delphine's eyes grew wide with surprise. Reinhart's eyes lit up as he smiled. "An alchemist, huh? And a fairly skilled one at that. Though not as skilled as my master, of course."

"You're an alchemist, too, Your Grace?" Valeta asked.

"Yes, well, I suppose you just saw."

"I thought you were just a sponsor..."

The duke kept his steely gaze on Reinhart. As he continued to speak, his eyes never wavered. "It's quite difficult for someone to be the head of an alchemist association if they're not an alchemist. Of course, this is a well-kept secret. Most people don't know. Now, may I ask for your cooperation?"

Valeta nodded at Duke Delphine's gentle voice.

"I see. I've been wondering where my master was hiding. It seems she was hiding under the king of rats," Reinhart said.

"What a vulgar remark."

Reinhart slipped out of bed as Duke Delphine's lips curled in distaste. He glanced at Valeta only to catch her sighing. "Master, when did you get into collecting such interesting things?"

"Can you leave? I want to wash up." Valeta pointed to the window. She didn't bother telling him to leave through the door because he always went in and out of the windows.

Reinhart burst into laughter, making the servants turn bright red. "It's been so long since we've had a meal together."

"You need to get permission from the head of the household first," Valeta said. "You're so cruel, master," he replied, but even so, he nodded his head obediently. Reinhart smiled as he turned to look at Duke Delphine.

"Take your time, Valeta. We'll wait for you," the duke said.

"All right."

The way the duke spoke to Valeta was far warmer than the tone he'd taken with Reinhart, whose eyes narrowed at the slight. The two men, along with the servants, all exited the room. Once they were some distance away, Reinhart stopped walking.

"There's no reason why I can't join your meal, right?"

"Disrespectful people aren't welcome at my table," the duke said.

Reinhart frowned at the duke's firm response. He then shrugged. With a light chuckle, he grabbed Duke Delphine by the neck.

"You're hurting my feelings. When have I ever been disrespectful? On the contrary, I feel like I'm being quite humane."

"If you think this is humane, then I suggest that you relearn what common decency is."

"I can make you obey me, you know. Mind control is nothing for me," Reinhart said.

"Go ahead, then."

Reinhart made a strange expression at Duke Delphine's response. He wasn't showing any sign of fear. The magician wondered if the duke had another card up his sleeve, but he couldn't sense any special energy. "All these strange things keep surrounding my master."

While they weren't as exceptional as Valeta, the people around here were unusual and interesting. Reinhart wasn't a fan of these little gnats that hovered around Valeta, but he didn't dare kill them either.

His master never opened her heart up to other people, so even if he were to murder all of them in front of her now, he doubted that she would even bat an eye. Reinhart had watched her kill her own ability to feel and knew that it wasn't easy for her to form attachments.

*I hate being put on the same level as that pig, though.* Reinhart dropped his hand.

"Fine. Then what do I need to do to sit at your fine table? Do you want me to kneel? Would that be enough?"

Duke Delphine knitted his brows. If he commanded it so, Reinhart would've dropped to his knees. Not only him, but Valeta too. They didn't know any other way. They were so used to kneeling. They didn't know that all they had to do was ask.

"You can just ask, 'Can I eat with you?'"

"On my knees...?" Reinhart asked, confused, as he pointed to the floor.

"No. Just standing."

A puzzled look flashed across Reinhart's face. He looked like he was still having trouble understanding. There was a long period of confused silence. Eventually, Reinhart summoned a magic circle in midair and pulled something out from

within.

"Please, let me eat with my master."

"What's this?"

"Payment for my meal? It's a high-quality alchemy stone. Don't you alchemists need these things?"

The magic stone Reinhart offered to the man was larger than his fist. It was something both magicians and alchemists would yearn for, something they were willing to pay any price for.

"You're welcome to join us, but I don't need that. Put it away," the duke said.

"Why not? Is this not incredibly valuable even by your standards?"

"It's not that expensive to set another plate on the table," Duke Delphine replied, sighing.

Reinhart watched as the duke walked away, a deep frown set on his face. "That human's impossible to understand."

The duke turned back. "Also, stop entering Valeta's room whenever you want."

"Why?"

"It's frowned upon for a full-grown man and woman to sleep in the same bed together. No good can come of it. Rumors will abound."

Reinhart shrugged as he listened to Duke Delphine's nagging. He didn't want to listen, nor did he have to. It was all pointless to him. He slowly walked to the dining room and once inside, leaned against a chair, crossed his arms, and watched the meal being set up around him. He didn't say a word or interact at all with the other people. The sunlight streaming in through the large glass

windows made the whole place feel strangely cozy.

"What kind of relationship do you have with that child?" Duke Delphine asked.

"Child? How cute. What kind of relationship, you ask? I don't know. I gave up trying to define our relationship a long time ago," Reinhart said with a slow shrug. Instead of bothering to define their relationship, he'd simply decided to keep her by his side, the one person who could bring color and emotion into his life.

"You gave up?"

"Yes, but if I had to describe it..." Reinhart paused for a moment. "She's too much for you to handle. That much I know for sure. Master is just as broken and tortured as me."

Reinhart smiled a smile that was so clear that Duke Delphine could see the darkness that was within him. He was rendered speechless.

"I'm the only one who can completely understand and accept her. I don't know if you're hovering around her out of misplaced pity or compassion, but you should give up now while you still have the chance."

Duke Delphine swallowed, sensing the deep hostility and possessiveness that radiated from the smiling magician. He was more inimical than the duke could have imagined. The tension broke abruptly when the door to the dining room opened. Reinhart perked up and turned his head in a graceful motion.

The smile on his face shifted into something else. Duke Delphine stared at him.

"Would you like me to dry you off, master?"

"No." Valeta brushed the magician off as she took a seat at the table. Reinhart shook his head, making a great show of disappointment, but he didn't add another word.

"How did you know that the child was here with me?" Duke Delphine asked.

Reinhart slowly turned his eyes toward the duke. Feeling Valeta's gaze on him, Reinhart reached for a string around his neck and snapped it off. A ruby-red marble, darker than blood, dangled from his hand.

Valeta flinched. Her shoulders started trembling. She could recall the pain that she'd felt that day, a sharp ache was so terrible that she didn't even want to think of it.

"Don't be scared, master. This may be a tool to bind you, but it's also one to protect you," Reinhart said as he put the necklace back on again.

Valeta turned her trembling gaze on him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said. It means that I know where you are at all times, even if you get kidnapped, and whether you're alive or dead."

With a look of disbelief, she stared at Reinhart, who simply shrugged his shoulders and elaborated no further. Duke Delphine had a peculiar expression on his face as he sensed the strange tension between the two people.

"Of course, repatriation is possible too."

Everyone remained silent, understanding the meaning of his words: this was his form of insurance. As long as he had that necklace in his hands, Valeta would never be completely free of him. At the same time, she would never be in danger. That was what Reinhart was trying to explain.

"I'm so grateful," Valeta said.

"Really?"

Reinhart looked delighted, but Valeta did not reply. She had nothing left to say. It was more than likely that she'd form a headache trying to argue with this

man. It was best to abandon the conversation altogether.

"Isn't this the first time we're eating like this, master?"

"You ate with me in my room not that long ago..."

"Yes, until we were interrupted by some fools."

Valeta had her chin propped up on her hand as she looked at Reinhart. She regarded him silently for a moment before looking away. Technically, they had never had a proper meal together like this before.

"Master, why do you think I didn't chase after you the second you ran away?"

"Why are we still talking about this?" Valeta replied as a plate was set down in front of her.

"I'll be quiet if you answer my question," Reinhart replied from across the table. His smile was dripping with affection.

Duke Delphine carefully watched the two's strange banter. As an adult, he felt like it was his duty to set these children, who hadn't gotten the chance to properly grow up, on the right path. One side was trying to bind the other with unfettered cruelty and obsessiveness, while the other refused to give their heart to anyone, cutting ties with anyone if given the chance.

"I suppose you thought you should give me the illusion of freedom."

"How come?" Reinhart said, his smile disappearing.

Valeta felt much more at ease once the fake look was wiped from his face. It was ironic how much more comfortable she felt now that he wasn't smiling.

"You felt pity for me. Even though I escaped the birdcage, I'm still caught by the shadows."

"This is our first taste of freedom, isn't it?"

It was clear the more the two talked, the more their broken and perverse natures were made visible. A soft smile appeared on Reinhart's face, one that Valeta had never seen before. Her breath caught in her throat. She vacantly gazed at the shape of his curved lips before she remembered to compose herself again.

"Don't put me on the same level as you. You're the one who didn't leave when I told you to," she said.

"And I already told you, we would have found our way back to one another in due time. The curse has that power too, master."

Valeta didn't respond to the magician. She pushed the food on her plate into her mouth.

As promised, Reinhart no longer bothered her during the meal, and Duke Delphine reached for his silverware. The rest of the meal was a quiet affair.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 46

\* \* \*

“Are you ready?”

“Yes. It’s been so long since I wore a dress like this. It’s a little uncomfortable,” Valeta said as she gazed at herself in the mirror. Her dress didn’t come with a lot of scratchy lace so it wasn’t particularly burdensome, but it was like she was psychologically repulsed from the discomfort of wearing a dress nonetheless.

“Oh. I almost forgot to give you this.” Valeta grabbed the three high-quality potions that were sitting on her desk and offered them to Duke Delphine. A puzzled look appeared on his face.

“What’s this?”

“It’s to repay you for this dress and the clothes you bought for me and the child, among other necessities. It’s also for allowing us to stay here. I wanted to give these to you earlier, but I completely forgot because of what happened with that scoundrel.”

Following their meal that day, Reinhart had vanished into thin air. The way he came and went on a whim no longer surprised Valeta. *Seems like he doesn’t plan on taking me back to the Magicians’ Tower any time soon.*

In the end, he’d disappeared without ever telling her what had happened to him. Valeta shook her head as she patted her hair, shaking all thoughts of Reinhart out of her mind, and turned back to the duke.

“This is all I can offer you because I don’t have any money. Is that okay?”

"Payment...?" Duke Delphine echoed as his expression darkened.

"Yes. If it isn't enough, please let me know. I really don't know how much all this costs."

Duke Delphine listened to the girl, giving her a hollow smile. He thought he was treating her kindly enough and hadn't thought she would feel the need to tally up everything he had done for her. It felt as if someone had hit him in the back of the head with a hammer.

"Also, today's the last day of the month," she said. "Is it okay if I get you those sixty potions starting next month?"

The duke remained silent.

"What do you think about fixing the last day of the month as the delivery date?"

The child's eyes were as dead as ever. No. Even the eyes belonging to that of a dead fish would've had more life in them. The head of the Magicians' Tower's eyes were the same—devoid of any signs of life.

"Also, I can't stay here forever. Once the banquet is over, I'd like us to find a way to open a shop as soon as..."

For a moment, Duke Delphine couldn't breathe. He was struck speechless by Valeta's steady stream of words. Clearly, she had been thinking about this for a long time.

"Valeta."

"Yes?"

He didn't bother hiding his expression this time. He rubbed his forehead, his brows furrowed with helplessness and frustration. He gave a long sigh before he started speaking.

"That is not what I want."

"But I told you, a hundred potions a month is..."

"No. I realize that my approach was all wrong. I thought it wouldn't take this long for you to understand, but I made the wrong choice," he continued, tapping his chin with his fingers.

She gave the duke a questioning look as he continued to tap his chin in an attempt to maintain a neutral expression.

"What do you think about making a slight amendment to our relationship?" he asked.

"An amendment? But the contract has already been signed..."

"No. That's not what I'm talking about. First, allow me to apologize. You could say I was throwing a childish tantrum when I asked you for a hundred potions."

"A tantrum?"

A look of blunt suspicion crossed Valeta's face at the duke's reply. What was he thinking, saying those things to a child who had trust issues? He was one to rarely regret his actions, but this time, he did.

"That's right. I just wanted to help you, that's all. I wasn't expecting anything in return." His tone was more casual than normal in his frustration.

"Oh..."

Valeta nodded her head as if she was beginning to realize something, and seeing the look of understanding on her face, the duke gave her a small smile of relief. However, he couldn't have expected what she would say next.

"I see. So this is what pity is like."

"What?"

"Oh. I'm sorry if I offended you. I heard that people don't like that word. I didn't mean it in a bad way. Anyway, I think I understand what you mean," Valeta said, a relieved smile playing on her own lips. The duke was at a loss for words.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure you've noticed, but I don't like receiving favors without any way to repay the other party. However, I completely understand where you're coming from. So..." Valeta paused as if she were searching for the right words. "I hope you can accept these as a token of my gratitude."

Duke Delphine placed his hand over his eyes, his devastation indescribable. He had been convinced that she had understood him, but now that he knew that he was mistaken, he was rendered speechless.

She tried to act like an adult, but in his eyes, she was still a child. She hadn't changed from the days back when she had been little more than a circus monkey, forced to make potions with those lifeless eyes of hers in front of a crowd of people. Perhaps nothing would reach this child's heart. A barrage of thoughts flashed across the duke's mind. He never thought Valeta would reject his goodwill in this way. It had never crossed his mind that it was even a possibility that she could, and so he had not been concerned with it at all.

"It's not pity..." Duke Delphine started before falling silent again, a forlorn expression on his face.

Even if he said it, Valeta would fake a smile and nod, pretending that she understood. Was there a way he could explain this without burdening the child?

He slowly blinked. Behind his closed eyes, he could vividly recall the figure of the child he'd met in the past.

\* \* \*

Duke Delphine first met Valeta Delight thirteen years ago. At the time, she'd been only seven years old while the duke himself was twenty-six years old with his newly inherited title. He had first witnessed the child's alchemy at the imperial castle. In the midst of a crowd of large adults, she had written down her formula with unfeeling eyes and tiny hands before activating it.

"Now, show us a healing potion, Valeta."

"Yes, Father."

Count Delight spoke affectionately, but Valeta's response was colder and drier than a desert. She had no light left in her eyes.

"Your Majesty," Count Delight said. "Is there anything else you'd like to see?"

"Well, I heard that there's a potion that can make you feel energized."

The emperor and all the other people gathered in the room looked at the child as if she were a circus animal, a hint of greed behind every single pair of eyes in the room, knowing that her very existence was worth a whole lot of money. She had the ability to generate incredible wealth. If they had her in their hands, they believed that she might even be capable of postponing their inevitable deaths.

The moment Count Delight let down his guard, many people would reach for young Valeta. Of course, the child's potions were wonderful; Duke Delphine could tell that they were high-quality, even from a distance. It wasn't easy to make a potion like that. In fact, it should have been impossible for someone her age.

The symbol had to be drawn with a steady hand and the magic circle that went on top had to be perfect. Even with the crowd watching her, the little girl never made a single mistake. If she ever slowed down, Count Delight would tap his foot a couple of times, causing the girl to flinch and speed up a little, shaking all the while.

It was a shame.

"You didn't draw that circle properly earlier. You were also a hair too slow," the duke heard Count Delight say to Valeta a distance away from the banquet hall.

"I'm sorry, Father."

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision to follow father and daughter after the count had announced that they were going to take a quick break from the performance. He wanted to see if he could help the child a little, but his eavesdropping was a complete coincidence.

"How pathetic."

"I'm sorry, Father..."

Count Delight clicked his tongue as Valeta bowed to him and apologized in an emotionless voice. It was hard to tell if she was genuinely sorry.

"You're not going to embarrass me in front of the emperor, are you?" he asked.  
"If you make another mistake like that..."

"I'll try harder next time," the child replied mechanically, entirely subservient. She sounded as if she didn't want her father to make a bigger deal out of this and was doing everything she could to get out of this situation as soon as possible.

Count Delight seemed displeased by the whole affair. "Starting today, you won't have any meals for two days. In that time, I want you to make a hundred copies of that symbol you failed to draw earlier."

There was a beat of silence before Valeta replied, "Yes, Father."

"Go to your room. Kneel and reflect on your actions. I'm going to talk to the emperor."

"Yes, Father," the child quietly replied, still bowing to her father. She sighed once Count Delight returned to the banquet hall.

"That stupid fox."

The child's grumbling caught the duke by surprise. He stumbled around the corner and into the open. The child whipped around, eyes wide with surprise.

"Ah... Hello there," Duke Delphine greeted Valeta awkwardly.

"Who... are you?"

"I'm sorry. Did I scare you?"

"A little. Did you just hear what I just said?" the small, startled child asked in a whisper. Duke Delphine crouched in front of her, bringing him down to her eye level. The small child ducked her head slightly.

"I think I heard you calling for a fox, but I'm sorry to say, I don't think you'll find one here."

"P-please don't tell Father," the child said hesitantly.

"I promise I won't." Duke Delphine gave her an exaggerated nod, and the child nodded back in relief. For a moment, he thought he saw a little life return to the child's eyes.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 47

Valeta's tiny smile was lovely. It pained the duke to learn that the child with lifeless eyes, forced to perform like a circus monkey, could make that face.

"I wish I could become an adult already," she said.

"And why is that?" he asked, his voice low.

Valeta gave a bitter smile, unfitting of a child. "Then I'll finally be set free."

"You want to be set free...?"

"Yes. I want to live with a loving family with a home I can return to. I feel like I'm living in a prison right now."

Duke Delphine stared at Valeta. It was too dreary a dream for a child to have. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out something he had brought to give to her and placed it in her palm. It was a piece of chocolate he had grabbed from the banquet hall. "This is all I could get for you right now. Hide it and save it for when you get hungry. Once I... Once I'm well established, I promise I'll help you."

The girl laughed. "You're strange. Thank you for the chocolate."

Her eyes sparkled with life as she laughed again, and the duke couldn't forget the way her lifeless eyes came alive. His eyes widened, surprised that she actually looked like a kid again.

"Goodbye, child."

"Goodbye."

Valeta gave a small wave with her hand, the chocolate nestled in her palm.

Then, she hurried away as if she were afraid that Count Delight would return.

Duke Delphine remained there long after Valeta had disappeared. After that day, from time to time, she would make an appearance at the imperial castle to put on a performance, lightening up the usually austere atmosphere, and as the years progressed, the child grew along with her alchemy skills.

Simultaneously, she was becoming more and more devoid of emotions. People were drawn to her, fascinated by how she could do things that only adults could do. She didn't even formally attend the banquets but was there as entertainment.

Every time he saw her standing in the center of the hall, performing alchemy with her dull, dark eyes, Duke Delphine tried to think of ways to help her. However, getting in contact with her was impossible after that day. If possible, he wanted to whisk her away from Count Delight and adopt her into his own family. Duke Delphine's bitter smile grew thinner and thinner as he watched the skinny child mechanically draw symbols.

After that day, he had decided—if Valeta Delight ever needed his help, he would do everything he could to help her, no matter the reason.

“Your Grace?”

Valeta’s voice broke him from his reverie. Unlike back then, he was in a position to help her now.

“Never mind. We can take our time talking about this. Also, I don’t need those high-quality potions. Don’t feel too pressured. Just think of it as a kind gesture.”

Valeta grimaced slightly.

“Anyway, if you need anything, just let me know. All you have to do is ask. There’s no need to pay me back. I can help you with anything you need.”

For thirteen years, there had been nothing he could do to help this girl—even though he had promised he would—meanwhile watching as she withered away, dying inside, for that entire period of time.

“Okay...” Valeta made a strange expression but nodded as if she understood.

He gave her shoulder a couple of awkward pats. “Don’t worry about the imperial castle. I always keep my word.”

“All right.”

It could have been his imagination, but the girl still sounded rather doubtful. Instead of dwelling on it, Duke Delphine just nodded and smiled. “Let’s get ready to go. Again, you don’t have to worry. We don’t have to stay that long at the banquet.”

“Mm. Okay.”

“Also, do you remember what I used on the magician the other day?”

“I do.”

“What did you think?”

It was a short, simple question. Valeta blinked once, a puzzled expression flashing across her face. Then she shrugged. “I thought it was a unique alchemy skill. I was kind of surprised because the light was different from mine. And the fact that there was ice...”

Valeta thought that alchemy was only used for creating potions or turning stones into gold and vice versa. The thought that alchemy had other purposes was new to her, let alone the idea that it could be used to attack other people.

“That’s what I thought. Count Delight taught you a very narrow idea of what alchemy is.”

Duke Delphine continued, “Alchemy can be just as powerful and amazing as magic. This might sound obvious, but it can also be used to attack others too.”

Valeta nodded.

*Makes sense. Most of the symbols I learned were for extracting.* She used the same symbols over and over again, and all she really did was switch out some ingredients for others, making sure that they were in the right proportions. Plus, all the books she'd ever read were on the same subject, so that was all she thought alchemy consisted of.

*Why does this feel like a betrayal...* Valeta held back a wry smirk at this newfound knowledge. She held no expectations of Count Delight anymore, but she felt like a bucket of cold water had been dumped on her head with this new revelation. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

“I'll have to study these other kinds of alchemy.”

“That's why I said you need to go back to the basics. Valeta, it's like you were born knowing how to wield a sword, but you don't know what other uses it has,” Duke Delphine calmly explained.

Valeta nodded again, a strange expression on her face, as if she was acknowledging that he was right, that there was a need for her to relearn everything again.

“Swords can be like blades that are used to trim things. Of course, they can also be used to take someone's life, but at the same time, they can also be used to protect your own.” He briefly gave Valeta a pat on the head before withdrawing his hand. “Come down when you're ready. We'll go together.”

“Okay.”

She nodded.

*It's like I'm talking to a doll.* Duke Delphine felt that he was beginning to understand what the head of the Magicians' Tower meant by those words. That man seemed to realize how broken they were, but Valeta wasn't as self-aware.

The duke couldn't decide if one was better than the other. Either way, it didn't change the fact that the two were damaged goods. Duke Delphine sighed deeply. He thought he was finally making a connection with Valeta, only to find that there was an even larger wall to scale.

At this point, all he could do was make sure the imperial family didn't get their hands on her.

\* \* \*

“Duke Carlon Delphine and his companion!”

At the loud voice, all eyes turned to the entrance of the imperial banquet hall. The laughing and chattering among the guests ceased as they turned in surprise. The term “companion” meant that Duke Delphine’s guest was either not a noble or... a complete stranger to society entirely. What’s more, the duke had *never* brought a guest with him before.

A man sat in the corner, nursing a strong drink. The man, Duke Dreux Leon, naturally turned his head toward the entrance. The commotion from the crowd grew once Duke Delphine and his companion, a young woman, stepped through the wide open doors.

“Is that... Lady Valeta?”

“My goodness. Isn’t there a wanted poster for her?”

“What’s her relationship to Duke Delphine?”

“Didn’t the imperial family also release a poster for her?”

"She could be a murderer for all we know! What is she doing here?"

The combination of the murmurs around him and the scene unfolding in front of him caused a deep frown to form on Duke Leon's stoic face.

"Crazy" was the only word that came to his mind. What more did he need to express how he was feeling at that moment? A heavy aura began to form around the duke, and the nobles nearby took note and made themselves scarce.

Duke Delphine looked around the banquet hall and began striding toward Duke Leon, who frowned and started pouring more liquor into a crystal glass.

"It's been a long time, Dreux Leon."

"Go away..."

"There are too many eyes on me. If I walk away now, I'll only get a barrage of questions. I won't be able to catch a break."

"Nonsense."

Duke Delphine held his ground despite Duke Leon's short, displeased reply. If anything, there were only a handful of people in the banquet hall who weren't easily swayed by others. Among them, a few stood on the side of justice.

"Please. I'll be fine. I'm just asking because of the child."

"Child...?"

At Duke Delphine's words, Duke Leon turned his eyes toward the girl, only to find her indifferent eyes on his own.

"This girl..." Duke Leon mumbled, his brows narrowing.

For the past ten years, Duke Delphine had mentioned that there was someone that he wanted to help, someone he affectionately referred to as "the child," but

Duke Leon never imagined she would be Count Delight's only daughter. He had wondered who this person was that even the almighty Duke Delphine couldn't approach freely. *So it was Delight after all.*

Duke Leon let out a small sigh. The stench of alcohol lingered in the air.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 48

"I'm fine," Valeta said. "You're more than welcome to go somewhere else. Or if I'm bothering you, I can go somewhere else. I'll let the two of you talk."

At Valeta's suggestion, Duke Delphine's gaze fell on Duke Leon, a look of blame in his eyes. He'd done nothing wrong. Where was this strange sense of guilt coming from?

"It's fine."

Valeta tilted her head at Duke Leon's curt reply. Duke Delphine patted her on the shoulder and pulled out a chair for her.

"He's saying that you can take a seat."

"Oh." She paused. "Thank you."

She didn't know that that had been the meaning behind his short reply, but she trusted that someone who'd known him for long enough would understand what he was trying to say. *Anyway, if he's Duke Leon...*

Valeta had never met him before, but she had heard his name before. He was the empire's second duke, known as the sword of the empire. He remained utterly undefeated in the battles that he'd waged thus far.

At the same time, he had a reputation for being a good, chivalrous man, never abusing his power or authority. But that wasn't all. He was a role model for many as he'd once been a nobody from a fallen aristocratic family who had managed to rise to the position of duke through sheer ability. On top of that, it was said that his swordsmanship and strength were unparalleled in the empire—and the nations beyond. A lot of swordsmen looked up to him because of that

fact alone.

This was all information Valeta had gathered while she was imprisoned by Count Delight, so she had no idea how many of these stories were true. *I think Duke Delphine and Duke Leon are about ten years apart in age.* They seemed close despite the large age gap. Of course, Duke Delphine was the older of the two.

*So Duke Leon's the one who recognized Terion's talents.* This man must have been the one who passed his last name on to Terion. She quickly glanced at him as she quietly ran her hand over her chin. *I heard he's also a man of very few words and is fond of his drink.*

He was particularly picky about his liquor, so when word got out about which drinks the duke liked, Valeta remembered hearing the servants in the Delight Manor whispering that they should try it out before it got too expensive.

“What were you thinking?”

“What I've always told you, Your Grace,” Duke Delphine replied.

“Honorifics.”

His displeasure could be felt from that single word. Duke Delphine shrugged.

“Well, we're at a banquet. It's a public place.”

“No one's listening.”

“That's because you chased them all away, Dreux.”

Though Duke Delphine spoke more casually than before, his tone still carried a hint of formality to it. Duke Leon let out a low sigh, but he didn't criticize or force his companion to do anything else.

“I'm going to protect that child, no, Valeta.”

He stared wordlessly at Duke Delphine. His expression might have looked cold to other people, but to Duke Delphine, it looked as though he was blaming him.

"It's beyond my control. It's not easy taking back something that I decided on many years ago."

Duke Leon said nothing to Duke Delphine's excuse, instead focusing on getting himself another glass of whiskey. The strong scent of alcohol wafted into the air as he poured the liquid into an exquisite crystal glass.

Valeta glanced at the half-empty bottle curiously. She knew what whiskey was but had never had the chance to try it in her previous life, let alone this one. She was curious to know what it tasted like. As if sensing her thoughts, Duke Leon moved the bottle over to the side.

"No."

Blinking, Valeta tore her gaze from the bottle. His single-word retort sounded like he was talking to a child. She rolled her eyes once and nodded, a little embarrassed.

*Do I look that young?* she wondered. Duke Delphine had always treated her like a child ever since their first meeting. Now Duke Leon wasn't all that different. It was rather strange..

"I'm an adult, Your Grace..." Valeta started.

"No."

"Fine."

She gave up with a light shrug even though she couldn't understand why he wouldn't let her drink. This was her body. Besides, she was an adult. What right did these two men have to decide what she could or couldn't do? She thought about picking a fight, but she didn't want to infuse their goodwill with hostility.

"The Emperor Kynos Siliance! The Crown Prince Miloyd Siliance and the President of the Alchemist Association, Guilian!"

Duke Leon and Duke Delphine both rose from their seats at the announcement. Valeta rose too with an impassive look on her face, ignoring the way her heart was pounding in her chest.

All the nobles and attendants at the banquet stopped what they were doing and bowed. Valeta followed suit and dropped her own head. The door opened and the footsteps of three people entering could be heard.

"Valeta...?" a voice called.

She flinched. Her shoulders started trembling slightly.

"You're Valeta, aren't you? Lift your head if you are."

Letting out a deep sigh, she lifted her head. Before she knew it, the crown prince was standing in front of her. He was just like Reinhart. Everyone in the banquet hall was bowing their heads in the exact same way. How was he able to find her so quickly in this sea of people?

"Valeta!"

Miloyd's eyes widened.

*He doesn't look hurt,* Valeta noted. Reinhart wasn't lying when he said he'd sent the crown prince back intact. But then again, he wasn't one to lie about these kinds of things.

"You're safe! No... You're back. I missed you so much."

Miloyd didn't bother to hide his joy as he took Valeta into his arms. Surprised at the sudden embrace, her eyes shot open. Miloyd jumped as if startled by his own actions and quickly stepped back, releasing her from his strong embrace.

"S-sorry. I was just so happy. That was my fault."

His face had gone bright red, and he now rubbed at it so hard that Valeta idly wondered whether he was going to peel off his skin. Valeta shrugged, feeling a little sorry for the crown prince.

"It's all right."

"I heard that you ran away from the Magicians' Tower. You're not hurt, are you?"

"No."

As she lifted her head, she looked over Miloyd's shoulder and caught sight of the emperor, a strange expression on his face, and a one-eyed man wearing an impressive cloak.

Three men had entered the room. One was the emperor, and one was standing right in front of her, which meant the last man, the one-eyed man, must be the president of the alchemist association. *I think his name was Guilian.*

He had on an eyepatch and a handsome cloak. Clearly, he was different from the underground alchemists who used their robes to hide themselves.

"But how did you...?"

Miloyd asked a little belatedly after his initial excitement had died down. Valeta glanced at Duke Delphine who stood beside her. Before she knew it, he had lifted his head, ready to respond in her stead.

"I've been protecting Vale— I mean, Lady Valeta, ever since she escaped from the tower," he said.

"Oh!" the crown prince exclaimed. "Thank you. If it wasn't for you, Duke Delphine, we wouldn't have been able to reunite like this."

He readily accepted the duke's nonchalant explanation without question. That was one of Duke Delphine's good strengths. However, it did nothing to help Valeta.

"Not at all. I was surprised when I found the missing posters of her, so I took the liberty of searching for her myself. I let her rest for a few days after I found her."

"I see. You've done so much."

With this, Duke Delphine backed away, surprising Valeta. She had expected him to say more. Miloyd looked at her with happiness, and she returned his look with impassive eyes before bowing again. His face slowly darkened.

"Let's go to our seats, Miloyd. I know you must be thrilled to reunite with your fiancée again, but we can't leave people bowing their heads like this."

"Ah! Yes, Your Majesty. I'll come talk to you later, Valeta."

He clenched his fists when she didn't respond. He had no idea why she wouldn't meet his gaze. She was able to look into the eyes of that savage brute, the new head of the magicians' tower.

*Come to think of it, she still hasn't called me by my name yet. She always avoided it by saying, "When the time comes." But in the end, she had never said his name once. Today was no different. He seemed to be the only one happy about their reunion, and it left a bitter taste in his mouth.*

"Come, let us celebrate this joyous day with both familiar and new, surprising faces. Now, rise and enjoy the banquet."

At the emperor's words, the crowd rose from their bows all at once, and when they did, all eyes turned to the same place.

"Duke Delphine and Lady Valeta, would you mind joining me for a moment?"

Instead of answering, Valeta turned to the duke. Duke Delphine smiled as he bowed once more.

"It would be an honor, Your Majesty. However, if it's not too much to ask, could we invite my close friend, Duke Leon, to join us as well?"

The emperor glanced at the other man before nodding. "If that is what you wish, Duke Delphine. Feel free to invite anyone you want."

Duke Leon gave a deep sigh when the emperor granted his permission. Then, he slowly rose from his seat, making his way to the head of the table.

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The emperor took his place at the table with Miloyd, the crown prince, on his right and Guilian on his left. Valeta sat directly across from the emperor, with Duke Leon and Duke Delphine sitting on either side of her.

"Well, I'm quite glad to see that you are safe and sound, Lady Valeta," the emperor said.

"Thank you for your kind words."

"It's a shame what happened to Count Delight," the emperor continued as he shook his head with a heavy sigh.

*Is he being serious?* Valeta looked up and studied the emperor with a curious expression. Her face twisted into a resemblance of a smile when she saw the emperor looking back at her benevolently. It occurred to her that he would have been one of the people who mourned the loss of her father. They'd been collaborators, after all. If he had waited a little longer, she would've fallen right into his hands. He probably wasn't pleased about the way she'd taken off.

"He failed to realize that he had a precious gem in his house and tossed it to the side. Then perhaps that gem got angry and destroyed the jewelry box that was holding it imprisoned. It couldn't be helped."

"Right. I heard that the head of the Magicians' Tower was at the Delight Manor."

The emperor's eyes narrowed at Valeta's response before giving an empty laugh. Valeta couldn't hope to argue against such a veteran. "Yes, but no one knew."

"Well, he's gone too far this time. I wouldn't be surprised if a war broke out. The previous heads of the Magicians' Tower have never annihilated a noble family before."

He had gone too far for sure, evening contemplating whether he could overthrow the imperial family. It was he who would be the most excited if a war were to break out. However, Valeta would give everything she had to avoid a war.

"I see."

"Oh, this fellow here is Guilian. He's the president of the alchemist association, one that you'll belong to very soon."

"Guilian Grancis," the man introduced himself in the roughest voice Valeta had ever heard. She looked indifferently at his outreached hand before shaking it lightly with her own.

"Valeta," she said.

"Nice to meet you."

"Once you grow as an alchemist, Guilian here is thinking about making you the next president of the association."

Valeta heaved a heavy sigh and leaned back in her chair. It seemed like everyone in the world wanted to cut her limbs off. "I'm sorry, but I have no interest in belonging to any association or being in charge of people."

Duke Delphine stiffened. "Oh dear. Of course, I understand you may think that way because you're still young..."

"Also, I'd like to make another thing clear," she said. "Now that the Delight family is no more, I have no intention of upholding the engagement."

The duke suddenly grabbed Valeta's hand under the table. She flinched and glanced in his direction. Both Duke Delphine and Duke Leon had grim expressions on their faces. She tried to relax her body and slowly closed her eyes before opening them again. *I got carried away. I made a mistake.*

Miloyd's face crumpled into despair. Valeta looked away as he looked at her with trembling eyes, an indescribable sense of guilt overcoming her. The emperor didn't look very happy either. The only person with an unreadable expression was Guilian.

Duke Delphine jumped in. "Lady Valeta has experienced a lot of terrible things for someone her age," he explained. "She's just saying that because she's developed a deep distrust of people."

"That may be true... given what the head of the Magicians' Tower is like and the reports that I've read," the emperor said with a nod. He gave a benign smile as if he had decided to accept Duke Delphine's excuses for Valeta. Anyone could tell that he was faking it, though. The emperor turned his gaze.

"Lady Valeta, you might not realize this because you're still young, but it's hard to take back what's been said. I suggest you err on the side of caution. Don't forget, a single word can completely change one's position, in addition to their power, strength, and money."

Valeta took a deep breath, not because she was scared, but because she was mildly annoyed. It was fleeting, but for a second, she could understand what Reinhart had meant by, "*Should I wipe them out?*"

She suppressed the urge to call Gene and Nereid. She didn't want to be known as a murderer or a traitor. She just wanted to live a normal life, just like everyone else. Valeta squeezed her hand, focusing on the warmth of the duke's hand to calm her down. She slowly spoke. "I think I was just nervous, being in a place with so many people. I will take your good advice into consideration, Your

Majesty.”

The emperor’s mood brightened considerably at Valeta’s words. He smiled and nodded his head.

“You might think they are just words from a nagging old man, but it’s the wisdom of life. I’m sure you’ll find it useful one day.”

“Yes. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

The emperor reminded her of her father. This was nothing compared to the times when she had to kneel and bow before the count.

“Good. Well, the wedding may have been delayed, but we should proceed with it now. What do you think about staying in the imperial castle until then?

“I’m not sure about that...” Valeta dropped her gaze, recalling what the duke had told her before they arrived at the banquet:

*“There’s only one thing you need to do. You can make whatever excuse you want, but tell the emperor that you want to*

*stay at the duchy.”*

“Will that really work?”

*“They’ll have to allow it. They can’t force you to stay with them. At least, for the time being.”*

The emperor’s face hardened. Miloyd clenched his fists and said nothing. His deep blue eyes, wide with shock, were shaking with despair.

The duke spoke up. “Your Majesty, Lady Valeta has been tormented by what happened to the point where she’s been losing sleep. She’s been taking the time to recuperate in my home, so I ask that you give her more time.”

“Couldn’t she do that in the imperial castle?”

"This is what she wants. Furthermore, I'd like to take on this responsibility as her guardian and the person who first found her," Duke Delphine said, respectfully bowing his head.

The emperor looked displeased. However, there was nothing inherently wrong with his request, so he couldn't press the issue any longer. "Even if you live in the imperial castle, you wouldn't have to get married right away. Do you agree with what Duke Delphine says, Lady Valeta?"

"Yes, this is what I asked of His Grace. I have trouble sleeping at night. And even when I do, I get nightmares. I don't want the imperial family to see that side of me."

Valeta turned her head, her eyes downcast. How did Reinhart make himself look sad? No matter how much she thought about it, the only thing that came to mind was his inhuman beauty. Anyone would forgive him with those looks. She had no idea if her sad words were having any effect when she was saying them with an expressionless face.

"What do you think, Miloyd?" the emperor asked as he passed the decision to the crown prince.

"You could've asked me for help, Valeta," Miloyd slowly spoke, the pain still lingering in his eyes.

She stared wordlessly at him. He was too soft and weak to be used as a shield. He wouldn't be able to protect her from the law. He wouldn't be able to protect her from falling into the emperor's hands, either.

She opened and closed her mouth several times. She didn't know if it was a good idea to say these thoughts out loud. If she was ever in a position where her life was in danger and her only two options were Reinhart or the crown prince, she'd choose Reinhart.

"Your Highness, you always walk the proper path. It makes me wonder how you're able to accept someone like me."

She wanted him to stay on that path. It would be better if he could meet someone who was better suited for him instead of forcing him to make an effort to get along with someone he didn't.

Miloyd said nothing. He stared at her, dazed, before dropping his head with false laughter. "If that is what you truly want, Lady Valeta, then you may continue to stay with Duke Delphine under his guardianship."

"Thank you for your understanding..."

Miloyd's bright voice was a touch more despondent than usual. His sudden formality caught Valeta off-guard, but she thought it was better to keep some distance between her and the imperial family.

"However, you mustn't forget, my lady. You are the crown princess and the future empress. Wherever you are, whatever you do, you belong to me now."

Valeta silently looked into the slightly murky but otherwise crystal-clear blue eyes of the crown prince before dropping her gaze.

The emperor stroked his chin, watching Valeta for a moment before rising with a smile on his face. "I've kept you from the banquet for too long. It seems like everyone, including the crown prince, is in agreement that Lady Valeta will stay with Duke Delphine for the time being."

"Yes, thank you."

"I hope you three will enjoy the rest of your time at the banquet."

The emperor left his seat, and the crown prince, after giving them a short bow, followed behind his father. However, Guilian lingered back, gazing at Valeta with abundant curiosity.

"I've been keeping a close eye on you. I heard that you can make two top-tier potions a day. Is that true?" he asked.

Valeta lifted her head and locked eyes with Guilian's one good eye. He looked as though he was appraising her, but she knew that he was unable to recognize her true worth.

*Two top-tier potions?* That was what Count Delight must have thought her capable of. That, or he had been hiding Valeta's true potential from the imperial family. She couldn't tell if she should be relieved that they didn't know the full extent of her abilities or if she should click her tongue because they had found out that she could make top-tier potions at all.

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## Chapter 50

"Shouldn't you be a little more formal with someone you just met?" Valeta asked.

"Ah, I'm sorry," Guilian replied. "I suppose I didn't feel the need for formal language since you'll be working for me anyway."

"I'm not in the association, nor do I have any intention of joining."

Guilian's smile widened at Valeta's curt response in an attempt to disguise his displeasure. He slowly nodded. "That was my mistake. It won't happen again."

"Is it a problem that I can make top-tier potions?" she asked.

"No, not at all. I wanted to commend you on your skills. I look forward to the day you join the association."

"I appreciate your compliment."

"Well, I await the day we meet again."

Valeta bowed as Guilian walked away without another word. Now that it was just the three of them at the table, she could finally begin to relax.

Duke Delphine smiled bitterly, noticing that she didn't release a single sigh. But she leaned back against the chair, looking exhausted, not realizing that she was still clutching his hand. It seemed like the imperial family wasn't going to give up so easily. The things she needed to set her plan in motion still weren't ready yet, but it might be better if she obtained a business license and opened a store. It couldn't be that hard to obtain a license. After all, potions weren't classified as medicine.

Valeta was about to rise from her seat when she realized she was still grabbing onto the duke's hand. She let out a heavy sigh. The duke shrugged when she snatched her hand back.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said.

"It's all right."

Duke Leon watched as Duke Delphine and Valeta both rose from their seats.  
"You mustn't provoke the emperor," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"Be careful."

"Yes, Your Grace..."

At her reply, Duke Leon got up, reached out, and patted Valeta on the head once. Then, before leaving the banquet hall altogether, he simply waved at Duke Delphine, looking deep in thought.

"I should've warned you about the emperor. He may look like a kind ruler, but he slaughtered his parents and brothers to get to the throne," Duke Delphine said.

"Is that so?"

"How much history did you learn?"

"I don't think I went in-depth with it," Valeta said. "I learned about the origins of the empire and a little bit about world history. Other than that, I never really studied it."

Duke Delphine nodded as he listened to Valeta. He had a good idea of how she'd been raised. Count Delight had pretended to teach her a lot of things

while omitting the most important parts so that she wouldn't be on guard around the imperial family.

"I'm thinking about heading back now that you made your appearance. What do you think?" he asked.

"That's fine with me."

"Then I'll explain things in more detail on our way back."

Duke Delphine escorted the girl out of the banquet hall, much to the chagrin of all the nobles who wanted a chance to talk to the belle of the ball. Valeta hopped into the duke's carriage and watched as he took the seat across from her own.

"The emperor was born as the youngest in his family with no rights to the throne," Duke Delphine said in a low voice. Both Duke Delphine and Duke Leon had witnessed the bloodshed leading up to the emperor's ascension to the throne, and then when he'd risen above all his misdeeds to be hailed as a hero. "He may look like he's good on the outside, but he's a smart and ambitious person. He knew how to use people. He wasn't blinded by smaller glories, and knew how to keep his eyes on the prize."

"You mean the imperial throne?"

"That's right. However, at the time, the then-crown prince wasn't lacking in any way. He had a good reputation, was gifted, and was a pacifist."

Valeta nodded as Duke Delphine continued. Clearly, the emperor knew how to hide his malice with kindness. It would be hard for people to tell if they'd displeased him if he didn't choose to show it.

"The current emperor started by framing the crown prince. After that, he started spreading rumors that caused a stir. Brothers who used to be close were

suddenly pointing swords at each other."

Duke Delphine shook his head as if remembering the terrible turn of events. At the time, the duke had only been ten years old, but the current emperor had acted much differently back then.

Duchess Delphine, the head of House Delphine and Duke Delphine's mother, had agreed with the youngest prince's opinions. However, behind the prince's back, she would wag her finger, sit the young duke down, and warn him of what lay ahead.

*"A great serpent has been born into the imperial family."*

**"A serpent, Mother?"**

*"A serpent that will do anything to become a dragon. I can see it in his eyes. It's clear who the next emperor will be."*

*Your generation will suffer greatly from this. Try to stay out of his sight if you can."*

Duke Delphine sighed as he recalled the memories. He leaned back, took a deep breath, and continued. "Then, people kept mysteriously dying, one after another. People were dissatisfied with the emperor and the way he was failing to handle the whole thing."

**"Very sly."**

Duke Delphine nodded in agreement. "Yes, sly indeed. I wouldn't have known if my mother, the duchess at the time, never told me. The people were terrified as they witnessed their loved ones shriveling up or dropping dead on the spot. It infuriated them."

Valeta's eyes widened. So the emperor knew how to incite the people. She had also thought about using the people, although not in the same way. Crossing her arms, Valeta leaned back against the carriage. If he had used the people as a weapon before, then he would surely see how she would try to use them as a

shield.

"The imperial castle was so broken it was impossible for them to govern. Nobles were either corrupt or running amok because of the lack of discipline."

"Sounds like chaos."

"It was. The people were desperate for a leader." He nodded as if he were proud of Valeta. "However, the youngest prince was strangely self-composed in the midst of all that chaos."

"Seems like he was smart, even as a child."

"That's right. He was only twelve years old, and he had the power to win over nobles, persuading them. Of course, Duchess Delphine was there, too."

"Mm..."

"He took the side of the servants in the imperial castle and bought the people food with his own money. He dispatched soldiers and provided fresh water for all."

A benevolent, almost gentle expression flashed across his face. The reason why she'd spoken so carelessly was because of that strange benevolence of his. She had to admit that she'd been at fault. Looking back on it now, the emperor's expression wasn't all that different from Reinhart's. It was the look of someone who knew how to take advantage of people's emotions. They had the ability to see through people's true natures.

"The emperor had Guilian, the alchemist, look into the situation. Things started calming down after that. Everyone shouted about how the curse was over and that it was all thanks to the youngest prince."

"The magician isn't as cunning as him. If anything, he's a little more... earnest," Valeta mumbled in a small voice as she tapped her chin.

Reinhart lived the way he wanted. He had no problems with bowing his head in order to achieve his goal, but he wouldn't resort to doing things behind the scenes like that. His style was to destroy everything with his own two hands.

"If that's true, then I don't think we have time to prepare. I should've been more careful with my words. It never occurred to me that he was like that."

After their encounter, the emperor would never believe that Valeta would just walk straight into his grasp. There was only one way for him to take her. He would find a way for her to enter the imperial castle.

*I don't know what method he'll use, though.* One thing was clear. He wasn't going to sit back and watch. She was sure that Reinhart was up to something, too, but she hadn't heard any news.

"Come to think about it, you haven't mentioned anything about the top-tier potions."

"No. Did that bother you, Your Grace?"

"It made me a little sad because you didn't seem to trust me, but otherwise, I'm not too upset. It's ridiculous of me to ask for your trust when it hasn't been that long since we first met."

Duke Delphine answered Valeta's straightforward question honestly. He had no choice but to. He was beginning to see how he could talk to the child. It didn't matter how long he waited or how often he explained himself. If he didn't lay it out for her, she would never understand.

"I've been watching you for a long time," he said.

"Yes. I found out after hearing the two of you talk."

"That's why I want to tell you that you don't have to doubt me."

Valeta stiffened as she cast a look at the duke. Then, she lowered her head as if in thought, before lifting her head again. She sighed. “I don’t believe in favors. If you don’t want me to doubt you, then please expect me to pay you back. However, I understand what you’re saying, Your Grace. I know in my head that you mean well.”

The duke listened quietly.

“I know that this might seem frustrating and suffocating. You probably can’t imagine why I’m so uptight all the time, but...”

Valeta slowly lowered her gaze. She carefully chose her words, trying not to hurt the person with this rare show of sincerity.

As he watched the girl, whose eyes were lowered in thought, Duke Delphine thought about how much like a prisoner she was, stuck down in the depths of the sea and unable to escape.

“This is the way that scoundrel and I have been living. It’s not that hard for us to drop to our knees and bow. We don’t have any pride left to swallow.”

She had to kneel in front of Count Delight so many times, with her forehead pressed against the floor, that she had no hesitation about doing so again. Even if someone tried to pick a fight with her, apologizing was no longer a matter of pride to her. Valeta leaned against the window of the carriage, a vacant look on her face.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Oh...”

“That and I... Well, we might have been better off if we’d met someone like you ten years ago.”

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 51

Duke Delphine's face crumpled in despair. House Delight was under the protection of the imperial family, and it had been impossible to make contact with the girl when there were imperial soldiers hiding all around their manor. There was no telling if someone was watching, making it nearly impossible to get the child out.

Valeta shrugged, a smile painted on her face. "I don't particularly like Reinhart. However, I've never pushed him away. Of course, I've never embraced him either. And that will probably never change."

Duke Delphine felt like he couldn't breathe as he listened to Valeta speak in a cool, collected voice.

She continued. "Even if we know that we're both decayed, fraying pieces of rope, there's nothing we can do. Thinking about it now, we're pretty twisted, aren't we? I wonder if I'll be able to unravel myself from him before I die."

She had no idea if he would chase after her for the rest of her life. Her dream was to live a normal life, but for some reason, it felt like that dream was moving further and further away no matter how hard she tried to reach for it. Valeta watched the torch flickering endlessly through the window.

"I feel like I was normal once, but now I see everything as a tool. My skills, people... even you..." she murmured, laughing humorlessly. "This is depressing, isn't it?"

She knew that things were different now than in the past, including her previous life and the vivid memories of her childhood. *Would I be able to change even if I wanted to?*

Mingling with all those people must have tired her out. Not to mention the emperor's double-edged words, Guilian, and the crown prince's changed demeanor. *I really want to get some sleep tonight.*

Suddenly, remembering Reinhart's magic, she frowned. She must be going crazy. Why was she thinking about him at a time like this? Probably because his magic was so effective... Valeta let out a deep sigh.

Duke Delphine leaned back against the carriage seat and was silent for a long time. Meanwhile, the well-maintained carriage rushed along quietly.

\* \* \*

"I thought I told you I'd show up if you called my name," Reinhart said with a troubled expression as he stood on the roof of the carriage, his arms crossed. The moonlight illuminated his long, silver hair. His red eyes blinked lazily.

The magician sighed softly, accidentally having eavesdropped on Duke Delphine and Valeta's conversation. It wasn't difficult to piece together what had happened. *Something must've happened at the imperial castle.*

The emperor was proving to be more troublesome than expected, not to mention his right-hand man, the alchemist. At the same time, he was also facing far more enemies at home in the Magicians' Tower than anticipated.

Not only that, Reinhard realized that his power wasn't as stable as he'd believed. It was a good thing that he hadn't tried to go after Valeta the second she ran away. If he had gone after her, he would have missed everything. He sighed again.

"Failing to apologize is a declaration of war."

He had to come up with something.

The carriage arrived at the Delphine Manor. Valeta stepped out, staggering with

exhaustion. Reinhart approached her from behind and gently poked the back of her neck. A small magic circle appeared and melted into her body.

“You...!”

The magician caught her in his strong arms as she suddenly fell unconscious. He smirked at the duke.

“My master went through all kinds of new things today, so she must be tired. She isn’t very honest with herself, but I should help her sleep. Slaves exist for their master’s comfort, no?”

Reinhart disappeared for a moment from Duke Delphine’s sight before reappearing again right in front of him, all within the span of a few seconds.

“Where’s the child?”

“What an uninspired nickname. She’s in bed,” Reinhart replied with a shrug. He chuckled as his long, pale fingers reached out for Duke Delphine’s neck. The soldier standing next to the duke stiffened and drew his sword, but the duke raised a hand, gesturing for the soldier to back down.

Reinhart took the opportunity and grabbed him by the neck. “So... What were you telling my master for her to look so exhausted?

“Nothing. I just told her that there’s no reason for her to be suspicious of my favors.”

“What’s that...?”

A strange expression took over Reinhart’s features, and he released the duke. Duke Delphine took a deep breath as he observed the man’s bewilderment. The sharp tension between the two of them vanished in an instant.

“Is this that famous ‘obligation of the nobility’ that you aristocrats are known

for? I don't know what kind of foolish sentiment that is, but you should just take what you can get before you regret it," Reinhart said.

"What do you mean?" the duke asked.

"Just as I said, stop pretending to be nice and just be honest with what you want. You do want it, right? Master's abilities—powers that are impossible for you to get."

Duke Delphine looked at the head of the Magician's Tower for a moment before rubbing his face with his hand. He felt like he was rehashing the same thing over and over again between these two children.

"There's a ton of things you can gain from my master, just like that alchemy stone I gave you last time. Both high-quality and top-tier potions are extremely valuable, no?"

Duke Delphine sighed. "Let's stop talking about this. I just expressed my opinion. That's all."

The magician shrugged. It was certainly none of his business. There was another reason why he was here: he had to warn the duke.

"The emperor has his sights set on my master, right?"

"Yes, and I don't think he's going to give up."

"He won't. And it seems like the Magicians' Tower is getting in that greedy pig's way."

Reinhart looked up at the night sky, basking in the light of the delightful full moon. He sighed, a smile forming on his lips.

"Why do you smell like blood? Where have you been?"

Reinhart's smile broadened at the duke's questions. "A battlefield?"

"There aren't any wars going on in the empire right now."

Reinhart shrugged.

Upon further examination, Duke Delphine could see dark stains on the magician's robes. The scent was unmistakable—blood.

"I'm sure the whole world will know by tomorrow morning. You better protect my master. Also, I think it's better if you follow through with that contract or whatever agreement that you have."

"The preparations still aren't ready yet."

Reinhart frowned as he looked at the duke. He could see why this man, with his deep convictions and sense of justice, was intent on protecting the girl. *He doesn't understand.* He wasn't seeing Valeta Delight for who she truly was. He narrowed his eyes. "Master needs people who are willing to use their bodies as a shield."

"What...?"

"Master wants to open a potion shop, yes? She's not exactly a saint, so why do you think she wants to do that? She wants to use the dim-witted commoners as a shield."

Duke Delphine's eyes widened as the magician patted him on the shoulder a couple of times before squeezing it tightly. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Who would be able to protect her when the imperial castle and nobles are vying for her in their greed to hoard life-saving products?"

"No..."

"Your Grace." Reinhart reached out and stroked the duke on the cheek, his cold fingers lightly brushing against his skin without any ounce of sincerity. "If you try to force us into the square way of life that you're used to living in, you'll break us all. There's no reason for you to get ruined as well."

Reinhart turned back to bask in the moonlight. Not a hint of hostility could be sensed from his crescent-shaped eyes. Then, he bent forward and leaned in close to Duke Delphine's ear.

"Throw her away if you think you can't handle her. You're more than welcome to," Reinhart whispered, his voice almost angelic. Furrowing his brows, the duke bit his lip. For a second, it felt like the magician was controlling his mind with magic. "Having her crawling back to me after being abandoned by everyone... is exactly what I want."

He was grinning as he spoke. The magician's voice moved away, no longer close enough to tickle his ear, but Duke Delphine still felt a little faint.

"The thought of Valeta falling back in my arms, trembling, with nowhere to go is enough to excite me."

The duke scoffed. "How can you be so crude? Why would you want that for someone who's already so hurt and broken?"

Reinhart took a few steps back and tapped his chin. He snickered. "What's wrong with being broken? I like Master when she's broken, too."

Duke Delphine paused. "What?"

"It's nice having her depend on me, unable to do anything. Responding to each and every one of my touches, eating everything I give her without a hint of suspicion. That sounds nice, doesn't it?"

Duke Delphine was growing light-headed. Reinhart was far more twisted than

he previously thought, so much so that he was beyond saving. The magician shrugged his shoulders with a sigh and turned around.

"Really, if I could push her off a cliff and save her from her despair only to have her thoughts be filled with me as a result, that would be rather nice."

"Do you really want that for the child?"

"Why not? There are a lot of people who are looking for her, and she'll be exploited no matter where she goes. If that's going to happen to her anyway, wouldn't it be better if I lock her up and look after her instead?"

"Haven't you... ever wanted to see her smile, really smile, for once?" the duke asked.

Reinhart's eyes widened. He tilted his head and crossed his arms. He had never once had that thought. Had she ever smiled genuinely before? *Maybe once?* Thinking about it now, Reinhart thought that he might have seen her smile when they were really young. But it was so long ago that he couldn't recall the circumstances or reason behind it.

"Anyway, you're free to use Master as much as you want. Throw her away once you're done."

"How cruel."

"You won't be able to accomplish anything without a bit of cruelty."

Duke Delphine rubbed his brow in response and, instead of answering, he turned around. It had been a long day. *I never thought I'd find out Valeta's true motives like this.* He had found it strange that Valeta wanted to sell potions, but he never thought that this would be the reason for it. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

As Reinhart watched Duke Delphine walk away, a magic circle appeared

beneath his feet, and he vanished into thin air.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 52

\* \* \*

The new head of the Magicians' Tower was a foreign figure in the tower. Typically, the position was never vacant for long periods of time—though the longest vacancy was about ten years. The previous head would typically seek out a successor before they died, and in the case they weren't able to find a new head, the other magicians would look for one instead. However, Reinhart's story was rather peculiar. He hadn't even been born until a good while after the passing of the previous head.

It was strange because the lives of both the current and succeeding heads of the Magicians' Tower usually overlapped, but that was not the case at all this time around. And that wasn't all. Reinhart had further delayed his return to the tower, leaving the position vacant for a total of thirty-some years.

This prolonged wait had created small cracks, the small cracks had turned into anxiety, and that anxiety had led the magicians to search for a new head.

Balteer Baroksis. Acclaimed for being one of the most distinguished, wisest magicians in the tower before Reinhart had taken his place. He was a snowy-haired man, so old that it was impossible to tell exactly how old he was, especially since he typically looked like a middle-aged man.

Balteer Baroksis wasn't a greedy man, but he had his beliefs. He'd been acknowledged by Caspelios, the watchdog of the tower, as another head, although for different reasons. Reinhart had slaughtered the magicians in the tower when he'd come to take power, rewarding any who resisted with death.

"How long do you think your childish antics will work?"

"You can bring down the gods as long as you have the power," Reinhart said with a

*snort. He was proud and powerful and was, unfortunately, intelligent enough to use that to his advantage. However, he preferred using his hands rather than his head.*

*"How long do I think these antics are going to work? Until someone stronger than me is born..." Reinhart said, his red eyes gleaming with madness. He was an untethered beast and bared his teeth as such. "I won't stop."*

*"Oh..." Balteer started weeping with sorrow, and the moonlight reflected off the tears that streamed down his face.*

*Reinhart was a strikingly beautiful man whose power surpassed all the other heads to the point where he was as powerful as a god, but he lacked conviction. The only thing he had was cruelty.*

*"If you promise to be a righteous head, I, Balteer Baroksis, will swear to be your hands and feet."*

*"Sorry, but I don't have the patience to listen to barking dogs."*

*Reinhart snapped his fingers just as Balteer flourished his cane. Jet black and maroon magic collided with each other, causing a huge wave to ripple in the air.*

*"How deplorable. To think that you're the head we've been waiting for," Balteer said.*

*"Hm? I find this all rather entertaining."*

*"You need to learn what despair is to realize that power isn't everything."*

*With these last parting words, Balteer disappeared. Reinhart, once the slave of a count, stood covered in the blood of countless people in the center of the small floating island known as Tartarose.*

*He'd officially become the new head of the Magicians' Tower, ruling over his fellow magicians through fear. The magicians, overwhelmed by the smell of blood and paralyzed by fear, were already praying for his reign to be over.*

*Not long after Reinhart's rise, mysterious deaths began to occur around the empire, deaths that were caused by a disease, akin to a curse. Overnight, the cursed began to lose their sanity, their bodies shriveling up like mummies or losing body parts.*

*The people called it "God's Curse."*

*As time passed, rumors spread that the dead were beginning to move on their own, and even stranger stories of how the decaying corpses of animals were running around as if they were alive appeared as well. The living dead, called "rezir," gave off the pungent smell of death and spread all kinds of diseases, sending the empire into chaos. At the same time, massacres, similar to Reinhart's annihilation at the Delight Manor, began happening all around the empire.*

*All the signs pointed to a single person who could be the cause behind all of this, and it didn't take very long for people to begin drawing their swords, pointing them toward that one person.*

\* \* \*

Her head felt so clear. Valeta slowly opened her eyes without the usual groan that accompanied her mornings. Everything that had happened after she left the carriage was a blur.

She could still recall the warm touch on her neck. Maybe it was because his body always ran hotter than hers, but the feeling made her shiver. Sitting up, she leaned against the headboard and hugged her knees to her chest.

"Really? Ugh, that bastard..."

He was probably the reason why she had such a good night's sleep. Why had he shown up and left without showing his face or causing a fuss? Something must've happened if he came all the way here.

*Now that I think about it, maybe it happened. Things were now heading in a*

direction she could no longer recall from the novel. Unless it appeared to her in a dream, the story was no longer of any help. It was news to her that anything like *that* had happened to Reinhart.

I see. So that was why Reinhart had said that when he first met the future hero of the story. There was a reason why he wanted to make Terion the protagonist. She thought it was purely for his own interest, but apparently not. It was all out of revenge.

After that incident, Reinhart had completely disappeared from the rest of the novel, only reappearing shortly after Terion had grown into a man and learned to fight with a sword.

“Corpses...” Valeta murmured.

Duke Delphine spoke as if the youngest imperial prince had caused that incident. However, he hadn’t mentioned anything about the dead coming alive. From what she could tell, there were differences between what was happening during Reinhart’s reign now and the time before when the emperor had still been a prince.

*Were those mysterious deaths a precursor to the strange rezir phenomenon?* At the very least, it could be useful to know the differences between how things had been back then and the events that were going to happen to Reinhart going forward.

The same went for the past. When Valeta thought about it, it didn’t make sense how a twelve-year-old boy was able to kill people and turn them into walking corpses. Could there have been another person pulling the strings behind the then-prince?

If she thought about it, Balteer Baroksis seemed to be the most likely culprit. But Guilian, the alchemist whom the imperial prince had a close connection with, was a possible candidate too. Either way, it wasn’t out of the question that

one of the two had caused all this. If the culprit was an alchemist, symbols would be involved. If it was magic, then Reinhart would know.

Valeta reached out and grabbed a pen and paper from a nearby desk. Balancing the paper on her knees, she started writing down everything that came to mind. Soon, she started to get the picture.

The story hadn't changed that much, and though there were a few changes that she had made when she'd entered into this life, overall, they had no effect on the story: although it was a week late, Reinhart had massacred everyone in the Delight Manor, and while he'd spared everyone in the Nursery, he'd still saved Terion, encouraging him to learn the sword.

She didn't know the details, but Valeta was sure that something had happened in the Magicians' Tower. Caspelios hadn't gone into detail, but Reinhart had looked rather happy when he returned.

The purge of the Magicians' Tower had yet to begin during her time there, but it could be in progress right now. Everything was going according to the story. While her existence changed the timing or the way the events unfolded, in the end, the outcome was the same.

*That doesn't mean Reinhart is going to disappear too, right?* It felt unlikely. The reason why she was able to roam freely like this was because she had the high-level elementals, Gene and Nereid, but also because she knew that she wouldn't die at the mercy of the magician. She'd be surprised if Reinhart disappeared.

"I hope that worst-case scenario never happens."

What if the emperor or someone around him had instigated the incident she'd thought of earlier? What if they wanted to cause it again? And what if she got caught in the middle of it all? The emperor could get his hands on her if he got rid of Reinhart based on the assumption that he was the one behind all this. At the same time, he'd probably capture the Magicians' Tower.

*All of this will be over once Reinhart awakens as a transcendent, but... As far as she could remember, the Magicians' Tower, no, Tartarose, the name of the dungeon in the underworld, would be destroyed by someone at some point in the future.*

*That, and there was a period when Reinhart was unstable, wasn't there? He wasn't always perfect. There was a time when the Magicians' Tower had problems too. Caspelios, the watchdog of the tower, was able to use his power to maintain his form, but most of the other magicians had disappeared. That was the place where Reinhart would reunite with Terion, when he was looking at the ruins of the tower.*

"So that's what happened."

The strange puzzle pieces were falling into place. Valeta shivered at the pleasant feeling. However, she remembered that both Caspelios and the Magicians' Tower had returned to their original state. Hadn't the novel ended with Reinhart looking down at something in the sky room?

"A symbol that can kill someone by taking away their body..."

Valeta needed to find out more about these strange deaths. Alchemy was about the law of equivalent exchange. You could only obtain something if you gave up something of equivalence.

What were they obtaining in place of a human body? What was the equivalent of it? If these human parts were being used, something was being created in return. Nothing came for free in alchemy. In order to get something, something had to be given up. But there was nothing to give or take from someone who was dead.

She sighed. "I haven't felt this frustrated in so long."

The fact that she was being taken advantage of in this game annoyed her even more. She had played along with Reinhart until she got sick and tired of it. Did

she have to play along with the emperor too?

"Wait, so, how did everyone end up at the end?"

She couldn't remember what happened with Terion. After their story, after everything was over, Reinhart had lived in solitude. That was the end of his story, with him quietly looking down from his tower as if he were a god watching from afar. That scene had lingered in Valeta's mind long after she had finished reading the book.

*Why do I only remember details about the supporting characters?* Of course, it could have been because of all the times she had desperately wracked her brain for any information about him.

Valeta ran her fingers through her hair. As much as she hated him, she hated how she couldn't stop thinking about him. They were so entangled with each other that it was impossible not to always have him on her mind.

She rose out of her bed.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 53

Valeta took a light shower by splashing water on herself, then got dressed and left her room. As she went down the stairs, she crossed paths with Duke Delphine who was on his way up. Instead of continuing up the stairs, he stopped and raised his head.

"You're up, Valeta."

"Yes."

Then she recalled the scene she'd made yesterday. What in the world was she thinking saying something like that? Sighing as the memories came back to her, she was beginning to grow exhausted with her own antics. *Maybe it's because I slept like a baby, but I feel like I can think straight.*

Duke Delphine looked pale.

"Did you not get any sleep last night?" she asked.

"Just a little," Duke Delphine started. "I had a visitor late last night, and I had a talk with him."

"Really?"

"Yes. Also, there was something I didn't get a chance to ask you, Valeta."

"What is it?" She nodded, waiting for his question.

"Oh, but why don't we have breakfast first? Do you mind if Duke Leon joins us?"

"Of course not," she replied.

Duke Delphine weakly smiled as he turned around. There was a strange air around him, almost as if she could tell that the duke had met with Reinhart last night. It was likely they'd discussed something important.

Valeta trailed behind him, his gait smooth and steady, surprisingly so. How was he able to move so perfectly, so smoothly, almost like water? Of course Valeta had learned how to walk properly, but her body felt stiff in comparison, as if she was just going through the movements.

As she trailed the duke into the dining room, she noticed that Duke Leon was already sitting at the table, leaning back in his chair. Perhaps he had had his eyes closed for a moment, but he threw Valeta a slightly dazed look. His eyes slowly moved. His dark gray hair and black eyes were eye-catching in many ways.

"Hey," he greeted.

"Good morning," Valeta replied, taking a seat at the table.

Duke Delphine took a seat after her and let out a deep sigh. The food hadn't arrived yet. "That man came to talk to me yesterday."

"I see," Valeta said with a nod.

"I have yet to hear the reason why you want to open a potion store. Would you like to explain?"

"Oh. I didn't tell you the reason?"

"No. Not yet."

Valeta sighed, nodding. She had never properly explained herself because she had lost track of things. Duke Delphine gave her a faint smile while Duke Leon was already looking elsewhere, his gaze cold.

"I needed something that could keep me from the imperial family."

Silence followed.

Duke Delphine felt even worse now that the girl had confirmed his worst fear and wondered how he could best explain to her how these kinds of thoughts weren't appropriate.

*"I feel like I was normal once, but now I see everything as a tool. My skills, people... even you..."*

She was without malice. It was just as the child had said: she saw everyone and everything around her as a tool. She didn't know there were other ways besides just using people. How to ask for a favor, how to ask for help. No adults had ever been around her to provide help and, as a consequence, she had learned how to do everything on her own to survive.

"Alchemy is an excellent tool. It can provoke the imperial family and the nobles who are monopolizing the potions," she explained.

"People are inherently selfish, so they'll do everything they can to get their hands on them. I will give the people what they need, and they will gladly throw themselves in front of me to protect me."

It made sense as far as Valeta could tell. She nodded proudly. It was innovative. She would use the people the same way the emperor did.

"Of course, if the people get injured, I can just treat them with high-quality potions. I don't want them to die, after all."

"Valeta, what if... Just, what if... What would you do if one of the people who tried to help you died?" Duke Delphine asked.

Valeta blinked at the question. What if someone died? She had never thought about that before. *It can't be helped if I want to survive, right?*

Wasn't this how the world worked? She had to step on other people in order to survive. She had to be stronger than everyone else. Wasn't that why she was getting stepped on? Wasn't it natural for people to use one another if they shared the same interests? All business relationships were like that.

"I haven't thought that far, so I don't know yet. I don't want people to die, of course. There are always potions I can use on them, right?"

"Then think about it." Duke Leon, who had been silently listening the entire time, finally spoke up.

Duke Delphine, who was lost in thought, blinked at the man's brief words. Valeta slowly turned toward his friend.

"But it's inevitable... Isn't it?" she said. "People use each other for their own greed."

"What if I was related to the deceased?"

Valeta was at a loss. Related to the deceased? Was he asking her to see from the relative's perspective? She wished she could do that, but it was impossible to stand in their shoes. Her one and only family member was Count Delight, and frankly, she was glad that he was dead.

*What was it like in the past?* She couldn't remember her family from her past life. Her memories were so hazy. Of course, that couldn't be helped. It had been twenty years since she'd lived that life.

"I'd be saying the wrong thing if I said it was inevitable, right?"

Her response left Duke Leon speechless and concerned. He was beginning to understand why Duke Delphine was so frustrated, why he'd been venting about it all last night.

She was a smart and clever child. There was no way she couldn't understand

what they were trying to say. Duke Leon, who had been slumped against his chair as though he were exhausted, suddenly narrowed his eyes and sat up straight. He turned to Valeta, who was sitting next to him, and looked at her.

“Don’t you hold anything precious?”

“I used to have things that were precious to me, but they’re all dead now. I had to kill them. If I didn’t, Father would have killed them using even more painful methods.”

Judging by the evenness of her tone, he could guess how many precious things she’d had to kill.

*“Miss Valeta... She’s kind, but cold. She doesn’t see me. If I died, she’d probably think that it couldn’t be helped. I’m right next to her, but she seems so far away.”*

Duke Leon blinked and pushed the memory of the conversation he had had with Terion recently to the back of his mind. “How do you feel when you think about it now?”

“It’s been so long ago that I don’t remember. However, I’ll never lose anything precious again because I don’t plan to take care of anything ever again.”

That went for animals, beasts, and insects. Nothing. She had stopped giving her heart to others long ago. Her world had become a little dreary because of that, but she found it easier to live her life. She would help them if they needed it, but she no longer opened up herself to them, not even to give them a single pat on the head. She had to remain vigilant because affection could creep up on her without her realizing it.

“What about before?”

“I felt like I shouldn’t have given them my heart.”

Upon hearing the girl's reply, Duke Leon looked toward Duke Delphine; he was frozen, his head in his hands. The girl had a rotten core that had to be scraped out and replaced with something new, but the rot was so pervasive that it would be impossible to remove all of it.

"What in the world did Count Delight make you do...?" Duke Delphine asked.

Valeta shrugged her shoulders in response to the loaded question. "It wasn't that bad. He liked it when I obeyed him and followed his orders, but occasionally, I'd save the animals out of foolish pity."

"No..."

"Father said I could only use alchemy on his orders. But sometimes I'd use it on the animals. I had to pay the price, and..." Valeta trailed off, but Duke Delphine could guess what she had been through. He slowly turned his head, his knuckles white.

"But I think I understand what the both of you are trying to say," she said with a nod. She thought she could understand. It was simple: they didn't want people to die. People were generally resistant to the idea of other people dying.

Of course, Valeta didn't particularly enjoy it either and could even vaguely recall that feeling. However, it was hard for her to put herself in other people's shoes because her own emotions had been so forcefully blunted.

"So... You're saying that I should try to avoid death as much as possible because if one dies, their family will be sad. Is that right?"

"In a way..."

Duke Leon agreed after a long pause. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes again. Valeta turned to look at Duke Delphine.

"If I make the first move, the emperor won't be able to attack me. An emperor

can't rule if he doesn't have any subjects," she said.

"I see. You have no intention of changing your plans?"

"No. I have nothing to my name, so this is the only thing that I can do to safely gain the favor of others."

Valeta didn't deny it. If she was going to change her mind out of guilt or morals, she wouldn't have made this kind of plan in the first place. However, she needed to take care of a few things before that. "Also, I wanted to—"

Suddenly, Duke Leon stood up without a word. His companions looked up in surprise.

"Where are you going?" Duke Delphine asked.

"Out. Keep eating. I'll be back."

"Oh... We'll wait for you—"

Duke Leon suddenly jumped out onto the dining room balcony. Since the house was built on a slope, even the first floor was high up, yet the duke had jumped from the second floor like it was nothing.

"I'm so sorry for my friend. He can be a little... unrefined at times."

"Not at all. I'm more impressed that he can do it at all. He's quite strong," Valeta said.

Just as swiftly as he had disappeared, he reappeared again less than an hour later with something in his arms. It looked like a fluffy ball of cotton. He strode over and placed the ball of fluff into Valeta's arms. A rare look of surprise crossed her face. She leaned back and started fiddling with the bundle in her arms.

The creature whined. Valeta hastily withdrew her hand at the sound and looked down at the cotton ball.

“Dreux, you...” Duke Delphine’s voice trailed off.

“A gift.”

“Oh...”

Valeta opened and closed her mouth. This didn’t make sense. What was this white thing? A puppy? A kitten? A cub? And a striped little thing at that—the black stripes ran from the top of its head down to its tail.

“You want me to...?”

“Raise it.”

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 54

"No... I said I wasn't going to take care of these things anymore," Valeta said.

Duke Leon looked down at her. The girl, who was a whole head shorter than him, was shaking her head and frowning. He carefully moved her hand down so she could hold the tiny creature with both arms.

Valeta resisted. "No, like I said..."

"You don't have to kill anymore. Count Delight is dead."

Duke Leon rarely ever spoke so much. Duke Delphine's eyes widened slightly.

"Yeah, I know that, but..."

"You don't."

Duke Leon reached out and stroked her head a couple of times. It was a very gentle movement for such a large hand riddled with calluses.

"I don't want to take care of it because I feel like it's going to die," Valeta said.

"It'll grow for as long as you take care of it," Duke Leon replied.

"Dreux, is that... a snowta?"

Duke Leon silently nodded and Duke Delphine held back a wry smile.

"Where on earth did you get a snowta?"

"It arrived on a cargo ship."

"Aren't they endangered?"

"Quite so," he replied quietly.

Valeta gave them a weary look. She didn't understand why they were making her take care of an endangered animal. She pushed the cub back to Duke Leon.

"If it's endangered, I'm sure there's another place that can..."

"You."

"No. What I'm saying is that I..."

"You can do it."

Duke Leon sat down in his chair, folded his arms, and closed his eyes as if he was done talking. No, the way he crossed his legs meant that he had no intention of continuing the conversation.

Duke Delphine spoke instead. "Valeta, I think you should know that Dreux is more stubborn than a mule."

"You're kidding," she murmured helplessly.

"I'm not."

Duke Leon had delivered the final blow. A rare, vacuous look crossed Valeta's face. She blinked before bowing her head.

"It'll die," she tried again.

"It won't," Duke Leon replied with finality.

The creature looked like it wouldn't be able to survive if she were to drop it on the floor this instant. And what were the chances of her losing it? She didn't want to face having something she cared for dying in front of her again.

"Come to think of it, didn't you say you had something you wanted to ask me

earlier, Valeta?"

"Oh... I wanted to learn more about the people who lost their body parts." She barely managed to answer as the snowta kept wriggling around in her arms.

Duke Delphine turned his head, trying to contain his laughter. "Oh, you mean roste?"

"Roste?"

"Yes. In the underground, we call the disease 'roste.'"

Valeta's eyes widened as she nodded. "Yes. I'm curious about what kind of disease roste is. The symptoms, how it spreads, how quickly it spreads, and whether it's infectious."

"There are no symptoms," Duke Delphine said. "It's not an infectious disease either. It just appears one day. It's closer to a curse rather than an actual disease."

Valeta nodded. Alchemy could turn people's body parts into ice, but it couldn't take them away. If it was impossible with alchemy, the only possible explanation left was magic.

*I'm sure Reinhart will be able to take care of it if I tell him.* If that was the case, then Balteer Baroksis was the most likely culprit. He was depicted as being skilled and experienced, so he must have been a rather seasoned magician. He could probably give Reinhart a run for his money.

"Why are you suddenly asking about the disease?" Duke Delphine asked.

"Um..."

Valeta fell silent. She wasn't sure if she should tell him how she had dreamed about the novel again, how the disease might not only be connected to the

emperor but also to alchemists and magicians. Would they even believe her if she told them? And if they did, what were the chances that they'd keep it a secret? What were the odds that her secret wouldn't leak?

"The payment," Duke Leon said.

"What?"

"You want to pay me back, right?"

Valeta reluctantly nodded her head. She was pretty sure she'd only told Duke Delphine about that. How did he know?

"Consider this payment," Duke Leon said as he reached out and patted Valeta's head. Dazed, she looked up as he crossed his arms and looked down with an expressionless face.

"Also, 'thanks,'" he said pointedly.

"Huh...?"

"I think he wants you to say 'thanks,'" Duke Delphine said.

Surprised, Valeta whipped around to see Duke Delphine smiling. Duke Leon was looking down at her smugly, without any shame or embarrassment. He met her gaze unflinchingly.

"Why does this have to be the payment?" she asked.

"I'm strong, so I don't need it."

"Then you could sell it for money...?"

"I'm wealthy," he said lazily.

"For honor?"

“Don’t need it.”

She fell silent. This man was one of the hardest people to deal with. She felt like she was talking to a wall. Even Reinhart was easier to talk to. He was both straightforward and intuitive, and his words were clear. Once a no was always a no.

“It’s the price for my help.”

Valeta still did not reply.

“What do you say?”

“Okay...”

She wanted to ask why this was the only way she could pay him back, but in the end, she couldn’t argue with him. He didn’t need potions because someone who was strong enough to jump from the second floor definitely had no use for them. He was a duke, so he didn’t need fame or money.

*He really doesn’t need anything.* Valeta snapped her mouth shut. She wanted to refute him, but there was nothing to refute. It was almost unfair.

“Terion is well.”

“What?”

“Oh. I let Terion decide what he wanted to do,” Duke Delphine jumped in. “He said he wanted to learn the sword, so Dreux is teaching him.”

“Huh... I see,” Valeta said.

This was following the events of the novel too. It had only been a matter of time before Terion found his way to Duke Leon. And as the main protagonist, Valeta wished for him to grow up well.

*Who did he learn from originally?* Terion was the main protagonist, but it was concerning how little she knew about his story. At least Reinhart had acknowledged his swordsmanship. She nodded. She wasn't worried.

"You can come visit him next time," Duke Leon said.

"Okay."

"And if you need something, just tell me."

"Oh... Then, could you tell me a little bit about Guilian, the alchemist? For example, if he... How long has he known the emperor?"

Duke Leon narrowed his eyes and nodded. He had, in fact, investigated Guilian and did have some information about the man. "I'll look into it."

Duke Leon chuckled and gently stroked Valeta's head. Then he glanced down at her, waiting for a reply.

"Th-thank you," she said.

"You mean, 'thanks.'"

Valeta's eyes widened. She had no idea what was going on. Was she allowed to treat a duke so informally like this? With reluctant eyes, she looked at him before glancing down at the bundle in her arms.

"Thanks..." she said.

"Dreux."

"Dreux..."

"Together," the duke pressed.

"But..." she faltered and let out a long sigh. What did he want from her? From

the start, she didn't understand why he wanted *this* to be the payment for lending her his help.

"Thanks, Dreux," Valeta said.

"Good," he said with praise. He got up and left the dining room, a weary look in his eyes.

*Bang, bang, bang.*

Valeta's face scrunched up as she heard a series of crashes and slamming after Dreux left the dining room. Duke Delphine furrowed his brows too.

"He hasn't been able to get any sleep for the past few nights," he explained.

"Oh..."

How much sleep did one have to lose in order to become a walking zombie? Valeta sighed, a weary expression on her face. Suddenly, the bundle in her arms squirmed. She looked down.

*Meow?* She smiled wryly. The snowta was warm and soft. *Do I even have what it takes to care for this?*

The tiny creature that was snoring away in her arms looked like a baby tiger. It was amazing how it was able to sleep in the arms of someone it had just met. *How can it be so unsuspecting? Isn't it supposed to be a wild beast?*

This was probably why it had found itself captured and stowed on a cargo ship. Valeta narrowed her eyes as she gently tapped the snowta on the nose.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 55

“Give it a name and raise it. I’m sure it will be rewarding to watch it grow up before your very eyes.”

“I’m not going to name it. Do you really think I’ll be able to take care of this?”

“It’s possible if you try.”

Valeta leaned back in her chair instead of responding to Duke Delphine. Even though her daily life was now comfortable, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was sitting on a bed of thorns. She felt like she was walking deeper into the sea, and right now, the water was up to her chest. If she took a few more steps, it’d be up to her neck, making it harder to breathe.

“Keep in mind, a snowta only grows depending on how much love it receives. I don’t know how the cub got separated from its mother, but I’m sure it’ll grow if you show it love.”

Valeta didn’t have the heart to do that. No matter how much she thought about it, she didn’t think she could do this.

“We were interrupted before you finished explaining,” Duke Delphine said.

“I was just thinking about whether magicians and alchemists were involved, just like how the emperor and roste are linked,” she said.

“Magicians and alchemists?”

“Your Grace, don’t you think...”

“Carlon,” Duke Delphine interrupted. Valeta sucked in a strained breath. She never thought she’d hear Reinhart’s request coming from yet another person. “Is

the reason why you don't want to give that cub a name or call us by our names because you're scared that we're going to die?"

Valeta was silent.

"Will you call me by my name if I promise I won't die?" the duke asked, his voice tinged with laughter.

She stood there, blinking. Not calling people by their names was a habit that had stuck with her from having grown up in the Delight Manor—a habit she'd developed because she knew that Reinhart was going to kill everyone in that household. She did it so that she wouldn't get attached to all those people who were going to die. In the end, every single one of them *had* died, confirming her belief that it had been the right thing to not spare anyone any affection. Now it was ingrained in her.

"Something like that..." she eventually replied.

"I'm not going to die. The same goes for Dreux too."

Valeta was lost in thought before she suddenly remembered Reinhart.

"Yesterday, did you meet Rein— I mean, did you meet that scoundrel?"

"Yes... I did," Duke Delphine answered, frowning as he nodded affirmatively. He didn't want to hide it. His face would've given it away even if he tried.

"He said something, didn't he?"

"That's right."

"What did he say?" she asked.

The duke hesitated. Was it appropriate to tell her? He had no idea. Reinhart was abnormally obsessed with her, more than willing to take her even if she was broken. Valeta spoke up when she noticed that Duke Delphine wasn't going to

answer her question.

"I fear him the most," she said. "That man can take everything I have away from me."

Not a single one of his obsessions had managed to escape unscathed. She couldn't forget the day when he confessed to her that he'd killed someone. Of course, he hadn't stated it outright, rather letting her know that the two attendants who had happened to run their mouths had the misfortune of falling to their deaths.

"So why didn't you push him away every time he came?" Carlon asked.

She had no answer. Was it out of pity? Was it self-sacrifice so that others could live? Was her reason that high and noble? Valeta knitted her brows. She couldn't think of a good answer.

"I don't really know," she said, shaking her head.

"You can figure that out step by step. Don't feel like you have to rush yourself. I'm sure Dreux gave you that cub with that in mind."

"Ah," Valeta murmured. She ducked her head again.

"Honestly, there's nothing more I can teach you, given your current alchemy abilities. It's quite refined. However, I still think it's best if we revisit the basics."

To use a metaphor, Valeta's skills were an old, run-down building built upon a shoddily constructed foundation. Since the foundation was poorly made, it was only a matter of time before it would collapse, bringing the entire building down with it.

"Only if you help me open a store first," she countered.

Duke Delphine held back a laugh, his expression troubled upon hearing her firm

response. He stared expectantly at her.

Valeta made a face before slowly opening her mouth.

"Carlon..."

Her voice was meek, hardly loud enough that an ant might hear.

"Okay... Let's submit a permit tomorrow," he said.

"All right."

Duke Delphine nodded as Valeta slowly rose from her seat. It seemed that she was being careful not to wake the cub from its sleep. The duke bit his lip, afraid that she would catch him laughing. Even though the child couldn't see it, she still had some kindness left in her. It was just that her way of thinking wasn't normal.

"Also, I'll tell you what I know about Guilian tomorrow," he said.

"You know him?"

"How could I not?"

There were a lot of rumors about him since they ran in the same line of work. Most of the rumors were unsavory, but he was also known as one of the best alchemists in the imperial castle.

"Okay, thank you," she said.

"Go get some rest. You're more than welcome to visit the market... No. If you want, we can go underground in the evening."

Valeta's eyes widened. She nodded.

"Sounds good."

"Well, then you should get some rest."

"I'll try."

The duke nodded in answer.

\* \* \*

"The complaints coming from the imperial castle are incessant."

"What complaints?" Reinhart cocked a brow at Silon's worried voice. The sky room was in disarray, a reflection of Reinhart's abilities, which had recently been running rampant.

"They're saying that if you don't issue a proper apology for laying a hand on the crown prince and for the massacre of the Delight household, the relationship between the imperial family and the Magicians' Tower will be damaged."

"What do they want?"

"A written apology, support for the magicians affiliated with the imperial family, and a ton of magic stones."

Reinhart suppressed a snort. Was that really worth the effort for those pigs? If he gave out a rotten apple for every head he cut off, did he really have to ask the apple for its permission?

"Ignore them."

"The imperial castle has started dispatching magicians to the tower," Silon replied softly. His voice sounded like it was full of troubles. Reinhart was keenly aware that the Magicians' Tower was not on his side. The only people who were loyal to him were probably the watchdog and the two men standing in front of him.

"So what do you want me to do? Kill them all?"

"I don't think it's advisable to solve all of your problems through murder and violence," Kurt said.

"Kurt," Silon said in warning. His eyes widened as he tried to stop Kurt from speaking. The other man responded by standing straighter, his hands behind his back. But he didn't retract what he'd said. He simply frowned and stood his ground. His short hair made Kurt look warm and friendly, but his expression was anything but.

Reinhart narrowed his eyes. "You learned how to bark. Oh, how you've grown."

"If it makes you a more respectable head of the Magicians' Tower, I'll bark as much as I need to."

"Ha..."

Reinhart further narrowed his eyes as he played with the ends of his hair. He had no idea what he wanted. He didn't know what he had to give. What the hell was he supposed to do?

"If this is about purging everyone in the Magicians' Tower, then I'm confident," Reinhart said.

"Sorry?"

"It's not hard to have mercy for those who have no free will of their own and are easily swayed by people," he said, opening and clenching his fists. The motion, although barely perceptible, was threatening. He continued, "It's easy for me to kill all the people standing in my way."

"My lord."

"If not that, then I don't know what you want me to do. If all this knowledge is

going to be crammed into my brain, there should be more to it than just the memories of those crazy bastards."

The days when survival had been his only objective were long gone. Maybe that was why she'd left this place. Perhaps the two of them needed to have more of that sort of experience after being locked up for so long.

"If you don't know, you can always ask. Please don't hesitate to use us. We are your tools."

The head of the Magicians' Tower narrowed his eyes, a look of annoyance crossing his face as he sat on the bed. Then he clicked his tongue and let out a long sigh.

"Master hates blood. She hates murder. Violence too. I want to bring my master here. But for that to happen, this place has to be safe and quiet for her."

"Are you talking about that nice socoro...?"

At Kurt's question, Reinhart snapped his fingers as a dangerous smile played on his face. In an instant, dozens of ice spears surrounded Caspelios, Silon, and Kurt, poised at the ready.

"I'm your master, right?"

"Yes."

"Right. You should watch your words, for Master is my master."

Kurt wordlessly knitted his brows. Every magician held a deep grudge against socoros. Silon stepped in front of Kurt and bowed his head.

"Then what should we call her?" he asked.

"You can call her Miss Valeta. Master is fine too."

All three hesitated.

"We will call her Miss Valeta," Silon replied.

Reinhart curtly nodded before he turned. His powers were running wild, she wasn't there, and his head hurt. He frowned. "She'll be mad if I go around killing everyone..."

He had so much to endure. Reinhart snapped his fingers, dissolving the spears of ice. Silon and Kurt started to relax, easing the tension in their bodies.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 56

“So what do you want me to do?” Reinhart asked.

“Learning about the Magicians’ Tower is of utmost importance.”

“Most of that information is in my head.” He tapped his temple with a forefinger.

“But you know very little about the current situation, the magicians in the tower, the situation both in and outside of the tower, and not to mention the island in the sky,” Silon said.

“The island in the sky?”

“People started calling this island the ‘island in the sky’ about ten years ago, whereas the Magicians’ Tower is known as ‘Tartarose.’”

Reinhart crossed his arms, nodding. An island floating in midair. He could only imagine how hard the twelve magicians, the “Magicians of the Beginning,” had to work in order to create the island. *Even I can’t do permanent magic like that yet.* He was curious about this lasting magic.

Silon continued, “Mmm, and... I think it would be a good idea for you to learn about the basics of magic.”

“You’re kidding...” Reinhart gave Silon a bewildered look. The basics of magic? How could he say that to someone who already knew how to use almost any magic?

“I know you are talented by nature. However, if you learn the basics, you’ll be able to broaden your horizons,” Kurt responded in place of Silon.

Reinhart held back a laugh. He was willing to overlook a lot of things, but these

two were beginning to overstep their boundaries. His hand twitched a few times before he splayed it out, sighing.

“What do you think about learning from Balteer?”

“You mean that old codger who was a candidate for the head of the tower?” Reinhart scoffed.

“Balteer Baroksis loves this tower more than anyone. If you request his guidance, he won’t refuse, my lord,” Kurt said.

Reinhart narrowed his eyes and, placing his hands on the bed, leaned back slightly. The ceiling of the sky room was rather high. If he wanted to, he could light up the night sky.

*“Haven’t you... ever wanted to see her smile, really smile, for once?”*

He blinked slowly. Had he ever wanted her to smile? Not really. He didn’t think there was a need.

“Come to think of it,” Silon said, “I noticed you’ve been leaving the tower often these days. Has something happened?”

Reinhart’s gaze slowly landed on Silon before turning away in disinterest. “It’s none of your concern.”

“But—”

Reinhart quickly cut him off. Recent developments were putting him in a bad mood. It was clear what they were aiming for. “I want you to stay with my master. Guard her around the clock in shifts. She’ll understand if you tell her that you’ve been sent on my orders as circumstances have deteriorated.”

“My lord,” Kurt started, his voice full of discontent.

Reinhart raised a hand. "Treat her how you would treat me."

"Yes, my lord," the two replied simultaneously.

Whatever Balteer had to teach Reinhart or whatever the Magicians' Tower was going through didn't matter. The most important thing was protecting Valeta from the imperial family.

*I was wondering what was causing the recent chain of events...* It wouldn't be long before the rumors reached the capital. The challenge was trying to stop that from happening.

"Now, go. That's an order," Reinhart said. "You'll see once you start watching over her. My master is in grave danger."

Silon frowned upon receiving their new orders, and he turned to look at Kurt.  
"You go first."

Kurt sighed as his expression made clear his reluctance. He released his hand from behind his back, and as he lifted his hand into the air, a long, dark crack appeared. Reaching into the void, he pulled something out. A long wooden staff—an essential item for magicians.

It was magnificent, despite the lack of embellishments, and pitch black, as if it were made from charcoal. There was a round, blue magic stone embedded into the top of the staff.

"I'll be back."

Reinhart was silent. His arms were now crossed, and he was seemingly lost in thought. Holding onto the magic staff, Kurt began chanting a spell, coordinates weaving their way in through his words. A magic circle appeared, and he vanished.

Silon, Caspelios, and Reinhart remained rooted in the quiet that followed.

\* \* \*

Whoosh.

Valeta knitted her brows at the sudden brightness that illuminated her room. The source of light was emanating from a magic circle, so she could guess who it was. She sighed and closed her notebook.

"You don't have any patience..."

She turned and blinked. Behind her was a man in a dark robe. He had short, black hair and equally black eyes. He was somewhat of a familiar sight for Valeta.

"Weren't you at the manor...?" she asked.

"I don't think we've been formally introduced. My name is Kurt, Miss Valeta."

Valeta remained silent. The greeting was nothing but polite, but she was surprised at how combative he sounded. She had never been greeted with such plain hostility before.

Grr!

Valeta looked down at the snowta that had trailed after her. The creature that was neither a puppy nor a tiger cub started to nip at her heels. Though she attempted to nudge the snowta away with her foot, it ran up again, this time grabbing hold of the hem of her skirt. Kurt frowned.

A snowta? he thought. He had no idea why such a special, spiritual creature was with a socoro. Still frowning, he looked up.

"Did he send you?" she asked.

"Yes. I, along with another magician, Silon, will take turns guarding you in twelve-hour shifts until my lord tells us to stop."

"Why?"

"He said we've been sent here since it seems that the situation is worsening."

Kurt didn't know what he meant by that. He knew that he was one of Reinhart's closest confidants, yet his lord never discussed anything with him. Kurt couldn't remember the last time Reinhart had even asked him a question prior to today. The number of times the magician would leave without a word of warning was truly upsetting.

"Oh... I knew it." Valeta let out a low sigh, as if she knew what Kurt was talking about. His eyes widened. How did this girl know when he was left clueless? She asked, "Did he ever lay his hands on the crown prince and the imperial magicians?"

"Yes. The elementalists and magicians that were with the socoro, I mean, the human crown prince. He killed the elementalists' elementals, severing their connection, and made it so the magicians can never use their powers again." He went on, "On top of that, he's committed horrific acts against dozens of magicians who wanted proof that he was the head of the Magicians' Tower and then healed them when he was through with them."

Valeta brought her hand to her forehead as she found a chair to sit in. This was bound to have happened sooner or later. She figured that the capital would be talking about this in a few days' time. *Let's say that happens. What will become of the roste?* Frowning, she began to tap her pen on the notebook.

Kurt, who had been silently watching her, spoke. "Do you know what's going on, Miss Valeta?"

"Didn't he tell you?"

Kurt remained silent.

She gazed back as if she were lost in thought before shrugging her shoulders. If Reinhart hadn't told him, then he must have had a reason not to—perhaps he thought it unnecessary.

"I suppose it's not a big deal. It's none of your concern."

Kurt's face contorted, and noticing his reaction, the girl awkwardly rubbed the back of her neck. It was uncomfortable in so many ways for everyone involved when one was constantly forced to be on guard.

"Also, please keep your expression as neutral as possible when you're guarding me," Valeta said.

"Aren't you going to send me away?" Kurt asked.

"I think I know why he sent you."

Reinhart must've been feeling on edge having the emperor as his opponent. And if the events of the novel were true, then the Magicians' Tower would be a warzone for some time. Many would doubt the head of the Magicians' Tower, and many more would turn their backs on him.

*But these two guys were with him until the end.* If Reinhart asked them to kill themselves, they'd do what they could to carry out his orders, even faking it if they had to. He would continue treating them as his two trained dogs, and both men would accept such treatment as if it were expected.

*Knock, knock.*

At the sound of tapping at her door, Valeta rose from her seat and opened the locked door, and although Kurt was reluctant to listen to the socoro, he quickly

made his face impassive as he took a step back.

"What is it?" Valeta asked the maid at the door.

"Oh, His Grace asked me to relay a message. He's wondering if you would be fine with pushing back dinner until after your excursion. What would you like me to tell him?"

"I see. It doesn't matter to me. Tell him to do as he wishes. I'll be down soon."

"Yes, Lady Valeta."

At Valeta's decisive reply, the maid bowed with a bright expression on her face, closed the door, and walked away. *This is fine, but...* How could she explain the guards to Duke Delphine? She had received quite the scolding from him the day he'd caught her sleeping in the same bed with Reinhart.

*How many times have I heard "Never let a brute like that sleep next to you"? Just the thought of having to face another scolding was exhausting. "Excuse me, Mister Henchman, could you step out for a bit? I need to change my clothes."*

"It's Kurt."

Ignoring his comment, she silently pointed toward the door. He nodded, frowning, and turned to leave. Once she was sure that Kurt was gone, Valeta hid her notebook deep inside her drawer. The contents of the notebook were written in Korean rather than the language of the empire, but she didn't want to get caught in either language. Korean wasn't a language of this world, and it had an entirely different writing system from any of the native languages here. However, if she wrote in the language of the empire, that would cause only more problems.

*Better to be safe than sorry, but I'd rather not get caught at all.* After a quick shower and a change of clothes, she opened the door.

The moment she stepped foot outside the door, she heard a pitiful yelp. Valeta looked around and found that the puppy—no, the snowta—trying its best to cling onto her ankle.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 57

The soft, fluffy feeling around her ankle was a sensation Valeta had never felt before. She awkwardly nudged the snowta away with her foot. However, it toddled back over and latched onto her ankle again.

"I need to go," she murmured, her face troubled.

The snowta tilted its head. *Mrow?*

She suppressed a sigh. Maybe her defenses had weakened with time, but she couldn't deny how cute it was. Still, she was afraid to touch it. What if it died? What if she misjudged her strength and hurt it?

"I'll be back soon."

*Mrow? Mrow!*

The snowta replied as if it understood, but refused to let go of her ankle. Clearly, it didn't understand. Valeta rubbed her face as she let out a deep sigh.

"Just bring it with you," Kurt said.

"What if that kills it? I got it as a gift, you see."

Kurt gazed at her with an incredulous expression, as if she had said something utterly absurd. He had never heard of a spiritual creature like a snowta dying just because it went outside.

"It won't die," he replied wryly.

Valeta shrugged and looked at him. "It could. You don't know that it won't."

"I am your guard."

"Yes, but this little one isn't under your protection," she pointed out.

"If it's yours, I'll do whatever I can to protect it."

"Is that so?"

Kurt nodded.

Valeta stood there pondering for over ten minutes before bending down and picking the creature up. "I don't know how to deal with something so weak. I feel like a single touch will kill it."

Sensing that she didn't seem like she was expecting a response, Kurt remained silent. With the snowta nestled in her arms, the girl descended the stairs and saw Duke Delphine waiting for her at the bottom.

He looked incredibly sharp in his cape and fedora. Duke Delphine was reaching out his hand to her when he caught sight of the stranger following behind her. He frowned. His outstretched hand stiffened in the air for a moment before he lowered it.

"Valeta, I believe we have another stranger with us."

"Yes, this is Kurt. He's one of *his* henchmen."

"Oh?"

Valeta nodded in response before turning to Kurt. "And this is His Grace, Duke Carlon Delphine. He's the master of the manor and my benefactor."

"I have no desire to learn the name of a mere socoro."

"As you can see, he's a magician," Valeta said as she turned back to the duke, ignoring Kurt's hostility.

Duke Delphine's expression remained flat. Rude and disrespectful people were the worst, and it just so happened that magicians tended to fall under that category. "I see that the henchmen are no different from their master," the duke said with a frown, dropping all politeness.

Kurt glared at him and took a step forward. "Watch your words, socoro. I don't know where you stand in this world, but..."

"Ah! Your Grace, do you mind if I bring this along?" Valeta interrupted, pointing at the snowta.

Narrowing his eyes, Duke Delphine glanced at what the girl was holding in her arms. He had tried so hard to get Valeta to call him by his name, but she had reverted back to "Your Grace" in a matter of hours.

"If I can't, I can leave it behind. Just say so."

The duke's gaze was fixed on her violet eyes, dull as ever. She didn't seem as though she expected his approval, nor did she even look like she wanted to persuade him. Valeta didn't seem to realize that she wouldn't have brought the crying animal along with her if she hadn't already started forming an attachment to it.

"Valeta, I think you forgot to say the magic words. I'm pretty sure I taught you this morning."

"Oh..." She frowned. Just thinking about saying those unfamiliar words made her reluctant to even try saying them. "I'll just take it back."

"It's not that difficult, Valeta. All you have to do is say a few words. Don't be scared. Go ahead."

Valeta bit her lip. Why should she have to do something she didn't want to for this cotton ball in her arms? She was starting to get an idea of what Duke

Delphine wanted. *Like this is going to change anything.*

A habit that she'd kept for twenty years wasn't going to change that easily. She sighed again. How many times she had sighed at this point? She could play along with his requests all he wanted but wondered if they'd ever become anything but pretend. It would be better for her to run away before she got used to submitting to his requests.

"Please... Carlon. Can I bring it with us?"

"Of course. Good job, Valeta."

The girl blinked, watching the hand that stroked her head move away. She determined that she had to leave before she couldn't differentiate him from being a tool that was there for her to use and a person. Did he know how corrupt someone could be, or was he just choosing not to see that side of her?

"But why has *he* suddenly sent a guard to protect you?" Duke Delphine asked.

Valeta blinked. The corners of her lips lifted, yet again adorning a painted-on smile. An odd expression came over the duke's face in response.

"He's always unpredictable. You don't have to worry about it," Valeta replied.

*"It's none of your concern."*

Kurt stiffened. He hadn't been guarding her for long, but one thing was for sure: Reinhart and Valeta Delight were more similar than they liked to admit. That was why they could understand what one another was thinking. That was why the socoro had hesitated before replying to Kurt's questions earlier. She knew what his lord had meant. Kurt clenched his fist.

"Valeta," the duke called.

"Yes?"

"Learning to walk on your own is fine, but don't forget. You have people around you."

"I haven't forgotten. I'll ask for help when I need it."

Duke Delphine rubbed his face and groaned mildly with exasperation upon hearing the girl's reply. He nodded slowly for a few moments before speaking again. "Very well. However, it would be great if you could ask for help from the start."

"I think I'm fine without any help right now."

The duke hesitated. "I know, but if you don't lean on people occasionally, if you always insist on doing things by yourself, you'll make the people around you sad and disappointed."

Valeta nodded her head, but she stood there quietly as if she didn't really understand.

Kurt looked away, his expression wooden. It seemed that there was an invisible wall here too. And who was behind that wall? If he had to guess...

"So, are you also bringing that magician with you?" the duke asked.

"Yes."

"Does he know what's going on?"

"This man is his henchman. He knows how to keep a secret."

Duke Delphine fixed his gaze on Kurt for a moment, assessing him. Then he nodded. This brusque man certainly looked like a magician. It was clear how much he disliked humans.

"Let's head off then. We'll be leaving through the back door today," the duke

said.

"The back door?"

"That's right. You see, officially, I only have business inside the manor today." Duke Delphine walked through the aforementioned door. Hidden in a wall of red bricks was another door which the group used to exit the manor. Following behind him in a robe, Valeta caught sight of a shabby carriage tucked between some bushes.

"I'm going to teach you some of the basics of alchemy today," he said.

"We're having lessons? I thought we were going to visit the underground."

"Two birds, one stone," Carlon said. "From now on, you'll be doing your lessons there. Your workshop will be there too. You may have noticed, but there are no alchemy tools inside the manor."

That was true. No matter where she looked, there were no signs of anything related to alchemy inside the duke's home. She had never checked the basement, but she surmised that it was simply used as storage, judging by all the attendants that were constantly going in and out of it.

*They must be prepared for the worst.* Duke Delphine had purposefully kept the manor free of any tools. In the case that he was caught, there would be no evidence, and without hard evidence, a duke of the empire couldn't be arrested, no matter how powerful the imperial family was. After all, Carlon was from a prestigious family, one of the founding families of the empire. He couldn't be messed with that easily.

"Then how is it that you've been able to hide?"

"My family has always been..." The duke paused, tapping his chin as if he were searching for the right words. He opened his mouth to speak again. "Let's say

that when our family discovered this unique ability, the hunting was at its peak."

"Oh..."

"That's when the underground lair, the Alchemist, was first established."

As he explained, he pointed a long finger downward. Duke Delphine got in the carriage and was about to reach out a hand to help Valeta up, but the girl had already started climbing in, her hand holding up the hem of her skirt.

Duke Delphine, who was about to assist Valeta, froze. Kurt mirrored him. They had no idea that she could get into the carriage without stairs. It should have been difficult for her to climb into the carriage while she was wearing a flowy dress, let alone both a dress and a robe, but she had done so effortlessly, without any hint of struggle.

Duke Delphine withdrew his hand and smiled awkwardly. "Let us be off."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Kurt followed behind Valeta and hopped into the carriage. He had no desire to ride in a contraption made by a socoro, but it would be difficult to guard his charge if he was conspicuously traveling on the roof of the carriage.

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## Chapter 58

“Come to think of it, do you get newspapers delivered to the manor?”

“Of course.”

“If it’s not too much trouble, could we get one more newspaper? I’d pay for it, of course.”

Duke Delphine crossed his arms, looking rather displeased. When he didn’t respond, Valeta carefully reflected on what she had just said. She sighed. “Is this considered a request too?”

“You’re free to ask me for anything that you cannot do on your own.”

“I see.” Valeta nodded. How would she ask for this? She slowly racked her brain. It would’ve been nice if learning how to ask someone for help was like learning a language, with root forms and past and present tenses that she could memorize. “Then...”

She knitted her brows.

“Please, Carlon. Can we have one more paper delivered to the manor? I’ll pay for it.”

Both Kurt and Duke Delphine were speechless. Valeta had asked for help, but in such a way that she was still doing everything on her own. Kurt looked at her with slight astonishment. He already knew how abnormal his master and this woman were, but he didn’t realize how inflexible they could also be.

“Valeta... If you can already pay for it, then what’s the point of asking for my help?”

"I don't know how to order it," she said. "Also, if I have them delivered to the manor, it would be an inconvenience to you as someone who has to receive them."

Duke Delphine brought a hand to his forehead. What poor reasoning. Apparently, she wasn't very good at explaining herself. It seemed that Duke Leon had been trying to make the child understand through brute force, but Carlon didn't have that kind of personality.

"It won't be an inconvenience to me," he said with a sigh.

"I see. Then which part should I change... Oh, should I leave out the part about paying for it myself?" Valeta asked with a tilt of her head.

She wasn't a machine, but Duke Delphine wanted to ask her how she'd become so bent out of shape. Just what kind of environment had she grown up in and how had she been treated for her to become this heartless? It seemed like the child was brainwashing herself rather than learning to experience the world through her feelings. She was simply learning a math formula, memorizing a pattern, and remembering the incorrect parts so she could modify and adjust them later.

There was a long pause. "I feel like that will take us some time. Why don't we talk about the past instead?"

"The past?"

"Let's start with something simple." Talking about family was easy enough. Duke Delphine mused for a moment before he spoke. "Um, so... Where's your mother? Come to think about it, I don't think I heard anything about Countess Delight. You can shake your head if you don't want to talk about it. We can move onto a different topic."

"My best guess is that my father either killed her or sold her off," Valeta replied

as she stroked the sleeping snowta.

The duke was silent, struck speechless by what he had just heard. Apparently, there was no topic that was safe for them to discuss. He could feel Kurt's hateful gaze reaching him from across the carriage.

"Ahem, ahem..." Duke Delphine cleared his throat a couple of times, quickly bringing his hand to his mouth. He tried to keep his smile fixed in place. "Ah, I see. Count Delight, he..."

"Yes. If you really think about it, I'm more like an adopted daughter. I don't think Count Delight ever married. They call me a bastard, right? I was born out of wedlock to a woman my father once embraced."

The duke didn't miss the way she said "a woman my father once embraced" rather than "my mother." The girl didn't seem like she missed her mother either, the way her voice was as dry as sand.

"Don't you miss her?" he asked.

"No. Do I have to?"

"Were you separated when you were young?"

"Yes, because my father was very happy that I was born with this magic circle." Valeta pressed a hand to the eye that contained the ancient magic circle. She hardly remembered her mother at all, and though Valeta thought she could remember the soft caress of her mother's hands, she wasn't sure if it was real. "Thanks to that, I heard that my mother was treated differently. That's why we were only able to stay together until I was about three years old. But you see, she wasn't in her right mind either."

Valeta's smile carried no warmth as she tried to recall the details from her dim memories. It had all happened when she was so young that she had no bitter

feelings about it. Her mother had been a woman jealous of her own newborn baby. But her destiny had always been ill-fated. Sold to Count Delight, they had become entangled, and she'd become pregnant. That was all Valeta knew. Whenever she asked for more details, annoyed glares were the only answers she got.

"She wasn't in her right mind?" the duke pressed.

"Apparently, she tried to kill me several times. I don't have a lot of memories of her, but I can still remember the look on her face when she tried to strangle me." Valeta couldn't understand what the woman was thinking, strangling a child while spitting out malicious words, tears streaming down her face. "Once, she tried jumping from the second floor with me in her arms. Father had dragged her away somewhere after that, and that was the last I saw of her."

No one spoke.

"If she's still alive, she may have been re-educated in the Nursery before being sold off again. She could have also been killed for being crazy, but... Who knows? Death may have been more merciful for her."

She couldn't explain it, but Valeta rather wished that her mother was dead. Of course, Count Delight had not been a merciful figure. If her mother were still alive, it would be difficult to imagine what troubles she might have encountered in her life.

"Don't you want to meet her?"

"I don't know..." Valeta trailed off, lost in thought. She never once thought that she needed her mother. Perhaps it was the fact that she still could remember her past life, but she had also been forced to mature quickly in this new one, always preoccupied with trying to survive under Count Delight's rule. "I don't feel like meeting her. If I do, I feel like I would kill her."

"What...?" Duke Delphine didn't hide his shock.

Kurt frowned. Whenever he looked at Valeta, he felt like he was looking at his master—the flat tone and attitude, reminiscent of one who'd lived a thousand lives already.

"If she was chased away, I don't think she'd have been able to live a normal life anywhere. Wouldn't it be better to have died than to live a life like that?"

Both Reinhart and Valeta were twisted, crooked, ruined beings. Maybe it was because they'd grown up together, but their way of thinking was the same.

She continued, "That's what I'd think if I was in her place. I'd be thankful if someone killed me."

Kurt thought his master had inherited the cruel disposition from the many generations of the heads of the Magicians' Tower. It felt like a stretch, but the heads' powers seemed proportionate to their cruelty.

Valeta felt the silence in the carriage and snapped her mouth shut. Belatedly, she slowly thought back on what she just said and rubbed her forehead in frustration. "Judging by both of your reactions, I think I said something that wasn't normal. I'm sorry. Please forget what I said."

After that, Valeta vowed to try her best to make herself as normal as possible, but fixing such ingrained habits would not be easy.

"Not at all," Duke Delphine replied. "Clearly, I brought up a difficult topic."

"No, not really. But I should be more careful from now on." She chewed on her bottom lip and rubbed the back of her neck. Her voice was filled with, not regret, but self-reproach. She sounded disappointed for not having given the right answer. "There will be times when I make mistakes because I grew up in such a confined space with no baseline for normal. If you point it out, then I'll

correct myself."

"That sounds like... you're gathering information on how to act appropriately."

"Yes, well, my goal is to live a normal life. I have to learn how to blend in with other people without drawing attention to myself," Valeta replied, nodding along in agreement with Duke Delphine's statement. He was right. She was simply keeping track of the wrong answers. She wouldn't be wrong twice.

The duke tilted his head. "When did you meet that boy? The head of the Magicians' Tower, I mean."

"I must have met him when I was nine years old."

"Nine, hm?"

"Yes. Father gave him to me as a birthday present."

That was when she first realized that the beautiful slave boy was not a present but a ticking time bomb. Valeta had fought tooth and nail to survive, but in the end, her efforts hadn't made much of a difference. However, she was still alive. *And now he's strangely obsessed with me.* Still, it wasn't all bad. She was able to live a relatively normal life now.

"In your opinion, what kind of person was Count Delight?" the duke asked.

"A meticulous planner. He was a vain and greedy person, but not stupid. But he wasn't the type to take up other people's advice."

If he had listened, then he still might be alive. In retrospect, if Count Delight were still alive, then she would have been trapped working in the imperial castle like a slave. All things considered, Reinhart had saved her from that fate. Of course, she had planned on running away the moment she was free from that bracelet.

"That reminds me. Has there been any news today?" she asked.

"News?"

"Yes. Like an incident or accident of some sort?"

"Not particularly," Duke Delphine replied.

Valeta slowly nodded her head and dropped her gaze. If Reinhart had dispatched guards, then that must mean he'd seen something. Whatever it was, it must have been a threat to her safety.

"Henchman, what's the situation at the Magicians' Tower like?"

"It's Kurt..."

"Do I have to call you by your name?"

"I don't know why you're looking down on me. I have a perfectly good name, you know," he snapped.

Valeta's eyes widened. Was she looking down on someone by not calling them by their name? She closed her mouth and met his gaze. "Do you think that I'm looking down on people?"

"Yes."

"I don't call anyone by their names. Doesn't that make it fair?"

"Then that means you've been looking down on everyone," Kurt responded firmly.

Valeta glowered. Human relationships were always so difficult. She grew attached to people if she called them by their names. How were people able to go around calling everyone by their names?

"If you call someone by their name, you form a relationship with them. When you have a relationship with someone, you start getting attached to them," Valeta said, a dubious look on her face.

"Excuse me...?"

"Wouldn't you feel something if that person died...?" she said.

When she noticed Kurt's eyes widening in surprise, she stopped speaking and let out a deep sigh. She glanced at Duke Delphine only to find that he was as pale as a sheet.

*Wrong answer, I guess,* Valeta thought, taking mental note of her mistake. Sure enough, the atmosphere inside the carriage became even chillier.

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## Chapter 59

Valeta couldn't tell if the atmosphere was chilly or full of pity.

Then again, she figured she couldn't avoid calling people by their names anymore if she wanted to live a normal life from now on. It'd be good to start practicing now. Besides, she was beginning to get used to calling Carlon and Dreux by their names.

"I understand. How are things at the Magicians' Tower?"

"It's in chaos," Kurt replied, only after seeing that Valeta had acceded.

"Are the only people supporting Reinhart still you, your partner, and the watchdog?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I see. Balteer must be very influential," Valeta muttered. It meant that there was still a chance that Reinhart would disappear. Everything would have been better if Balteer Baroksis had openly embraced Reinhart instead.

"How do you know about him?" Kurt asked.

"I overheard some people talking about him in the library, how he couldn't accept Reinhart," Valeta replied honestly. Fortunately, Kurt didn't press further, simply nodding his head.

"Has he gone somewhere recently? Does he frequently go out?"

"Yes," he said after a pause.

"I hate to interrupt your lovely conversation, but we've arrived," Carlon said.

Valeta broke her gaze from her newly appointed guard as Duke Delphine rapped on the carriage door twice. Once the door opened, the duke got out first. The moment Valeta was about to hop out, he caught her in his arms.

"Wait! Your Grace!"

"Carlon."

"Carlon! Wait!"

The carriage left quickly, growing smaller in the distance. Valeta looked around, noticing how it was almost dawn. Her mouth had dropped open in surprise at the way Duke Delphine was holding her.

*Meow!* Carefully, she cradled the snowta against her chest with one hand.

"It may look like there's nothing here, but this is the entrance to the Alchemist," the duke said.

The carriage had stopped in front of a forest. Judging by the sound of some distant murmuring, the forest couldn't have been far from the capital's market. *Maybe it's less of a forest and more of a thicket*, Valeta thought. At any rate, this entrance was completely different from the pub entrance.

"After you pass by four large paulownia trees, turn left at the fifth tree, then continue past another seven maple trees before turning right. Are you taking note of this?"

"Yes, yes." Valeta nodded, a slightly bewildered look on her face. She had long forgotten that she was still being carried in Duke Delphine's arms, and he was watching her as she fretted, trying to remember the path.

*So this is a new side of her, huh?* he mused. Not giving her enough time to process the information made her more childlike. It left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Then turn right at the eighth maple tree and you'll see a boulder."

"I see. Is the rock the entrance?" she asked.

"No. All you have to do is stand on top of the boulder, hold a marker, and activate the spell. There's a symbol on the marker, you see," Duke Delphine said, still holding Valeta with one arm. He rubbed one of his earrings with his thumb. "You can bring with you anything that you hold in your hands."

"What?"

"You can hold that man's hand. Once I use alchemy, this location will react along with my marker."

"Oh."

Valeta reached out to Kurt, even though she was still being held by Duke Delphine. Kurt silently climbed on top of the rock and placed his hand in her palm.

"Activate."

An ancient magic circle appeared in the center of Duke Delphine's pupil. At the same time, his earrings lit up with a pale blue glow. Their surroundings changed in an instant.

"Here we are," Duke Delphine said as he set the girl down. They were standing at the entrance of the underground manor. There was a bright glow under their feet that quickly disappeared, indicating that there must be a symbol hidden under the long red rug.

"This is similar to the way you enter the island in the sky," Kurt said.

"This is alchemy too?" Valeta asked.

"That's right," Duke Delphine replied. "This is also considered an exchange. All I did was a small exchange with something that you can't see. Basically, we traded locations."

Valeta's eyes widened. She thought she could only trade a physical object to get what she wanted. Clearly, alchemy was more versatile than she expected. *I've been foolish.* She had been looking at the world through such a narrow lens. Duke Delphine was right. Her knowledge was shallow, limited to only one skill.

*Have I ever made anything other than potions?* She always thought of alchemy as giving something up and getting something else in return. However, she had never known that she could attack someone with alchemy or make weapons from it.

"Are you beginning to realize the benefits of relearning the basics?" the duke asked.

"I am."

"Then I imagine I'll have your full and undivided attention during class today."

"Of course," Valeta said with a nod.

Kurt drifted back to her side, having given the manor a quick scan. He stood tall, bringing his hands together behind his back. "The place seems rather secure, considering a socoro built it."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Duke Delphine replied lightheartedly.

"How do I get a marker?" Valeta asked.

"It must be something that you'll always have with you and never take off and doesn't draw suspicion. We will be engraving a symbol on a precious object."

She slowly nodded, lost in thought. An item that she would always have with

her and never take off? Something precious? She couldn't think of anything.

"I don't have anything like that," she told Duke Delphine.

"Then I suggest you start finding something to treasure."

"If I can't, does that mean I won't be able to get a marker?"

The duke thought for a moment before nodding. It would be good for her to get attached to something. Of course, he was underestimating just how unusual she was—as he was soon to find out.

Looking like she was about to be stabbed with a stake, Valeta stuck out her arm.

"Can you embed the marker in my arm, then?"

"What?"

"I think life would be difficult if I didn't have an arm, so I'd do my best to protect it. Also, the chances of me losing my arm are next to nothing too."

The resounding silence was heavy. Duke Delphine didn't know why this kept happening to him. Although Duke Leon was a man of few words, his approach seemed to be more effective for Valeta.

*Another wrong answer?* Valeta wondered. She thought engraving the marker into her arm would be the most effective way. How could she have known that wasn't an acceptable answer? She scratched her head in frustration.

"I guess I'll have to ask him for the bracelet again." She didn't have the money to buy something as nice as that. But how would she even broach the subject?

"The bracelet?"

"Reinhart put a bracelet on me, one with a tracker. But I broke it and ran away. I'll ask for one the next time I see him. Please engrave the marker on that,"

Valeta said as she lowered her arm.

Duke Delphine frowned, displeased, but said no more. What could he say to a woman who said "my arm" when he asked her if she had anything precious? Maybe studying would be easier after all.

"Valeta, before we start our lesson, why don't we continue our conversation from earlier?"

"Yes, by all means."

The snowta interrupted them with a soft mew.

"You can let it wander around."

"Okay."

Valeta slowly lowered the snowta to the ground before following after the duke. He guided her to the second floor, a part of the manor Valeta had never had the chance to see. The whole place was so flawlessly constructed that it was hard to believe that they were underground at all. It was jaw-dropping.

"First, I want to make things clear."

At some point, Duke Delphine had brought out a tea set. Kurt stood behind Valeta, looking extremely reluctant to be there. He appeared to be deep in thought.

"Yes?"

"I am your guardian," the duke said. "You know that, right?"

"Yes. You told me that."

"Do you know what 'guardian' means?"

"A person who takes care of a child before they become an adult. They make sure their ward is fed and clothed," Valeta said.

Duke Delphine mulled over her response. Choosing his words carefully here wouldn't be any more helpful for the child. After a moment's hesitation, he spoke again. "A guardian is someone who is on your side, takes care of you, and supports you. You can think of a guardian as being similar to a parent."

"Like my father?"

"No. Think of your guardian as a more... normal parent. Duke Delphine quickly corrected her with a vehement shake of his head. Valeta nodded in understanding. She knew very well that ordinary families were nothing like her and her father.

*My head hurts...* Valeta slowly shook her head. The underground manor had no windows, which meant that no sunlight was streaming in. It was amazing yet strange. She would've turned Duke Delphine down on his offer if she knew the conversation would turn out like this.

"I'm sorry, but I think I'm running out of time. I'll try my best not to inconvenience you, but could we continue this conversation after my lesson?"

"Sure..."

Duke Delphine gave a heavy nod as he pulled out a few textbooks.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 60

\* \* \*

"These are all the reports, Father." "I see."

The emperor leaned back in his office chair and rubbed his temples, exhausted. The crown prince watched anxiously, sensing his fatigue.

"The new head of the Magicians' Tower is causing incidents throughout the empire," the emperor said. "It could be a lack of control over his powers or him simply venting his anger."

"A lack of control?" Miloyd asked. "That's impossible. I thought he had great control over his powers. He's definitely venting."

"Hmm..."

"The man I saw had felt no remorse for killing people. According to these reports, the incidents are similar to what happened to House Delight." His fists were clenched, his voice raised.

The emperor flicked through the reports again before letting out a deep sigh. Guilian poured tea into his empty cup.

"Did we get a response from the tower?" Miloyd asked.

"We've demanded an apology along with compensation several times, but we've yet to hear a response," the emperor replied.

"The impudence! Just because he was born with such power doesn't give him the right to use it this way!" Miloyd cried. His blue eyes burned with anger. The magician had toyed around with him and ruined the lives of his priests and

elementalists. He had even stolen Valeta. Now he was taking the lives of innocent citizens.

"And that's not all."

"What do you mean?"

"We haven't made an official announcement yet because I fear it might cause disorder, but strange things are happening again," the emperor said.

"What...? What sort of strange things?"

"When I was still prince, there was a peculiar ailment going around called the 'Roste.'"

"Wasn't that a curse? I heard that you made things right once you rose to the throne, Father." Miloyd's eyes widened. He'd often heard about the disease during his history lessons, about how his father had dispelled the whole situation.

"What do we do? Isn't that a disease with no cure?"

The crown prince's voice started trembling. When the emperor nodded gravely, Miloyd rubbed his face with a shaky hand before he clenched his fists.

"But Father, I heard stories that you were able to eliminate the disease in the past. Can't we use the same method?"

The emperor smiled benevolently at Miloyd's hopeful voice. One of the reasons why he adored his son was because the boy had never doubted him. An idol would always be an idol, and Miloyd's idol was his father. The brave, just prince never doubted his sire. Of course, the emperor loved his son. How could he hate a child who looked up to him with such adoring eyes?

"Roste is a disease that suddenly causes you to lose parts of your body. We

don't know where it comes from, what the cause is, or how it spreads. Depending on which part of the body you lose, you could die instantly or over the course of a week or a month."

"Yes, I heard it was a terrible disease. That's why it was also called God's Curse, wasn't it?"

"That's right," the emperor replied. "Time is of the essence when dealing with the Roste. Chances of survival are higher with medicine."

"Then we just need medicine...!"

"However, the only thing that can bring back lost body parts is an alchemist's potions. Not only that, but it must be a high-quality potion."

"Potions? But the number of high-quality potions we have in our repository are..." Miloyed trailed off.

The emperor tapped his chin, observing the look of dismay on his son's face. He had all the makings of a fine emperor. If only he were a little more selfish and greedy, then he would have been perfect.

"What about potions made by magicians?" Miloyd asked.

The emperor sighed, and Miloyd's face fell with despair as he watched his father shake his head.

Guilian, who had been standing there silently, spoke. "It's not that a magician's potion isn't effective, but at the end of the day, they are imitations of an alchemist's. They can't be compared to the real thing."

"Back then, we had a lot of good alchemists like Guilian on our side. But now..." the emperor said.

There were less than fifty alchemists in the imperial castle. Among them, there

were only around ten who could create high-quality potions, and even then, they were only able to produce one a week. If Roste spread like an epidemic again, they wouldn't have nearly enough. The crown prince quickly came to this realization. He gave an empty laugh, staggered to the sofa, and put his head in his hands.

"What about Guilian?" he asked desperately.

"He is getting along in his years, so he can't make as many potions as he used to. It seems like we need a new..."

The emperor looked down at his son as he spoke in a kind voice. A greedy look passed over his face, gone as quickly as it appeared, but Miloyd, who still had his head in his hands, didn't see it.

"A new, talented alchemist."

"Valeta..."

Miloyd spoke the name the emperor had been waiting for. Indeed, his son was strong and smart. His only shortcoming was his stubborn inclination to stay on the righteous path. While Miloyd may have been defeated due to being caught off-guard last time, he would be able to take on the head of the Magicians' Tower with Guilian while the head's newly awakened powers were still unstable.

"If we're able to join forces with the alchemists that are in hiding, the empire will be able to avoid most of the damage and be able to save the weak as well."

"But those people..." Miloyd started.

"If we're not doing enough for them now, then we can start doing better. You are the next in line to the throne. You can slowly start showing them what you're made of."

Still seated in his chair, the emperor held out a hand to Miloyd, who looked at

the outstretched hand with a distorted expression before taking a step forward.

“Father, I...”

“Son, the throne is a lonely place,” the emperor said as he affectionately stroked Miloyd’s hair, his voice tender. He hugged his son and leaned in close to Miloyd’s ear as he patted him on the back. “It would be nice if you could save everyone by walking down the righteous path, but you would do well to develop some flexibility.”

“Flexibility?”

“Soldiers sacrifice their lives to protect hundreds of thousands of people. The lives of a few are sacrificed to save the many.”

“But that’s... war, isn’t it?” Miloyd asked, his brows furrowed. It had been such a long time since his father had hugged him. His arms were warm, and Miloyd reached out to return his embrace. The emperor gave his son a couple of pats before learning back.

“But it’s inevitable that the powerful will have to make small sacrifices for the good of the many.”

“Father...”

“Guilian, you, and I... We’re making sacrifices. Otherwise, the weak and powerless won’t survive.”

Miloyd nodded as though he understood. The emperor met his blue eyes.

“I understand, Father,” Miloyd said. “I’ll go to House Delphine in the morning and meet Valeta. If I explain the situation to her, I know she’ll help.”

“What if she doesn’t?”

"What do you mean?"

The emperor stroked his chin as he leaned back in his chair. Miloyd swallowed hard. His eyes wavered as if the thought had never crossed his mind.

The Valeta that he knew wouldn't turn a blind eye to the deaths of the weak and powerless.

"I know Valeta will help," he said. The emperor's benevolent smile was unchanging. Although Miloyd was surprised by what his father was suggesting, the crown prince didn't suspect him.

"However, that child spent a long time with the head of the Magicians' Tower. They were both abused by Count Delight. You don't know how that changes people."

"That's impossible..."

"We weren't able to ask the girl what exactly happened in the massacre," the emperor continued. "How can we be so sure that she wasn't involved?"

"Father..."

Miloyd was clenching his fists, his eyes squeezed shut. The emperor patted him on the shoulder. A hint of doubt was beginning to creep into the boy's trembling eyes.

"I'm saying this because I'm worried," the emperor said. "A child who has been abused for too long may have resorted to clasping onto the hand of a powerful being."

"Leave Valeta out of this," Miloyd replied.

"If she is willing to help out, then I won't doubt her any longer."

The crown prince clenched his fists even harder, tendons visible in his arms. He slowly nodded. The emperor quietly smiled as he looked at his son, his face full of trust.

"I'll go to the duke's manor tomorrow."

"Take Guilian with you as your guard this time. We don't want the same thing happening twice."

"Yes, thank you. Have a good night, Father."

"I will. I trust you, son," the emperor said, patting him on the back. Miloyd turned, a thin smile on his face in the midst of the confusion.

Once the crown prince was long gone from his office, the emperor dropped his smile. It took only a moment for all benevolence to vanish from his face, revealing his true colors. Guilian looked at the unsmiling emperor, familiar with this look.

"People despair when their hope and trust are broken with no warning. It's time that Miloyd starts seeing things in a different light."

"Is that right?" Guilan asked.

"Valeta Delight is no ordinary woman. It'll be difficult to get our hands on her. I doubt she's going to walk into the cage on her own."

The emperor had been feeding Count Delight's greedy appetite for a long time, hoping to get his hands on the girl by maintaining a cordial relationship. To think the count had lost his life over something he had picked up off the ground.

"You will get what you want."

"Of course I will. I think she'll even be able to make the medicine that you attempted to make but gave up on," the emperor said, his hand covering his

face, which was now splitting into a greedy smile. The layer of kindness and gentleness in his hazy, blue eyes melted away to reveal greed and desire.

"If he brings her back, you know what you'll have to teach her, right?" he asked the alchemist.

"Yes, I will make sure that my instruction is thorough."

Valeta was to be taught complete obedience to her master, following their orders no matter the reason. Guilian slowly moved to pour more tea into the empty teacup. The little girl seemed self-aware and was quick to assess a situation. She was also quick to judge friend from foe.

*I think I already made an enemy of her, but...* In truth, there were a lot of ways to get her into the imperial castle.

"By the way, I heard that the head of the Magicians' Tower is obsessed with that wench," the emperor said.

"Yes, I think that if you catch her, you'll be able to control the head of the tower to an extent as well."

"I can't wait to see how Miloyd will turn out. He's always shown great restraint and self-control."

The emperor was looking forward to how his son would react when his trust was broken and when he wasn't able to get the thing he wanted. He licked his lips.

"I finally get to see everything I've been wishing for."

Guilian stood silently with his hands behind his back as the emperor cackled into the night.

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# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 61

\* \* \*

"Is that child a genius or something?" Carlon mumbled with a drink in his hand. Dreux Leon, who had come late in the night by carriage after a long day at Carlon's request, had just opened the door.

He took a single look at the other duke and made a move to close the door again.

"I'm leaving."

"Hey!"

*Thud.*

The moment Dreux tried to retreat, Carlon blocked the door with his own body. He fell away from it, groaning in pain.

"You're drunk," Dreux said.

"Teach me your ways. How am I supposed to act around the child? I tried talking to her today, and I was immediately shot down."

"You talk too much."

"Well, you don't talk enough!" Carlon snapped.

"Just be honest with her."

Carlon continued to mumble as he clung to his fellow duke's leg. As a poor drinker, the hard liquor already had him in a stupor.

Dreux narrowed his brows. He couldn't bear to see his friend this way, so he shook Carlon off his leg and closed the door. It was amazing just how weak he was to a single drink. Dragging the bottle toward himself, Dreux was pouring himself a new glass when Carlon trailed after him and took the seat opposite his own.

In truth, they rarely drank together because Carlon was poor company when drunk.

"She's a genius?" Dreux asked.

"She is... It only took her a second to memorize and use a formula I taught her, and she developed a whole new one too."

"Clever."

Dreux nodded as he listened to the other man ramble. The older duke leaned down and laid a flushed cheek on the table. The child had listened more attentively and seriously than Carlon had expected, so the lesson had gone on longer than anticipated. They had skipped dinner and, by the end of the day, he had nothing left to teach her, having shown her all the basics that she was more than capable of applying on her own.

From the beginning, Carlon thought it amazing that Valeta could draw symbols while standing up and her ability to create such pure potions.

"There's nothing left to teach her," he lamented. "I'm unfit to be her guardian..."

Dreux took a sip of his rather tasty drink. Although he couldn't drink much, Carlon had developed a preference for high-quality alcohol after they'd spent so much time together over the years, and Dreux was grateful to be able to partake in his friend's carefully curated collection whenever he came to visit, drinks that he normally wouldn't have been able to try otherwise.

"It's bad. She has no treasured possessions, and she has no desire for one either," Carlon continued.

"She doesn't like to call people by their names because she's worried that someone will die because of it. It's like she refuses to get attached to anything or anyone. I wanted to ask, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

"Ask what?"

"Who she thinks will die if she calls them by her name. Them or herself? I told her that nobody's going to die, but..."

"That child..." Dreux started slowly. "She doesn't know herself."

At his words, Carlon bit back a bitter smile and nodded in understanding. Because she didn't know herself, her behavior suggested that she was still testing her limits. He knew that there was nothing that he could do about that, yet he couldn't help being frustrated.

"I don't know what to do because it seems like she's always on the defensive. It's just... I feel like she's hiding something, but I can't figure out what!"

*There it is. His drunk personality.*

Carlon tended to speak like an old man, but whenever he got drunk, the way he spoke became more young and childlike, as if he were pouring his heart out. Dreux preferred it that way because of the lack of formalities. The younger duke listened as he sipped his drink, Carlon's rambles going through one ear and out the other.

"Hiding what?" he asked.

"That twisted magician sent a bodyguard to protect the child," Carlon said in a huff.

The stench of alcohol began to fill the air. Again, Dreux found it fascinating how drunk his friend could get by a single glass.

"The head of the Magicians' Tower... Now, he's a mess too. Those kids... They act like they can only get help if they give something valuable up in return."

Dreux quietly swirled his glass. There was nothing they could do, even if they did attempt to fix Valeta and Reinhart's rotten cores. They could only wait for the two to figure it out on their own.

In the meantime, it was up to them to embrace the children and show them warmth. If they didn't, the two would live their entire lives without knowing the feeling. That this warmth was okay for them to accept. After all, humans had a hard time forgetting the painful experiences of their pasts, even if it was something that had happened only once.

Carlon went on, "He told me to stop pretending to be nice. Are we sure those two are living in the same world as us?"

"Maybe."

"Ahh... I wish I could bring Count Delight back from the dead just so I could stick his face down the toilet," Carlon blurted out, all decorum forgotten. Dreux's shoulders shook with laughter.

"Oh," he started with a soft sigh, "the Magicians' Tower has been charged with murder."

"The Magicians' Tower? Murder?"

"That's why I was late."

"Were you at the scene?"

Nodding, Dreux took another sip. It was also the reason for his sleepless nights

the past several days. Known as the Empire's Sword, when such cases like this occurred, he was usually the first person they called.

"A town in southwest Talrose, a town in northeast Mysia, a town in northern Kertonan, and a town in west Cicharin. They were all annihilated," Dreux said.

"Entire towns were annihilated...?"

"Indeed."

"Hold on. Are you saying that everyone in those towns is dead? They're all small towns, but you're saying that scores of people have died?" Carlon asked, quickly raising his head from the table.

The news seemed to have sobered him. Dreux took in the shock on his friend's face and gave a curt nod. Carlon's expression hardened. He ran a hand down his face.

"They're all dead?"

"Yeah."

Carlon was speechless. Say each town had thirty people, and there were four towns that had been wiped out. That meant at least 120 people were dead.

"Any witnesses?"

"A child."

"What did they say? Did you hear what they said?"

"Red eyes, silver hair."

Carlon stifled a gasp. The magician didn't seem like he would kill people for no reason. He might have threatened to snap Carlon's neck, but in the end, he never had, had he?

“Do you think it was really him?”

“Don’t know. It seemed similar to the Delight Manor Massacre.”

“Was it that horrible?” Carlon asked. “I’ve read the files too. Something about making a cake of sorts? And how there were limbs scattered throughout the manor.”

Dreux was the one who had investigated and escorted the crown prince through the scene. Sure enough, he nodded. The files weren’t with him, but he could remember it well. He thought it was all so cruel.

“The child will be shocked if she hears about this...”

“You think?” Dreux asked.

“Of course! It might not look like it, but they seem to trust each other a lot and have a fairly good relationship. But isn’t it more complicated if the Magicians’ Tower is involved?”

Dreux simply nodded once. Carlon reached out, refilled his drink, and immediately downed it.

“Ah...”

It all happened before Dreux could reach out to stop him. He blinked, his hand still outstretched, and sighed.

Carlon was beginning to look flushed again, his eyes relaxing. “You’re not sure yet, are you?”

“The imperial family is.”

“They already identified him as the culprit?”

Carlon was mumbling, his forehead on the table once more. The alcohol has

loosened his tongue considerably.

Noticing that his friend wasn't looking at him, Dreux responded, "They have."

Carlon's habit of drinking whenever something wasn't working out hadn't changed even though he was now over forty.

"Come to think of it, she seemed to expect that something was going to happen today. She never told me what it was in the end."

"Happen?"

"Yeah. I think she said that the Head Magician sent her an escort because he was worried that something would happen to her."

She'd never told him what it was about, though. He had tried to put the clues together, but in the end, hadn't figured it out. Carlon sighed and nodded. If he told her about this news tomorrow, there was no telling what would happen.

"I wish she'd just ask me for help..."

"She needs to get used to it first."

"Yeah, you're right."

Carlon nodded in agreement. "That reminds me. She's been taking care of that snowta you got her. She hasn't given it a name yet, though. Where did you get it?"

"A cargo ship," Dreux said.

"Why didn't you send it back?"

"It was stolen."

Carlon understood what he meant by those brief words. Duke Dreux Leon of

the newly established House Leon was not a fan of conflict. Perhaps it was that, or perhaps it was that there were few of similar ranking to them, and the two had grown close over the years.

"Oh, I see. It's not easy sending back an animal like that. What were you going to do with it if Valeta refused?"

"I was going to raise it." Dreux downed the last of his drink and stood up.

Carlon stared at him, his chin propped on one hand, and watched as the younger man put his coat on.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Have a good night."

"I'll be back tomorrow."

Carlon yawned at Dreux's farewell and was unfazed when he jumped out of the window again. Then, finishing the last of his drink, Carlon collapsed onto his bed.

"I shouldn't have drank," he mumbled.

But it was too late for regrets. Soon, silence descended upon the manor.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 62

\* \* \*

“Ugh...”

Valeta slowly opened her eyes, her head throbbing with pain. She had tossed and turned the whole night, feeling as if she were in some sort of fever dream. She was used to the lack of sleep, but the headache that followed every morning was still annoying.

“Would you like some water?”

“Oh. Thank—”

She frowned when she heard the unfamiliar voice and lifted her head. A man with sky-blue hair was standing by her bed. His equally light eyes almost looked clear in the daylight. Pouring a glass of water, he offered it to Valeta, who forced herself to get out of bed, accept the glass, and drink it. Her parched throat felt normal again.

“You’re Silon?”

“Ah, Kurt must have told you. It’s nice to meet you. Yes, I’m Silon, Miss Valeta.”

“Yes, he did,” she replied, nodding as she pressed a hand to her forehead. While she was used to living with insomnia and splitting headaches, they seemed to be getting harder to deal with after Reinhart had started using magic on her.  
“Come to think of it, the first shift must have ended while I was asleep.”

“The switch happened later than I expected,” Silon confirmed. “From now on, you can expect the shift change to happen overnight.”

“Very well.”

Valeta took a seat with her hand still pressed to her head. Her headaches usually subsided over time, but today, the pain seemed to have doubled after not having experienced it for so long.

“What about that guy?” she asked.

“That guy?” Silon repeated, confused.

“You know, the one who calls me ‘master.’”

She could have just called him by his name, but she didn’t feel like it. Whenever she tried, it felt like her tongue was refusing to listen to her. Maybe she was too used to calling him anything but his given name.

“I saw him in the sky room right before I came here. His powers are unstable lately, so he’s been prone to outbursts...”

“Unstable...?”

“That’s why he’s been staying in the sky room, in order to reduce the number of casualties,” Silon explained.

Maybe that was why the first thing she’d seen when she woke up in the tower were clouds. Perhaps that was why the tower was so high in the sky. The damage to human life would be minimal at that height.

Silon continued, “Also, the windows surrounding the sky room have the ability to absorb a certain amount of magic.”

“Oh, so that’s why the sky room exists. It’s for the heads when they’re unstable...”

“All newly awakened magicians are unstable to an extent. However, the heads

of the Magicians' Tower are usually so powerful that it's hard for them to control their powers through normal methods."

Valeta leaned back in her chair. "Is that so?" she murmured. She was starting to feel a little better, but the headache was still there.

"Excuse me. Can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"What kind of relationship do you have with my lord?"

"Everyone's been asking me that question lately. Maybe I should write the answer on my forehead or something."

Had it been three times that she'd been asked the same question over the past few days? Valeta shrugged and gave an odd smile. Her headache was beginning to fade, so she slowly opened her eyes and turned to look at the guard.

"We're nothing to each other. We're like two pieces of rotting rope."

Silon said nothing, simply accepting her indifferent tone. However, he was aware of just how much his lord trusted the socoro in front of his eyes. For someone who trusted nobody and always did things on his own, he completely, undoubtedly trusted her. It hurt his pride a little.

"I'm going to wash up," Valeta said.

"Of course."

Valeta stepped into the bathroom that was attached to her bedroom. Her sweat had cooled on her body, leaving her feeling cold and clammy and wishing for some hot water that she could pour over herself.

Silon slowly looked around the room and couldn't spot anything out of the

ordinary, other than the fact that the girl's room looked like it was entirely unlived in. *Maybe she can't get any sleep.*

He had noticed her groaning ever since he'd taken over Kurt's shift but didn't think much of it. Valeta had quieted down as the night progressed, but it was clear she wasn't getting enough sleep. She looked like she'd woken up tired and with a headache.

Silon heard the door to the bathroom opening. He remained quiet as he watched Valeta leave the bathroom, patting her still-damp hair with a towel. She flopped into her wooden chair.

"Don't your legs hurt from standing up all day?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Silon said. "Why is your hair...?"

"I just splashed some water over myself. It'll dry soon enough."

She set aside her towel and picked up a notebook and a pen. Silon swallowed when he saw the densely written notes and formulas in the girl's notebook. Judging by the vibrant color of the ink, it hadn't been long since she had written it.

"Are you studying?" he asked.

"Yes. Duke Delphine thought that it would be a good idea for me to relearn the basics of alchemy. He gave me a few lessons yesterday," Valeta said, writing down something with her chin propped on her hand. Her gaze was fixed on her notebook in front of her so that Silon could easily look over to see what she was writing.

"Oh, then you must be reviewing what you've learned?"

"That's what I thought I would be doing, but he said that he had nothing more to teach me," Valeta said. "He suggested practicing more applications instead.

So now I'm creating a couple of new formulas. Plus, there are a few more things I wanted to analyze too."

Valeta took a few quick glances over her notes before jotting something else down. With every turn of the page, she drew a new symbol and scrawled more notes down next to it. Silon knew very little about alchemy, but what she was doing was enough to make him want to pass out.

Creating new magic spells or alchemy symbols was no easy task. There were too many things to consider, too many errors to catch, and many simulations that had to happen to make sure that they worked properly. That was why it took years for some people to develop a working spell. Even Silon and Kurt could both count the number of magic spells they had developed on a single hand.

"Have you made any new formulas after learning the basics?" Silon asked.

"Yes."

"How many have you made so far?"

"Hmm... This would be my third." Valeta's eyes narrowed as she scrawled something down. She set down her pen and started flipping through her notebook, checking for something. Then she let out a sigh.

"Are you finished now?"

"Well, I already finished one yesterday. I was going to finish another two after I wrapped this one up. And after that..." Valeta muttered as she picked up her pen again.

Silon fell into a trance. It was only when he realized that the sun was well into the sky that he snapped out of it. "Miss Valeta, I don't mean to interrupt, but don't you think you should eat? And maybe feed this one too?"

The snowta growled.

"Oh," she exclaimed.

Her hand, which was in the midst of hastily scribbling something down, suddenly stopped. Valeta looked at the snowta in Silon's arms with a troubled expression. Its food bowl was hanging from its mouth, indicating that it was hungry.

"How long has it been like this?"

"It's been pacing for a while now. I didn't let you know earlier because I didn't want to disturb you," Silon said.

Valeta rose from her seat, a frustrated look on her face. She walked to a corner where there was a paper bag of high-quality feed and began to dump the contents into the bowl.

"I think you're giving it too much..."

"You think? It should eat until it's completely full, right?"

"It's still a baby," he pointed out. "It could get a stomachache if it eats that much."

Valeta started pouring some of the feed back into the bag. After checking with Silon to make sure she was giving the snowta the right amount, Valeta put the bowl on the ground and looked at the little animal.

Silon was still holding the snowta with one hand, the creature's tail twitching happily in the air. It had its eyes set on the food.

"Eat."

Mrow!

At Valeta's command, the snowta dashed to its bowl, nosed around the feed,

and started to eat so quickly that Valeta could practically hear it almost choking on its own food. She remained crouched in front of the bowl, nervously watching the cub eat. Would it die at this rate? She had no idea what to do with something so helpless.

Silon watched, a subtle expression crossing his face. "You don't have to keep watch like that."

"Yes, I know. Would you like to eat together? How do you feel about socoro food?"

"I can't say I like it much," Silon replied honestly, a faint smile crossing his lips.

He carefully watched Valeta for her reaction, but she simply shrugged and said, "I see. Then I'll bring you some fruit later."

"Doesn't it bother you? I basically said I don't like people like you."

"Yes, well, it is what it is."

Then, giving Silon an indifferent glance, Valeta left her room. As she went down the stairs, she could hear a commotion coming from below. Silon, also having noticed the same, quickly brought his hood up over his head as he followed behind her.

*Imperial soldiers?* Valeta knitted her brows.

"Good morning, Lady Valeta."

"Hello. And these people are?" But she didn't have to ask. Imperial knights. She knew them on sight.

"They're... The table has been prepared. I think you should go to the dining room."

Imperial knights meant that someone from the imperial family was here. Not only that, the knights were wearing the crest affiliated with the emperor, meaning that only someone directly related to the emperor could command them.

"It probably isn't the emperor, so..."

Silon, noticing Valeta's whispers, turned to look at her.

*The crown prince, maybe?*

It felt exhausting to even think about Miloyd. She thought that he would back off, but he was more tenacious than she gave him credit for. Unsurprisingly, the imperial knights were guarding the doors to the dining room.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 63

“Welcome, Lady Valeta. Please, come in.”

“Thank you.”

As she was about to walk in, the two guards lowered their swords, blocking Silon from following after her. Silon, hidden by the hood of his robe, flinched. Before he could move his hand, Valeta stepped in front of the magician, shielding him from the guards.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked.

“He cannot enter with you, Lady Valeta.”

“He is my guard,” she replied. “Allow him to pass.”

Silon was the most trustworthy guard she had, considering that Reinhart wouldn’t have sent him unless he had good reason to. Only magicians were capable of fighting such uncouth knights.

“We cannot.”

“Fine, then. I won’t go inside. Let’s go.”

“I don’t recommend that, Lady Valeta,” one of the imperial guards countered.

But she didn’t care. She didn’t feel like having a pointless conversation with the crown prince anyway.

“Just let them in.”

Valeta’s eyes narrowed at the familiar voice. She slowly turned around and saw

a man she didn't particularly care to see standing behind her.

"Guilian?"

"It's an honor, Lady Valeta. Let's go inside. You can bring him too."

Valeta frowned, surprised. This was the last person she expected to see. Guilian walked in first, followed by her and her guard.

"I've returned, Your Highness," the alchemist said.

"Good work, Guilian. Oh... Miss Valeta. How have you been?" Miloyd asked.

"Fine," she replied. "However, I wasn't expecting guests this early. I'm a little sensitive in the morning, so I can't say your visit is particularly welcome. I thought you of all people would have some decorum."

Just the thought of having to talk to this man while she had a headache was putting her in a bad mood. As Valeta moved closer to the table, the imperial alchemist pulled out a chair for her. Duke Delphine was already sitting at the table, also looking like he was in a very bad mood.

"Good morning, Valeta," he said. "Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Fine, fine. Though all the drinking from last night has given me a headache."

Duke Delphine frowned as he pushed back his hair. He was in a foul mood because the prince and the alchemist had invited themselves over so early in the morning while he, too, had a splitting headache.

"Now that Valeta's here, please tell us what you have to say. You may be the crown prince, but I can't say I appreciate you inviting yourself over like this without warning, Your Highness."

"I'm sorry about that, Duke Delphine," Miloyd said. "But it's an urgent matter,

one that requires Valeta's help."

"My help?" Valeta asked, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. She rubbed her temples a couple of times before leaning back in her chair. She rolled her eyes.

*I really don't want to talk to him.* Nor did she want to listen to him. It was like her brain was signaling her to leave the room as soon as possible—she could almost hear the alarm bells ringing in her head. Valeta's violet eyes looked down before she moved her gaze back to Miloyd.

"What is it?"

"This is about the current head of the Magicians' Tower," Miloyd said, his voice hard.

"The Magicians' Tower? Reinhart?" Valeta tilted her head to the side, slightly dubious. "What about him?"

"We received news that several towns around the empire have been annihilated, in a way much like the incident at the Delight Manor."

Valeta knew that this would happen. She sank deeper into her chair and sighed. But she hadn't been expecting to find out this way. Valeta glanced at Silon. From under his hood, she could see the stony look on his face. It was clear that he knew what the crown prince was implying.

*"Has he gone somewhere recently? Does he frequently go out?"*

"Yes."

Valeta sighed again as she recalled her earlier conversation with him. *He confirmed that Reinhart frequently goes out, right?* Kurt, on the other hand, would have immediately denied the accusations, claiming that it wasn't the head of the

*Magicians' Tower. They're completely different.*

She leaned her head back and sighed again. It felt like Silon was trying to warn her that the headache she'd woken up with this morning was only going to get worse if she didn't prepare herself.

*How nice, she thought. If only he had helped her escape this encounter altogether.*

"In less than a week, four towns were completely annihilated. All of the townspeople were killed. The dead were arranged in a most peculiar manner with most of their limbs dismembered."

Valeta's head cocked to the side. She blinked slowly. Entire towns had been annihilated? How remarkable. She almost wanted to talk to *him* about it.

Miloyd spoke again, surprised when Valeta didn't react the way he thought she would. "If you think about it, it should take at least a week to travel between the towns."

"Do you have any proof?"

"The fact that this all happened within a short period of time is the proof," the crown prince replied. "Most importantly, we have a witness."

This caught her off guard. If Reinhart were truly the culprit, he wouldn't have left any witnesses. Valeta's violet eyes filled with concern.

"A witness?" she asked.

"Yes, a child. The sole survivor."

"A child?"

"Yes. The child described the culprit as a man with red eyes and long silver hair,

floating in the moonlight," Miloyd answered.

Valeta heard Silon gasp softly from behind her. For some reason, Guilian had been staring at her this whole time. Meanwhile, Duke Delphine... *It seems like he already knows about it.* He had no reaction as he listened to the news. In fact, he already seemed to know that Reinhart was a suspect. Turning her attention back to the crown prince, she nodded.

*I can see why they might suspect Reinhart and the Magicians' Tower.* She remembered how Reinhart had blocked every single exit. Her eyes narrowed. "I see. So why are you telling me this, Your Highness?"

"Well..." Miloyd started. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, hesitant to say his next words. Then, he clenched his fists. "It's because the person you trust did it."

A twisted smile played on Valeta's lips. She felt like she was going to burst out in laughter, so she quickly raised a hand to cover her mouth. It was easy to see what the crown prince was getting at. *Is this him being possessive?*

However, it was but a drop in the bucket compared to *that* other man's jealousy. So this must be why education was important in the formative years of childhood.

"Your Highness, I know him better than anyone."

"What are you...?"

"He gave me a front-row seat during the Delight Manor Massacre. Do you think I don't know how cruel he can be?"

Miloyd's eyes widened as she spoke. Valeta watched his trembling gaze for a moment before she shrugged. Clearly, he had misunderstood something.

"It's not like that. I didn't want any of it," she said with another shrug. "Anyway,

if that is your business here, then I've heard enough. I think it's time you start heading back."

Miloyd gripped the armrest. He wasn't expecting this sort of reaction, or lack thereof, from Valeta. His blue eyes flashed dangerously as veins bulged from the back of his hand.

"One more thing!" he shouted. "That's not the main reason why I'm here. There's another reason why I'm asking for your help."

"My help?" Valeta had a gut feeling she knew what it was about, and it was probably something she didn't want to hear. Another sigh escaped through her clenched teeth.

It wasn't that she disliked the crown prince, but she was slightly turned off by him. He was like a sudden bright light to someone who had been in the shadows for a prolonged period of time. She could only describe the feeling as discomfort. So pure and upright, Valeta had no desire to get close to him. Even though she knew that he loved her with all his heart.

"Yes. I don't know if you're aware, but we've heard that cases of the roste, a dangerous disease, have appeared in a few towns to the south," the crown prince continued.

"Oh..."

"If we don't nip the disease in the bud, it will only spread. However, alchemist potions are the only way we can treat it. We need your help, Lady Valeta."

Roste. She had frequently been thinking of the disease for the past few days that it was impossible for her to look surprised, as though it were her first time hearing of it. Valeta narrowed her eyes and rubbed her chin.

"Here we go..." she murmured under her breath, but her voice reached both

Guilian and Silon, who turned to look at her.

Duke Delphine observed the whole situation with narrowed eyes. "Did the emperor tell you that?" he asked the crown prince.

"Yes, that's right," Miloyd answered with a puzzled look on his face. Valeta leaned back in her chair and rubbed her forehead, her expression weary. She knew that this situation could allow the imperial family to make false charges against her and put pressure on the Magicians' Tower.

*I don't know what they want. Why was the emperor after the Magicians' Tower, and why did he want her so badly?*

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 64

Did the emperor want her as a successor to Guilian? Or for his son?

*Definitely not the latter,* Valeta thought. The emperor didn't strike her as the fatherly type.

"Miss Valeta?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Valeta apologized, though her tone made it clear she couldn't care less, and she slowly lifted her gaze. She rubbed the side of her neck as she locked eyes with Miloyd.

"Your Highness..." she said. "I'm sorry, but I don't think this is any of my business, so I must refuse. Please find someone else who can help you."

"If you don't do it, a lot of people will die," Miloyd replied sullenly, his fists clenched.

Valeta regarded the prince for a moment before she tilted her head. She sighed before she said, "Is there a reason why I should help you?"

"Innocent citizens are going to die."

"That's your problem, not mine."

Miloyd sat there, shocked for a moment by Valeta's response. Normally, he wouldn't talk with such a combative person, and he felt like he was meeting someone new for the first time.

"But that's— That may be so, but..." He slowly looked down. "Are you saying that you won't help the people even though you have the power to save them?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

The concept of someone having to save others just because they had the power to was absurd. Some people may want to do that. Others did not.

Unfortunately, Valeta was the latter. She preferred to live a normal life rather than an honorable one.

"If you need an alchemist to cure people with roste, then find someone else," Valeta continued. "You have Guilian."

"He has been with the imperial castle for a long time. He's old and isn't as powerful as he used to be," Miloyd explained.

"Then you could ask him for his advice. I'm sure he's more than capable of that," Valeta said with a toss of her head.

Guilian fastened his one good eye on her. He regarded her for a moment with a curious expression, blinking slowly a couple of times before breaking his gaze.

"When did you become so cold, Lady Valeta? You used to be someone who would never turn a blind eye to an injured animal!" the crown prince said.

"I never changed. I've always been the same. You must've only seen the good side of me, I'm sure."

"You've never been this guarded against me before either."

Miloyd sat perfectly upright in his chair, his back a straight line. *He* hadn't changed one bit. If anything, he'd become more dazzling with time.

"You never treated me like a tool. You always treated me like a human being, so that's why I did my best to get along with you." Valeta had done her best to act normal around Miloyd ever since they were young. In other words, she had done her best to hide the darkness within her when she had been around him.

"But..." She narrowed her eyes. "That ends today."

"I never saw you as a tool!" Miloyd exclaimed.

"But you're here for my abilities, no?" she countered.

The crown prince was at a loss for words, looking as though he had been stabbed in the chest by someone he trusted, his mouth opening and closing as if he were gasping for breath. Valeta looked down at the sparkling silverware on the table. The well-polished knife perfectly reflected her neutral face.

"Do you want me, Your Highness?"

"Yes. Am I not allowed to? After all, you're my fiancée."

"I'm afraid that role is too much for me to take on."

Valeta shrugged. She was just trying her best to protect herself without having to give anything up in return. Her life had already been reduced to a wrestling match in the mud, and it would be impossible to handle if Miloyd was thrown into that mix. She slowly rose from her seat. It was useless trying to deal with him any longer.

*There's no way the Magicians' Tower won't hear about this.* How would Reinhart react? Her best guess was that he was going to stand firm, having no intention of getting pulled into this child's play.

"You didn't bring these guards here so you could drag me away, right?"

"No. They're simply my bodyguards."

"Then you may see yourself out since I have a headache that's been killing me all morning," Valeta told her guest.

Miloyd didn't know where to look. He had never seen this side of Valeta before.

Though she'd never been particularly affectionate, she had never been this cold, either.

"Won't you reconsider...?"

A tiny crack was starting to form on Valeta's face. She turned, a look of annoyance crossing over her features.

"Miloyd Siliance."

He held his breath. He had longed for her to call him by his name, but he never expected that it would be this cold when she finally did. He clenched his fists, feeling the air grow chilly around him.

"Please don't force my goodwill. I'm not a good person. I've never been a good person, not even when we first met. Don't try to fit me into your narrow-minded views."

"Valeta..."

"There will never be a reason for me to walk into the imperial palace again."

Miloyd fell silent as Valeta's cold rejection washed over him. Every one of her words felt like a knife plunging into his heart. Her words nailed him to the spot. His hands trembled as he slowly ran a gloved hand down his face.

"Please don't forget how inconsiderate you were with your visit today, Your Highness."

"I'll be back next time then," Miloyd replied.

Valeta remained silent.

Miloyd nodded at Duke Delphine, who rose to see him off, and turned away. Valeta remained rooted where she was.

"Wait here for a moment," Duke Delphine said to her, giving her head a gentle pat. Then he followed Miloyd out the door. As soon as the door closed, Valeta flopped into her chair.

*So the emperor has turned Miloyd into his tool.* In that case, she had no choice but to cut him out of her life. She couldn't even use him as a fragile shield, for he would only take up noble causes and he would never refuse his father's commands.

*I wonder what the emperor thinks.* He was a smart man. He had quickly understood what she meant by the things she'd blurted out that day and had immediately retaliated against her. It was clear that he didn't consider himself a pushover. Not only that, the emperor was skilled at reading other people's emotions and at hiding his own. His time in the imperial palace had made him masterful in dealing with people—like a slippery, ancient serpent.

"Why...?"

Valeta looked up, pulled out of her thoughts.

"Why are you so calm, Miss Valeta?" Silon asked.

"Is there a reason why I shouldn't be?" Valeta replied, her calm voice taking on a different register.

Silon snapped his mouth shut. Earlier, her calm voice had had a sharp edge to it, but he couldn't detect anything like that now. It was as if she had momentarily pulled out an emotion as a weapon for her to use, only to put it back.

"Magicians don't like socoros," Silon said. "In turn, socoros find the energy magicians radiate to be unpleasant."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"However, we don't go around killing socoros. The Magicians' Tower and

socoros have a non-aggression treaty."

"A non-aggression treaty?" Valeta repeated. She had never heard those words before. "Then why did you kill those residing in Delight Manor?"

"Those were necessary measures as those people harmed our ruler. Such inconsequential events are inevitable whenever a new head awakens."

"Um..."

Valeta wouldn't call the annihilation of a house *inconsequential*, but that explained why Reinhart wasn't taking any action. *I think something like this happened in the novel too.* She leaned back in her chair and tilted her head. This was bait for the imperial family.

"And the king of socoros knows that. Usually, socoros demand something from the tower, we give them what they want, and that is the end of that. They were quite demanding this time around, I must say."

"Did he agree to their request?"

"No," Silon replied.

Valeta crossed her arms again and looked down at the table. Was the emperor trying to break the non-aggression treaty? *But is this something the emperor thought of himself?* If so, how had he managed it? All the towns were far away from each other, yet the incidents had happened in a short period of time.

"Anyway, because of the non-aggression treaty, the king of socoros treats the island in the sky as an independent state."

Valeta nodded as she listened to Silon's explanation. That was the reason why the emperor, the sun of the empire, must have turned a blind eye to the floating country.

"You look pale," she said suddenly, her chin resting on her hand.

Silon swallowed as he looked down at her. Even though she had just heard terrible things, she looked bored, relaxed even.

"It was like he..." He was silent for a moment, trying to choose his words. "It was like he was a child who couldn't control his powers. They may have been socoros, but slaughtering them like that was..."

"So do you hate him?"

"No. We are his guides. We trust and follow any choice he makes. However..."

The guard fell silent. He hung his head and moved to take off his robes, feeling suffocated by them. Valeta was fiddling with the silverware when the doors to the dining room opened again.

Duke Delphine strode in with a rather stiff expression on his face. "Valeta, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Never mind her pounding headache.

"It doesn't seem like the crown prince is going to give up."

"Yes, it seems unlikely," she said.

The emperor wasn't going to let her off so easily. He would do anything to keep her on the board, as if she were one of his chess pieces in a game he was playing.

"Can I invite someone over, Carlon?" she asked.

Duke Delphine looked at Valeta with a mildly surprised but puzzled look.

Rolling her eyes, she tentatively added, "Please."

Duke Delphine gave a faint smile and nodded his head. "Anything for you, Valeta."

"Thank you."

Her eyes fell on the half-empty glass on the table. She blinked slowly a couple of times before she spoke again.

"Reinhart."

This was the first time she had called his name, or at least, the first time she had said it voluntarily. The name that fell from her lips was as sweet as his appearance and voice. The chandeliers in the dining room went out all at once, and Valeta could hear the sound of a robe fluttering behind her.

"My lovely master, you called me at last."

Valeta turned and saw the lone figure in the dark, illuminated only by the sunlight filtering through the dining room windows.

He walked slowly, step by step, as if he were taking his time, until he stood directly in front of her.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 65

\* \* \*

His red eyes seemed even brighter in the dim room. His silver hair shone like scattered beams of sunlight. Locking eyes with Valeta as he bent down, Reinhart kissed the back of her hand.

"It's an honor to have you call me," he said.

Kurt trailed after him, evidently summoned alongside his lord.

"How long have you known?" Valeta asked.

Reinhart grew quiet, surprised by the sudden question. His eyes narrowed and his gaze flicked across the table to an empty seat void of its occupant. He clicked his tongue.

"They already came?"

"The crown prince asked for my help," she said.

"What makes them think that they should ask you for help with a murder case?" he asked with a tilt of his head. Silver hair spilled around his shoulders. He glanced at Silon before his eyes flickered back to her.

*A murder case?* Valeta thought. This wasn't just about the murders. She rolled her eyes slightly. "Don't you know about the disease that's been going around? The roste?"

Reinhart narrowed his eyes. Then his lips quirked up into a faint smile. His silence suggested that he knew something about it. And as the silence extended into something eerie, Reinhart's faint smile grew into a broad grin.

"I can't say."

"You... If you didn't do it, just say that you didn't. You'll cause a misunderstanding."

The magician's eyes widened at her reproach, the pupils of his eyes slowly contracting. With a small laugh, he leaned in front of her. His eyes crinkled into a smile. "Why, it sounds like you completely trust me, master."

"I know you didn't do it."

All expression vanished from Reinhart's face at the resolution in her voice. He brought a hand to his chin as if troubled. "What makes you think that?"

"You wouldn't have been so sloppy as to leave a survivor."

Reinhart's face grew red as he smiled, and his eyes sparkled as if he were anticipating Valeta's praise.

"You don't kill without a reason," she reasoned.

He straightened up, momentarily lost for words. He slowly looked from left to right, then brushed his bangs back with one hand, and even as he opened and closed his mouth repeatedly, found that he had nothing to say in the end.

*What's wrong with him?* Valeta thought. She could tell that he wanted to say something. It left her feeling strange seeing him this way.

"Have you eaten yet?" Duke Delphine asked.

"Not yet." Reinhart immediately turned to the duke with a smile. His voice prickled Valeta's ears, sweet as if dripping with honey.

*Did he just avoid my question?* Surprised, Valeta turned to face him. For some reason, the man was avoiding her gaze.

"We haven't eaten either. Would you like to join us?" Duke Delphine continued.

Reinhart's brow furrowed. "You... want to eat with me?"

"Only if you're fine with it."

"Do you happen to require the alchemy stone from last time?" Reinhart asked as he moved his hand to draw a line in the air. As his hand slashed through the empty space, a line opened up, revealing a void.

The duke let out a low sigh, sat down, and gestured toward the table. "No, I don't. We have a spare seat that you're more than welcome to take."

Silence.

Reinhart's eyes slowly fell toward Valeta, his smile as bright as ever. However, he looked surprised, as though he were a lost child who didn't know what to say.

"I know what Valeta's like, but it seems that you also have trouble accepting other people's kindness."

"Do I look like I need your kindness?" Reinhart asked. "Don't you know that favors always come with strings attached?"

"Is that what you were taught?" Duke Delphine asked.

Reinhart froze, his face blank. He clenched his fist once before bringing his index and thumb together.

*Snap.*

Kurt and Silon both flinched. They knew that this was his gesture for conjuring magic. Duke Delphine narrowed his eyes, trying to assess what Reinhart had just done. Thankfully, nothing happened.

"Sit. Let's have a chat," he said, once again inviting the magician to the table.

Reinhart slowly nodded. Upon taking a seat in one of the chairs around the round table, he crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair.

"How did you discover the site?" Valeta asked.

"Are we still talking about that, master?" With a troubled expression, Reinhart leaned his elbows on the table and rested his head between his hands. He turned to look at the girl. The frigid atmosphere dissipated, growing warm as a spring day. "Let me ask you a question first. What makes you think I don't kill people without a reason?"

"You've never done it before," Valeta replied.

Reinhart smiled as if he were talking to a young child. He reached out and cupped her cheek with a hand. "Ah... You flatter me, master. I am more than capable of that."

"Do you remember what happened when Father starved me for a week? I heard that you were also locked up and beaten that week," she said. Valeta took a sip from her glass before she raised her head. Duke Delphine, Silon, and Kurt's expressions darkened, whereas Reinhart's forehead was strangely distorted.

"Of course," he said after a pause.

"You're the one who killed the servants who told on us, right?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled up as if he were recalling a fond memory. His red eyes gleamed maliciously.

"Of course," he said. "I couldn't let the people who hurt you live."

"Have you killed anyone else other than House Delight?"

"You have no basis for believing that I wouldn't kill people without a reason," Reinhart said in a relaxed, almost melodic voice.

Valeta let out a long sigh. She had no idea how their conversation had taken such a turn. *I just wanted to escape from him*, she thought. There was one thing she had learned during the time they had been apart: just how close they actually were, enough for her to understand why it was that Reinhart refused to let her go. Their roots had long been intertwined, and they were so deeply entangled that they had an absurd amount of influence over each other.

"You're scared, right?"

"What...?" Reinhart asked dumbly. His jaw dropped at the absurdity of Valeta's question, his expression stunned, as if someone had hit him upside the head.

Valeta rose from her seat and slowly approached him. She looked at him, unamused. The magician stayed in his seat, but his eyes never left her figure as she drew closer. Reaching out, she grabbed Reinhart's hand. She leaned over and stared into his eyes, lacing their fingers together. Their hands were interlinked, Valeta's cold hand locked with Reinhart's warm one.

"I recently realized, you've been paying more attention to me, haven't you?" she whispered into Reinhart's ear. "You've been thinking about me."

Valeta turned her head, leaning closer to him. They were so close that their noses almost touched. Valeta's lips parted slightly, only a hairsbreadth from Reinhart's own.

"You don't want to be hated by me."

"Enough, master."

His voice was cold as he spoke, and his red gaze even colder.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 66

Valeta had never seen such a rare show of hostility from Reinhart. At his warning, she took a step back and shrugged.

"It's your fault for not leaving the manor when I told you to," she said.

"What a savage fight," Duke Delphine interrupted with a laugh.

Valeta turned to the duke, her brows furrowed, and seeing the smile on his face, she sighed and turned away. No matter what she and Reinhart said, they would always look like children in the duke's eyes.

"So, tell me. It seems like the emperor plans to take me back to the imperial castle, and if so, I need to make a plan for myself."

Reinhart shrugged and sighed deeply, as if defeated. "Why do you insist on taking the hard road? You can just tell me what to do. I'll do whatever you say."

He received no reply.

"You're so stubborn, master," he continued, his voice growing brusque. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the chair, then snapped his fingers. Kurt and Silon flinched and shook their heads.

"We'll stay here."

"No. Take that and get out of here."

Reinhart lifted a finger at Duke Delphine. It was a clear order, yet Kurt and Silon refused to move, their mouths firmly shut. Valeta glanced at them to realize that they were looking at her.

Oh no... Lifting her hand, she scratched her cheek with a single finger. It was obvious that they were asking her for help, but Reinhart didn't seem like he wanted them to hear what he had to say next.

"Get lost before I break your limbs. Be on standby until I call you again."

"Just leave them be," Valeta interrupted.

Reinhart's eyes widened in surprise. He burst into laughter, and the girl's expression became dazed as she listened to the melodic sound. "You've grown a little strange, master. When did you start caring about what the help thinks?"

Kurt and Silon's faces grew hard at Reinhart's words.

"Why should I risk information leaking out, especially from people who aren't going to be any help? The two of us are more than capable of handling it on our own." Reinhart's chilly gaze slowly traveled across the three other men in the room. "That's what you've always thought too, master. What's the point in telling them if they can't do anything about it anyway? It'll just make everything more cumbersome."

She had been like that. In fact, she was still like that. But she knew the truth: these two people were going to help Reinhart somehow. *It's better to have three pairs of eyes than just one.*

The magician brought a hand to his chest as if he were a knight taking an oath.

"That I can agree on," he said. "We could assign tasks to those useless things, but why should we have to?"

"And you think I'll be of any help?" Valeta asked.

"Yes. I know why you're asking me this, master."

Valeta slowly rolled her eyes at his affectionate gaze and sighed. "You're going

to leave those two as my bodyguards, right? Either way, I think they should be made aware of the situation."

"Those dogs just need to follow their master's orders. What do they need to know?"

When Valeta didn't respond, Reinhart clicked his tongue. She was impressed by how the two men could just stand there, silently tolerating this kind of mistreatment.

"Have you ever thought about letting me win just once?" he asked.

"I don't like to make losing bets," she replied.

Reinhart sighed, looking rather fed up. "Fine. I lose."

He shrugged as Valeta nodded in agreement.

Duke Delphine was listening carefully, discovering that there were a number of things he could glean from their conversation.

"It's not really my area anyway," the head of the Magicians' Tower continued.

"Tell me everything you know, starting with the rumors."

The duke nodded slightly at Valeta's demand. "They say that the God's Curse has returned because the head of the Magicians' Tower ominously annihilated a noble family and became king after he brought bloodshed to the Magicians' Tower."

Reinhart pursed his lips and, judging by the curl of his lips, it was clear that he was quite upset. Valeta nodded as she listened.

"And that the current head has gone mad, slaughtering entire villages because he couldn't control his power," Reinhart continued.

Kurt and Silon paled as they listened, both clenching their fists, trembling with anger.

"That's what is being said in the north, where the first massacre took place," Reinhart finished.

"That's where you went when you were gone? Were there any signs?" she asked.

"Surprisingly, no. Not that I could tell." Reinhart's jaws tightened as his eyes narrowed. He said nothing for a long time, a disgruntled look on his face.

Valeta silently watched him as he pondered, deep in thought.

"Well, if you called me, that means you must've noticed something too, right? Did you find a clue?" he asked.

"I have a general idea, but nothing certain yet," Valeta said with a shrug.

Reinhart nodded. Magic and alchemy were similar, yet different. Alchemy left traces behind and magic did not. However, despite leaving signs, alchemy was untraceable, whereas magic was traceable even without leaving anything behind. Following traces of magic required high-level magic itself. The problem was that this particular user was very adept with magic.

The two continued their conversation. Duke Delphine, who was still listening, made a strange face and smiled bitterly. *I guess this is what a lack of empathy does to you*, he thought.

The two were intelligent, so they didn't need to explain things to each other. However, they had never learned how to explain the basics to other people to help them understand.

"Are you talking about the roste or the murder cases?" he asked.

Valeta looked at the duke, who had interrupted the flow of their conversation, her eyes widening in surprise. Then, she sighed.

"Oh... We're talking about the roste."

"See? They're going to be no help. He can't even keep up with our conversation," Reinhart said.

"We—" Silon blurted out as he took a step forward, and Reinhart's eyebrows rose as Silon laid his hands on the table. The head of the Magicians' Tower crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, annoyed. "We can find a way to help if we know the full story."

"How are you going to help?" Reinhart asked.

"Any way we can. We are your hands and feet, the tools at your disposal."

Kurt kneeled down on one knee. Silon followed, kneeling as he bowed his head.

Reinhart stifled a sigh and clicked his tongue in annoyance. "There's nothing you can do..."

"We'll show you that we can. Please, give us a chance. Aren't we your tools?"

Reinhart turned to Valeta with a frown, and she looked away, uncomfortable with the situation, saying nothing. After a moment, he snapped his fingers.

"Ah?"

"Agh!"

The two kneeling magicians were forced to their feet. Valeta could almost hear their muscles flexing as they rose involuntarily. Silon and Kurt looked shocked, their eyes darting this way and that.

"Let me be clear. I won't be held responsible if you die," Reinhart said.

"Yes, we understand."

The two quickly ducked their heads.

"Anyway, this is my problem, so I'll take care of it. You don't have to worry about it, master," Reinhart said.

"There's no choice but to get involved with the roste. It's your fault I'm hearing about it at all," Valeta remarked.

Reinhart took a deep breath before he stood up. He had never understood his master, not even from the start. She always seemed to find the thorniest path to walk down.

"Why would you get yourself involved with someone like this when you've finally found stability? This happened with the Nursery too," he asked, his head cocked to the side. "Just stay here, master. I'll figure it out on my own and set everything right."

"If I wanted to seek protection in your arms, I wouldn't have left the sky room in the first place."

"That's true, but..." Reinhart stiffened. "Master, over here!" With an uncharacteristic shout, he reached for Valeta, pulling her into his arms.

"What are you...?"

"A magic circle?" Silon and Kurt muttered in unison as they looked down at the floor in surprise. A magic circle was glowing on the floor beneath their feet, but not just their feet—it encompassed the whole manor.

*Bang!*

*Crash!*

*Crack!*

The magic circle emitted a brilliant light and a thunderous roar. The great manor began to crack and crumble as if all the pillars holding it up had vanished.

*Snap!*

Reinhart snapped his fingers. His eyes widened when no magic circle of his own appeared. In fact, there was no reaction at all.

“Sh\*t...”

*Snap!*

He tried snapping his fingers again, then laughed in disbelief. He had no idea what was happening other than the fact they had been hit hard.

And, for some strange reason, his magic wasn’t working.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 67

*Bang!*

“Valeta! Are you okay?!”

“My lord!”

Everyone suddenly sounded a bit more distant than before as they scattered, leaping out of the way to avoid the falling debris. Reinhart clicked his tongue, still holding onto Valeta’s waist in the pile of rubble.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’m fine. Just stay by my side.”

“Don’t strain yourself. I can summon Gene.”

“It’s not a good idea to show your hand here. While I appreciate the sentiment, protecting me can wait.”

Reinhart began to whisper an ancient language into her ear. It was clear that he was reciting something. Valeta had wondered if he knew any incantations because he was always just snapping his fingers to call up his magic. *He was just choosing not to, after all.*

After the incantation went on for nearly thirty seconds, an intangible wave spread out from Reinhart.

*Crash!*

A massive piece of rubble crumbled to dust, harmlessly raining down on them, and something fell and rolled across the floor, but neither the girl nor the

magician noticed, the sound lost in the clamor. The red marble rolled over to the edge of the magic circle.

A shadowy figure appeared. Emerging from the dust, the robed figure slowly crouched down. They grabbed the red marble, free from its chain, and vanished.

"Hold on tight," Reinhart said.

*Tsk.* The sound of a tongue clicking.

Just as he was about to take a step, Reinhart froze. *I'm not sure why, but the unpleasant feeling has disappeared.*

*Snap!*

His magic had returned. Reinhart gave the floor a slight kick and the two flew up into the air, his robes fluttering around them.

"*Tsk.*"

*Snap! Snap!*

Bringing his fingers together twice more, Reinhart flew higher into the sky, free from the wreckage of the duke's manor. Now they could see the damage more clearly.

"I told you to take care of yourself," he said to his magicians.

"I'm sorry, my lord."

"Indeed."

With another snap, he lowered the four of them down to the ground and scanned their surroundings. All remnants of the magic circle had completely disappeared. Reinhart's red eyes narrowed further, but he couldn't sense any traces of magic.

"Goodness gracious! What on earth happened here?"

"Isn't that man the head of the Magicians' Tower? The one who killed Count Delight?"

"Have you heard the rumors? How he's gone mad...?"

"Lost control of his powers..."

Hearing the whispers around him, Reinhart, putting a hand on his hip, burst out into laughter. It was chaotic, from the dust that was still settling onto the debris to the onlookers who had gathered to watch.

"Who's in his arms? Isn't that the missing lady?"

"You're right! I've seen her before! That's Lady Valeta..."

"What in the world is going on? Are the rumors true?"

"Rumors? What rumors?"

The building had completely collapsed, making it unrecognizable to the gathered bystanders. Reinhart remained holding onto Valeta, and the two made for a captivating picture. It wasn't a stretch to imagine what kind of rumors the onlookers would spread.

Valeta scoffed. They had been forcibly dragged into a childish play.

"They got us," she said in a dull voice.

"Yes, they did," Reinhart replied, his voice filled with madness. He bared his teeth, a smile dripping with killing intent. "I want to see the crazy son of a b\*tch that did this."

He looked like a madman himself, Valeta wanted to say. Instead, she slapped his shoulder.

Reinhart looked down at her. "Give me the bracelet and go back for now."

"Bracelet?"

"The bracelet I broke off last time. I know you fixed it."

Valeta thrust out her hand, and the magician looked down at it with a strange expression.

"You want to be mine? Why, I couldn't ask for more," he said.

He snapped his fingers. Immediately, two bracelets, like rings of silver, appeared on both her wrists, seamlessly fitting around them, leaving just enough of a gap so that they weren't uncomfortable. It looked like it would be difficult to remove without Reinhart's help for there was no way to remove them without hurting herself. That was fine with her. She knew that this man wouldn't make the same mistake twice. The problem was that there was a thin chain connecting the two silver bracelets together.

"Remove the chain."

Reinhart beamed.

"Remove it this instant before I cut off my wrists," she said again.

"How scary." Laughing, he snapped his fingers again. The thin chain vanished.

"Let me take one of the bracelets off."

"If you lightly tap your wrists together, the left one will come off. If you want to put it back on, just bring your wrists together again."

Reinhart set Valeta down where Kurt, Silon, and Duke Delphine were before lowering himself. "If they've come this far, I'm curious what they're after."

"My manor..." Duke Delphine shook his head. He couldn't forget the image of

his home collapsing like a house of cards.

“Carlon!” a rough, low voice called out. Duke Leon was rushing toward them, his eyes uncharacteristically wide with surprise. Dazed, Duke Delphine was watching him. Then, his eyes caught sight of a dusty maid who had managed to break free of the wreckage.

“Y-Your Grace! There’s... People are still...!” She broke off with a wail.

“Oh no! The attendants! They must be buried somewhere!” Duke Delphine cried.

Reinhart glanced at the duke before turning back to Valeta. “I’ll head back now, master. I don’t think this is going to end quickly.”

“Okay, then...”

“Help us! Y-you’re a magician, aren’t you? M-my friends and colleagues! They’re still trapped! They’re dying! Please help us!”

The maid grabbed the hem of Reinhart’s robe, kneeling at his feet. Reinhart looked down at her with indifferent eyes. Then he smiled and looked back at Valeta. It was a radiant smile, free of any concerns.

“Are you hurt, master?”

“Please help...”

The maid gazed up at the magician, wringing her hands, looking like she was about to collapse. With their faces darkening, Duke Delphine and Duke Leon both watched Reinhart as he spoke to Valeta. The magician was acting as if there wasn’t a maid clinging to him.

“No. I’m fine.”

"Good. I think some more interesting things are about to happen, but you'll be okay, right?"

"I can take care of myself. Anyway, you should— Oh."

Valeta blinked slowly, feeling the astonished looks of the people around them. The maid let go of Reinhart's robe, tears streaming down her face. Valeta, who was about to say her goodbyes, turned to face Duke Delphine. He looked disheveled, with a distorted expression on his face. He shot her a rather weary look.

"Shouldn't you help those people?" she asked the magician.

"Who?"

"The people buried under the rubble," she replied, almost muttering, as if self-conscious of the words that were coming out of her mouth.

If there were innocent animals trapped in the wreckage, she probably would've helped them. She could see that there were some similarities.

"You think? Don't you think they should take care of their own problems?"

"Well, this is the least you could do."

"As you wish."

Reinhart smiled and turned his head. There was barely any life left in the ruins. Most of the attendants had been crushed to death. Even those who were still alive were no longer in possession of all their limbs.

*Snap!*

Immediately, any remaining survivors flew from beneath the rubble into the air, hovering for a moment. After setting them down on the ground, Reinhart lightly

kissed Valeta on the nape of her neck.

"I'll be going now." His red eyes gleamed with bloodthirstiness just as he vanished along with Kurt.

Valeta approached Duke Delphine, crouching slightly near him. "Are you okay, Your Grace?"

"Yes," he answered, a beat too late. He turned away.

Valeta blinked once before she straightened up. The confusion in her eyes quickly turned to realization.

*Clank, clank, clank.*

At the sound of clashing iron, Valeta turned. A group of imperial knights clad in silver armor emblazoned with a golden crest stood in front of the manor.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 68

“Call the physicians! Treat the wounded now!”

“Impressive. I didn’t realize how dramatic this would be. They must love a show,” Valeta muttered in a low voice.

Duke Leon, who was standing beside her, looked at her silently. “Don’t you feel anything for your fellow socoros when they’re writhing around in agony, Miss Valeta?”

“Huh...”

Looking around the wreckage, she witnessed the dismal sight of people holding the bodies of their dead friends and colleagues in their arms as they wailed in agony. Why would it be sad if people died in an inevitable event? It wasn’t as if crying would make the world turn again.

The dead weren’t going to come back to life, and Valeta didn’t have the confidence to mourn for people she’d never known. Wouldn’t it be better not to do anything at all? Was lying and saying “I’m sorry for your loss” the right thing to do?

Duke Leon, who had been quietly observing, suddenly opened his mouth as if he remembered something.

“The snowta.”

Valeta’s eyes widened at the small voice behind her. For the first time ever, astonishment flashed across her face before it distorted into a grimace. She scanned the crowd of groaning people.

*It's not here*, she thought. She hadn't taken a moment to blink, but she did now slowly. Taking a deep breath, she knitted her brows.

"Can you find the snowta?" she said in a rush as she turned to Silon. "My magic isn't precise enough to find something so small."

"This is your punishment..." A maid without arms sat on the ground, muttering, tears streaming down her face. Valeta looked down at her. "You don't care about other's pain just because you're safe! What would a noble understand about suffering?"

Valeta blinked at the maid's spiteful remarks. *What's done is done.*

Just because she wasn't injured didn't mean that there was anything she could do. If she tried to help, she'd just get in the way. Valeta slowly picked her way through the rubble, even though her thoughts on the matter remained the same.

The imperial knights who had suddenly appeared, along with Guilian, seemed preoccupied with dealing with the aftermath of the chaos.

"Where are you going?"

"To look for the snowta," Valeta answered stoically. She knew how she could find it. The only problem was that it was slightly risky. If she got caught, she'd have to run away.

*I got it as a gift, so...* Ultimately, imagining the snowta buried under all that rubble left her with a sense of dread.

"It's dangerous."

"Yes, but you don't have to worry about me, Your Grace."

Duke Leon's expression flattened at her words.

Very well. It seemed like Duke Delphine was already fed up with her anyway, probably finding her unapproachable due to their less-than-normal interactions. Was it because she hadn't changed despite his best efforts?

"Stay here," she said to Silon as she rushed through the wreckage. She walked toward the area where she imagined her room used to be.

"Gene."

*Whoosh.*

A cool wind appeared, casting dust into the air.

*What...*

"Smaller! Make yourself smaller! You can do that, right?" she shouted.

Although he did not reply, in a single instant, Gene shrank to the size of Valeta's palm, the massive hawk looking to be no more than a decorative bird now.

Valeta leaned in toward the elemental. "I want you to find the snowta in here. It's a small, white animal around this size. Can you be as discreet as possible? Even if it's dead, can you bring me its body? And my bag too. It should be in this room."

Gene coughed as he furtively glanced around as if looking for something.  
"Ahem, and where's the magician...?"

"Not here."

"*You'll have to pay the price this time.*"

"I'll give you my blood."

She held out a bloodied pinky toward Gene, who absorbed the blood with a light peck. The elemental's eyes glowed with a clear, green light.

*"Very well. I accept."*

The tiny hawk transformed into a small whirlwind and disappeared. Valeta carefully crouched where she stood. It would be nice if the snowta were alive, but if it was dead...

*"Mew!"*

She shrugged, recalling the little animal's cry in her head.

*"What a shame..."*

It was the first pet she'd ever had. Of course, she'd planned on giving it back later.

*Whoosh!*

The wind was blowing up from her feet. Then, with a bang, something popped out with a little burst. Gene, in his little whirlwind form, deposited just what she had asked for in her arms, then vanished. Valeta looked down, feeling the fluffy fur against her skin, and brought her face close to the little creature.

She could hear a slight hissing sound. The snowta was still alive, but just barely. Its front legs were twisted at an awkward angle, and its white body was stained with blood. With a sigh of relief, Valeta held the cub in one hand as she reached for her bag with the other, pulling out one of the high-quality potions she had made for Duke Delphine, one of the ones he'd refused to accept.

Even as she staggered down the rubble, without pause, she popped open the bottle. The potion of light pink was a fine one, one of the best she had ever made. She attempted to splash it like water over the snowta's body, but half of it fell onto the creature while the rest sloshed onto her clothes.

Valeta didn't care that anyone who was watching her now would most likely be appalled by her behavior. The small amount of potion that was left in the bottle,

she poured down the snowta's throat. She moved busily, making her way to the bottom of the ruined manor.

"Meow..."

The snowta began to give a weak cry and rubbed its head into Valeta's hand, as if it was telling her that it was still alive, as if it had been waiting for her warmth. A faint smile appeared on her face.

Watching from afar, Duke Leon and Duke Delphine's eyes widened. As she walked toward them, the wounds on the snowta's body were slowly healing. It would be perfectly fine in a day or two.

"You should've run away if it was that dangerous," she said to the creature. It made a small sound in response.

"People won't always be there to help you, you know. You need to know how to take care of yourself if that happens," Valeta said in a low voice. She slowly stroked the snowta's fur. However, her words were loud enough for Duke Delphine and Duke Leon to hear. "There's a lot of people who wouldn't even glance your way just because you're still a crying baby."

It gave another pitiful mew.

"But since you have me, I'll take care of you for the time being. You don't have to grow up so quickly. One step at a time."

It almost seemed to understand, and its meow sounded a little more robust.

"It's been a long time since I named something..."

It was useless to name things she had learned, and she had done her best to distance herself from anything that would require her protection. She didn't want to get attached to anything. However, she couldn't let go of this little cub that had wormed its way into her heart.

“Meow?”

“How about ‘Pipsqueak’?”

The snowta didn’t reply, falling silent altogether.

*What the?* Valeta narrowed her eyes as she looked down at the creature. The cub, who had been looking up at her, had closed its eyes at some point.

“Valeta, that cub...”

At the sound of the voice, she lifted her head. Silon had moved to stand behind her, as though he’d been waiting for her to return all this time.

“Ah. Your Grace. I’m so glad it wasn’t terribly hurt. I got my bracelet, so I’ll leave the marking to you. This is good enough, right?” Valeta said, putting some distance between her and the duke, a smile painted on her lips.

Duke Delphine’s eyes widened slightly with the sudden news.

“What?”

“If you tell me when and where to pick it up, I’ll go get it when it’s rea—”

“Wait. What are you talking about?” Holding up his arm, Duke Delphine interrupted her.

Valeta let out a low sigh. “I think this happened to your manor either because *he* was here or because *I am* here. I’m sorry that this happened to you.”

“That’s not what I...”

“Also, it’s clear my way of thinking isn’t very normal, so I don’t think it’d be a good idea to stay here any longer.”

The duke’s breath hitched in his throat. Duke Leon stood there, watching from

the sideline as usual. Looking back and forth between the two men, Valeta shrugged and said, "Please don't look at me like that. I don't think I can suddenly live a normal life after growing up the way I did. I'm sure I'll be fine if I study a bit more."

"It's not that. I'm sorry. I must be exhausted from the sudden shock..."

"I'm not sure what you were thinking when you saw me, but it's probably right. No matter what happens to people, I don't feel sad or sorry for..."

A shadow appeared behind her. Judging by the sound of rattling armor, it must have been one of the imperial knights. Not a good sign if they were looking for her right now.

*I don't feel good about this.* She wanted to run away.

"Lady Valeta Delight."

"I thought House Delight was no more," she lightly said as she turned around to face the voice.

The armed knight cast a shadow on her. "In principle, as long as the bloodline is intact, the house lives on."

"Fine. I'm tired, so could you please get to the point?"

The knight didn't bat an eye at Valeta's dry, apathetic tone. On the contrary, his gaze remained as steady as ever.

"You're under arrest as a suspect and a witness for the attack on this manor."

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## Chapter 69

\* \* \*

"I didn't know you could be a suspect and a witness at the same time."

"Well..."

"What is the meaning of this? This child is under the guardianship of House Delphine," Duke Delphine said, interrupting the knight. He pulled Valeta behind him, shielding her from view.

Valeta blinked, looking at the back of the man who stood between her and the knight.

"Lady Valeta Delight is an alleged accomplice of Reinhart, the head of the Magicians' Tower."

"Accomplice?" Duke Delphine repeated. "She's a victim."

"We have numerous reports and eyewitnesses who say that Lady Valeta Delight and Reinhart were watching the manor collapse from above," the knight said.

Duke Leon, who was standing behind Valeta, moved to step in front of her. As she looked at the backs of the two men, Valeta's expression changed.

"According to whom, Captain of the Second Order?" Duke Leon demanded.

The knight furrowed his brow. "We received a report from a citizen. Once I got a hold of it, I hurried over here."

"Captain, I'm telling you this. A magic circle appeared in the manor and we were suddenly attacked. The head of the Magicians' Tower was simply here visiting

the girl."

"Lady Valeta Delight is also under suspicion for her involvement in the Delight Manor Massacre. You cannot accompany her."

Valeta sighed as she quietly listened to the three men talk. She couldn't say for sure, but everything was falling perfectly into place. Someone out there was manipulating all the chess pieces as they saw fit, but there was one too many players on the board.

"You cannot take my ward away without notice..." Duke Delphine said.

"Would you like to go back to the island in the sky?" Silon bent down and whispered into Valeta's ear.

She shook her head. That would only make her look more suspicious.

The knight would not give in. "We'll investigate her according to due process. If we find her innocent, she will be released."

There was no telling when that would be. Valeta would probably be imprisoned in the imperial palace for as long as the emperor wanted. The possibility of one day being released by the emperor? A pipe dream.

"What if I refuse to go?"

"I'm sorry, but we'll have to take you by force as criminals can be arrested on the spot."

The knight didn't sound at all sorry. The emperor had his claws sunk in deep, Valeta thought, realizing at the same time that he was more powerful than she'd initially believed. He had everything: power, honor, money, and even the loyalty of his countless subjects.

*It feels like the whole empire is my enemy.* With this thought, Valeta took the

chance to observe her surroundings carefully. Guilian was standing among the knights, looking at her with a smile.

Silon lightly grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back.

“Ah...”

“Miss Valeta, this seems dangerous. Let’s go back.”

Frowning, she turned to look at her guard. Just when she was about to nod, thinking that there was nothing she could do, Guilian suddenly appeared next to the captain.

“That won’t do,” he said.

“President Guilian,” the captain said in salute.

“Miss Valeta belongs to the Magicians’ Tower. If you have any business with her, you should send formal requests to the tower,” Silon said.

Valeta’s eyes widened before they narrowed again. Of all the things he could have said, that was what he chose to say? Then again, she couldn’t think of a better alternative. The Magicians’ Tower was on the island in the sky and was a place where only magicians or the children of magicians were allowed to live. However, Valeta was an ordinary human born to a noble family.

*I guess I’m just an object in the tower’s eyes. It was strange to realize that.*

“She should be arrested if she’s committed a crime here.”

“She has no magical powers at all.”

“But if the head of the Magicians’ Tower, who’s completely enamored with her, committed this horrible deed under her orders, then that would make her a criminal. An accomplice is also guilty.”

They were treating her like she was already a convicted criminal. No matter how much she thought about it, she'd never be able to leave the palace if she was apprehended here. She looked around. *Opening a pharmacy is going to be impossible at this rate.* If these rumors began to spread, the common folk would refuse to shield her. Why hadn't she turned on the waterworks earlier? It would've helped her cause.

Silon threw out his arm, and a magic staff appeared out of thin air.

"I don't recommend you do that," Guilian said leisurely as priests and elementalists began to gather around him.

Silon stood close behind Valeta, his expression darkening. Priests and elementalists' powers were incompatible with magicians. Valeta slowly looked around. She could see people busily rushing back and forth behind Guilian and the knights.

"We need more hands here! We need some more help!"

"Everyone's hands are tied!"

"This is serious! Call for more support!"

The scene was playing out in front of her. She could see it. She still had a chance to rebuild the trust she lost. She licked her lips and tapped Silon on the arm. He looked down at her.

"Let go of me for a second."

Looking puzzled, Silon yielded, releasing her. Valeta proceeded to rummage through her bag and pulled out the two remaining potions from within. Holding the potions by their necks, she shook them lightly.

"Can you make bottles like this?" she asked her guard.

"No. I can't 'create' anything. Only the head of the Magicians' Tower can do that."

"Really?"

How impressive. She had thought it easy, simply because of the way he had conjured a table full of food out of thin air. He made it look easy. She didn't know that was only something the head of the Magicians' Tower could do.

"Can you pick up broken glass from the debris?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll leave that to you. I'm going to try something," she said.

Valeta tapped the ground with her foot a couple of times, then began to look around. Then, she started drawing a large circle on the ground with the edge of a pointy rock. Kneeling down, Valeta remained fixed on the ground as she continued drawing. Duke Delphine's eyes widened as he watched her.

An *alchemy circle*? It had been a long time since he'd seen one that big. After all, it was hard to see a formula of that scale when he was always drawing his own in secret.

"What are you doing?" the captain asked. "If you're doing anything suspicious, I'll arrest you immediately. Don't forget, you're still a suspect."

"Oh, leave her be, Captain," Guilian said.

"Yes, sir..."

"That's an alchemy circle. It's similar to a magic circle but used by alchemists. From what I can tell, it doesn't seem to be a symbol that would set off an attack," Guilian said without taking his eyes off the girl's small figure. He had never seen such a tiny girl draw such a large circle. She must have developed

this alchemy circle on her own. A transformation one, perhaps?

Silon flew through the air, lightly landing next to her with a bundle in his hand.  
“Will this be enough?”

“Oh, yes. Could you put them inside the circle?”

“Yes.” Silon used his magic staff to move the glass shards so that they were lying on top of the circle. He took a couple of steps back to observe Valeta.

Placing her hands on one edge of the circle, she said, “Create.”

*Whoosh.*

The formula began to emit a deep purple glow. The light increased until it was nearly blinding, then persisted for a moment before it began to fade. Silon squeezed his eyes shut momentarily. When he reopened them, they instantly went wide with shock.

The circle was gone, and so too was the broken glass. Dozens of potion bottles stood in their place. Valeta was picking them up and lining them up in little rows.

“I need water,” she said without looking back.

Realizing that she was a natural at ordering people around, Silon waved his staff. A bucket of water landed in front of the elementalist, who then took it to pour equal amounts of water into each empty bottle. Then, she drew a second circle and moved all the bottles on top of that one. Placing her palms on top of the circle, she said, “Convert.”

Another blinding light. By now, she had attracted the attention of everyone around her. Silon had a grim look on his face. He couldn’t understand why Valeta was doing this. *Attracting attention like this isn’t a good idea.*

Guilian's eyes were shining with greed. It was clear that wanted something from her, though Silon didn't know what.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 70

*What did she transform?*

There was a light, but other than the circle disappearing, nothing had changed. The amount of liquid in the potion bottles looked the same. In fact, they didn't look any different after Valeta had activated the alchemy circle.

*Did it fail?* Silon thought as he slowly looked around. Luckily, everyone seemed to be entranced by what she was doing and didn't make a move. He cast a spell on his magic staff, ready to use in case of an attack.

When she was done, Valeta reached into her bag, pulled out a high-quality potion, and popped the bottle open. Then, she started pouring equal amounts into the thirty or so vials. As the light pink potion mixed with the colorless water, the insides of the vials began to take on the pinkish color of the potion. After dividing the two high-quality potions among the thirty vials, she got up.

"It's neither extraction nor creation, but dilution."

Mixed with astonishment and wonder, Silon turned to the small voice that had just spoken and found that it was Guilian, smiling. He clenched his fists, holding back his anger.

*That man's dangerous.* Not only the fact that he was knowledgeable about alchemy—his entire aura radiated with dangerous energy. *I don't know much about alchemy...* But even he could tell that Valeta was incredible. It was possible that she was a genius, much like his lord.

"Can you help me move this?" Valeta asked.

"To where?"

"To the wounded."

Silon tilted his head ever so slightly but obediently waved his staff. At once, the bottles floated in the air. Despite still being in the throes of pain, the wounded—along with their doctors—could not help but look on in amazement.

"These are potions I made in a rush. All my materials disappeared when the manor collapsed." Valeta raised the corners of her lips, trying her best to smile naturally. "They're not as effective at healing and relieving pain as a high-quality potion, but they're better than nothing. I have about thirty, but I don't know if they'll be enough. Drink half of it and pour the rest on your bodies," she instructed.

"Oh my goodness. Thank you."

"Lady Valeta..."

People were weeping with gratitude. Valeta looked down at them with an odd expression, her violet eyes moving from left to right before curving into a kind smile.

"I'll try to make more when I'm able."

She looked toward Silon, who proceeded to wave his staff in the air again, prompting the bottles to move from where they were to land in front of the wounded. Surprised, one of the medics carefully stepped forward.

"You're just... giving us these precious things?"

"Oh, I was planning on opening a pharmacy in the capital where commoners, merchants, and nobles alike can all buy potions."

"Whoa..."

Astonished murmurs broke out from the crowd. The medic's eyes widened. He

had never seen a potion before. The imperial family had monopolized all the alchemists in the empire, so unless you were a well-to-do noble, it was impossible to even lay your eyes on one.

"Luckily, I was born with this talent. I think I'll be able to sell at a low price that anyone can afford. However, I don't have the means to invest in a shop. That's why I asked His Grace for help."

Valeta lowered her gaze. She tried her best to remember Reinhart's expression. She never thought that his insincere smile would come in handy one day.

"But now that things turned out this way..." She could hear hushed gasps. Now that the imperial family was attacking in full force, she had no choice but to reveal her cards. "They said they would release me as soon as I'm proven innocent. I hope to see you all again once I open the pharmacy for my potions..." she trailed off, smiling.

Some of those with only minor injuries who had already drunk and applied the potions to their wounds were starting to move around. Even the people who were on the brink of death seemed to have a better complexion. Nobody looked like they were going to die anymore. Valeta's violet eyes lit up for a moment.

"The potions are pretty effective, right?" she asked.

"Yes, very! Thank you so much!"

"I hope I can open the store and heal more people soon," she said softly as she rose. She rubbed the back of her neck and slowly turned. It would be hard for them to give up potions once they had a taste of it. *I hope the rumors spread.*

At some point, Guilian had begun staring at her with a strange gleam in his eyes. One thing was for sure—his eyes were filled with madness.

"I didn't know you were such a genius," he said to her.

"I didn't know you were this tenacious," Valeta replied in a bored voice. She had no idea what they were trying to achieve, making it impossible for her to anticipate their next steps.

"That's enough," Duke Delphine said, stepping in. He took Valeta's hand. "This child is under my protection, and I don't plan to have her held responsible for this. Step aside."

With wide eyes, she hid behind the duke. She could feel a strange ticklish feeling where their hands were clasped and frowned. It felt like an insect was crawling down her fingertips. Ignoring the urge to curl her fingers, she curled her toes instead. Then, he tightened his grasp.

"Duke Delphine, why would you go to such lengths to protect a criminal like this?"

"Mind your tongue, Guilian. She is no criminal. I can vouch for her innocence. I swear on my house's name."

At the duke's proclamation, Guilian frowned. The captain also bore a strange look. Duke Delphine was one of two dukes in the empire. Just his very name carried weight. His family had supported the empire for a long time and had the full confidence of the people. Duke Delphine himself was a faithful man of conviction, so many people, including noble families, supported him.

"Go with Dreux, Valeta. He'll take you to his manor."

"Will that be okay?"

Upon hearing the doubt in her voice, Duke Delphine smiled gently and stroked her hair. "It'll be all right. A child should act like a child. I'll take care of this."

"I'm an adult."

“I’m just saying.”

Duke Leon approached Valeta from behind and placed a hand on her shoulder, causing her to blink and turn around. Duke Leon pointed with his chin, gesturing that it was time for them to go. With one last glance at the others, Valeta turned her back toward them to follow Duke Leon. She had no reason to turn down the people who were offering her their help, but she didn’t know why it made her feel so strange.

“This way.”

As she followed behind Duke Leon, Valeta kept glancing behind her. Duke Delphine seemed to be a rather powerful figure. Neither Guilian nor the captain could make a move against him.

“Where are we going?”

“My house.”

Duke Leon opened the door to a carriage that was parked on the side. When had he called for this? Noticing the odd look on her face, the duke took her by the arm and pushed her into the carriage. As she looked back with surprise, Duke Leon got into the carriage and looked back at Silon, flicking his chin toward the carriage. Silon made a face but got in as well, closing the door behind him.

“Sit.”

“All right.”

Once Valeta was seated, Duke Leon leaned over and knocked on the wall behind her, alerting the coachman to set forth. His hand rested for a moment by the nape of her neck. He stiffened, inhaled lightly, and leaned back with a frown.

“The smell of wind...”

“What?”

“Lying is bad.”

At Duke Leon’s words, Valeta blinked, dumbfounded. What was he talking about? The smell of wind? Lying is bad? She tilted her head, trying to decipher what he meant. *The smell of wind...?*

Did the wind even have a smell? The only thing she could think of was the wind that Gene had generated. No. He couldn’t have been talking about that. It was impossible for elementals to have scents.

“Carlon’s worried about you.”

“I know.”

“You don’t,” Duke Leon replied firmly, his arms folded against his chest. His austere tone didn’t suggest that he was angry, but she could not ignore the stiffness in his words—it was as if there was no room for disagreement.

“I know very well that he worries about me...”

“You don’t know anything, Valeta.”

She tilted her head, his words suddenly leaving her with a surge of emotions.

“You don’t see those around you as people but as tools. You don’t even try. There’s nothing wrong with trying to protect yourself, but turning away from the truth? That’s poison.”

Duke Leon rarely spoke in such lengthy sentences, and Valeta gulped, at a loss for words. She blinked slowly a few times and locked eyes with the duke. Surprisingly, she found that his pitch-black eyes seemed to be blaming her.

"Then you should have just left me behind," she said. "I don't know why you're telling me this after you forced me into this carriage."

"Why did you save the snowta?"

"Because you gave it to me as a gift."

"Then give it back," he said, stretching out his hand.

Valeta was left speechless for a second time. Looking down at the creature sleeping in her arms, she began stammering.

"I'm just joking."

Duke Leon shrugged as she contemplated the cub in her arms. Valeta looked at him with a blank expression and returned his shrug with one of her own.

"Why did you save the snowta?" he asked again.

Valeta couldn't open her mouth as easily this time. Why did she save it? Because she had wanted to. She didn't like the thought of the little creature who used to chase after her meeting a tragic end.

"Are you going to keep saving it?" he continued.

"Probably."

"Even if it'll be no help to you?"

Valeta clenched her fist as she listened to Duke Leon. He had no qualms about punching people where it hurt them the most. Though he wasn't as cruel as Count Delight, he wasn't as kind as Duke Delphine. Even so, she knew that he wasn't a hostile person.

*How difficult.* The day Reinhart had broken her free of her cage, she'd assumed the border between her and the rest of the world had dissipated, at least

enough to bring her a step closer to the real world. She stifled a sigh, ran a hand down her face, and gave a bitter smile.

“Carlon and I are of the same mind.”

“What could you possibly stand to gain from this?” she asked.

“It’s because we think we can protect you.”

“Duke Del—”

Valeta stopped mid-sentence. She glanced at him for a moment before running a hand over her cheek. Her mouth opened and closed several times before she pressed a hand to her eyes.

“Carl—”

Valeta took a deep breath. Blushing slightly, she tried again.

“Carlon might be like that, but why you?’

“I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Dreux and Carlon were old friends. And Carlon had been wanting to help Valeta for a long time. She was like a bird trapped in a cage. It was rare to see her at all, and if she was ever in the imperial castle, she was never alone, making her impossible to approach. Carlon’s desires must’ve rubbed off on Dreux at some point.

A small laugh escaped from the duke.

“You’ll lose nothing.”

When she said nothing, he went on.

“I’ll protect you.”

Valeta stared at him, feeling her heart pounding in her ears. Then she looked away and shrugged bashfully. His words were rough, but she could feel the truth behind them. She leaned back against her seat and closed her eyes.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 71

\* \* \*

“This is unacceptable!”

“He may be the head of the Magicians’ Tower, but he can’t keep causing trouble with the socoros!”

“This is just foolish. Are you going to stand by and let him take advantage of his position? Balteer!”

*Bang!*

A robed man slammed his hands on the table. The magicians’ conversation around the large round table was full of tension. A man in brown robes sitting at the head of the table stroked his chin with a troubled expression.

“He’s already been chosen as the head. What can we possibly do?”

“We don’t believe that he’s the true head!”

“Right! He’s just a novice! One that kneels before a socoro’s feet and calls her master! It’s obscene!”

Balteer said nothing, lost deep in thought. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened before smoothing out. Pressing his magic staff against the floor, he slowly closed his eyes and opened them back up again. His dark brown staff bore the signs of age. Two lengths of wood braided together. At the end was a large, round magic stone.

“The Magicians’ Tower’s approach is too outdated. You would know what’s better for us, unlike that unreasonable man.”

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"Please... Take over as the new head. If you become the new head, all of us will support you.

Balteer quietly stroked his beard, then rubbed his temple with a callused finger, raising an eyebrow as though he were very troubled. Then, he silently stood up and raised his head.

"Welcome back, my lord," he said.

He turned to the entrance of the thirty-sixth-floor conference room and bowed deeply. The magicians remained in their seats until they realized who Balteer was speaking to and jumped up in alarm.

"Welcome, my lord."

They quickly bowed, greeting the head of the Magicians' Tower. Reinhart, accompanied by Kurt and Caspelios, slowly removed his robe and gestured with his chin.

Reinhart laughed softly. "What's wrong? Don't let me interrupt your conversation."

"Wh-what are you doing here, my lord?"

"It's fascinating how you think I don't know what's going on in this tower."

"But..."

The magicians clenched their fists, white as a sheet. Balteer stood at the head of the table, silently and respectfully. Reinhart walked over to a corner and lightly snapped. A velvet chair materialized instantly. He leisurely sat in the chair, crossing his legs. Leaning back, he also crossed his arms before gesturing with his chin again.

"Go on. Where were you?" he asked.

"We weren't..."

"Oh, right. You were thinking about making that snake the new head of the tower. Isn't that right, doggy?" Reinhart said as he turned to Caspelios, tickling him under the chin.

A few stifled gasps broke out among the magicians. They had never met someone so condescending. Although nobody treated the Watchdog of the Tower like a proper magician, he was going too far.

Caspelios frowned slightly but said, "Yes. That's right."

The other magicians made a face at his grating, metal-scratching-metal voice. It was a creepy sound that they couldn't get used to. The only people who didn't react were Reinhart, Balteer, and Kurt, who were already used to it.

"Okay. Go on. I know you have a lot of complaints. I have a lot to think about today, so I'll just sit here quietly," Reinhart said with a light toss of his head. The magicians grew red when they saw the beautiful curve of his bright smile and quickly looked away.

A beautiful devil. They remembered. They remembered how he had punished the magicians who raised their voices at him. Everyone fell silent as if their lips were glued together.

Balteer broke the silence. "Do you mean it?"

Reinhart, who was about to stand because he was quickly losing interest, lifted his head and looked at the man. Straddling the line between middle-aged and elderly, he had a lot of gray hair.

"Mean what?"

"That you won't punish us no matter what we say here."

"Oh. Fine. I guess..." Reinhart's eyelids cast a dark shadow over his ruby eyes. He propped his elbow on the armrest, his chin resting on the back of his hand, and smiled. "I need a little excitement today."

Balteer was silent for a moment. Then, he nodded and took his seat again. He waved to the magicians who were still standing. "Take a seat for now. Our lord has been gracious enough to allow us to speak. If you have any complaints, now would be a good time to tell him directly."

"But..."

How could they say those things in front of him? The magicians did as Balteer told them to do anyway and slowly started taking their seats again.

"So, what were your complaints?"

Balteer's voice was relaxed as he attempted to start the conversation. Reinhart leaned back against the chair, legs crossed, with his chin propped on his hand, looking like he was half-listening.

"Well... We can't stand the way our lord kneels before a socoro..." one magician started.

"That's right," another said. "Also, don't you think he should take responsibility for the most recent incident?"

"We keep getting complaints from the socoros' imperial castle. Even the imperial magicians don't seem to be treated well," said another.

Complaints started flowing out of the magicians, their gazes fixed on Balteer. Reinhart said nothing. Instead, he kept still, gaze pointed at the floor and not making any moves. The magicians glanced at him a few times before speaking up in earnest again.

"It seems like the head has no interest in the situation inside the tower."

"Right. There's so much to manage since the seat has been vacant for so long, but it seems like he doesn't care at all. Instead, he's causing more..."

The voices, which started out in annoyance, gradually became more concerned as they spoke. What they needed was a central figure that would protect the Magicians' Tower and keep it stable. The long-awaited head of the Magicians' Tower kneeled before a socoro and had no interest in their internal affairs —facts that were deeply upsetting to the other magicians. Wasn't he supposed to be their leader? But he was no leader. He had devoted his life to a mere socoro.

"Also, he won't respond to the flood of complaints that we're getting."

"I don't know what he's thinking! It's beyond frustrating!"

"If there's a problem, I wish he could just tell us. We, the magicians of the Magicians' Tower, would do our best to help him."

Reinhart continued to listen, lost in his own thoughts. He knew what they wanted, but he didn't step in because he wanted to see how the situation would play out. He already knew that there was a central figure and didn't feel particularly inclined to fight for the spot.

"Giving his heart to a socoro of all people..."

"I'd much prefer it if you were the head instead, Balteer. You worked so hard to keep this tower standing while he wasn't here."

Reinhart slowly blinked. Did he have to stay in this position? The answer was a resounding "no." There was no obligation for him to keep this status. He had just wanted to look less insignificant when standing next to his master. He just didn't want to lose her to the crown prince. After all, what power did a slave

have?

Also... He had wanted to create a place that they could go back to together. But it seemed like he had chosen the wrong place.

*"If you didn't do it, just say that you didn't. You'll cause a misunderstanding."*

*"I know you didn't do it."*

*"You don't kill without a reason."*

Reinhart tilted his head. If he thought about it, there was no need for him to depend on his status as the head. She had never paid much attention to status in the first place, treating everyone and everything equally and fairly. That was why he had noticed her. That was why he'd wanted to have her and had become obsessed with her. So, if he couldn't make a place for her here, then there was no need to stay. This had all been for her in the first place. Was it necessary for him to stay bound to this place if she didn't want it?

Reinhart slowly stood up from his chair, causing it to slide across the marble with a screech. The magicians flinched and looked over warily at him.

*"I understand. Balteer Baroksis?"*

*"Yes?"*

*"You're the head of the Magicians' Tower now. I'm leaving."*

Reinhart's hair fanned out as he spun toward the door. It was the furthest thing from what anyone had been expecting the beaming Reinhart to say. Their mouths dropped open in surprise.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 72

“My lord!”

Kurt jumped in front of Reinhart, his eyes trembling with surprise as the head merely looked back at him. If he was the one interfering with this group, all he had to do was just leave, Reinhart had realized.

*I see... Perhaps this was why that duke was anxious about the girl keeping her distance. He wanted her to fit in a collective, but naturally, he must have suspected that she would come to reject it and leave herself.*

“If the other side keeps throwing a fit, just tell them that the head of the Magicians’ Tower left of his own accord. You can take care of things on your own.”

“My lord...”

“Listen, doggy. I’m no longer your master.”

“My master is whoever the tower decides is the head.”

“Then, I guess it won’t have a head this time,” Reinhart replied lightly.

Balteer frowned, looking rather disappointed. He said that he’d listen to their complaints. How had he come to this decision? *He’s young, still wet around the ears.*

Balteer let out a small sigh and shook his head. The murmurs grew louder and louder, the magicians’ rumblings agitated. It seemed that they didn’t actually want Reinhart to leave, they had just needed to vent their anger and frustration. That was why Balteer had made a space for them to voice their concerns,

believing that it might lead to a clue that could solve the problem.

"Is that what you decided after listening to our conversation?" he asked the red-eyed man.

Reinhart glanced at Balteer and tapped the floor with the tip of his shoe. A small magic circle appeared at his feet, growing larger and larger.

"Have you ever drowned before and felt what it was like to be unable to breathe?" Reinhart asked.

"What?"

Everything he did was for that girl.

"Or felt like an animal with gills, forced to live on dry land?"

If he didn't have her, there was no need for him to be here. As he spoke, the magic circle that had started as the size of Reinhart's fist became the size of the conference room. He smiled as he looked up from the floor, his red eyes sparkling strangely as the candles around the room reflected off them.

"If you take away oxygen from all of the living things on this earth, they will suffocate to death."

The magicians fell silent at Reinhart's sudden, poignant words. Balteer clung to his staff for support and listened carefully.

"You're blocking off my only source of air, leaving me no choice but to leave."

The magicians' faces grew hard. There was a reason why all heads were so violent: their violence stopped them from going insane. As a wealth of information flooded Reinhart's head, many of the previous leaders had tried to gnaw away at his life, suffocating him. And once the lives of dozens of people lived inside of him, boredom had imprinted itself in his mind.

Humans no longer seemed human. The magicians' hatred for humans was felt even deeper by the head of the Magicians' Tower. The lives and memories of the previous heads, as well as all of their knowledge, were alive and breathing in the mind of the next incarnation. There was nothing new.

Reinhart knew bits about various types of magic. He knew how to deal with all types of people. To live a life you have already lived was bound to get old quickly. There was nothing that could excite him now.

"Who is that socoro to you? Is she more important to you than us?" one magician shouted, his teeth clenched. Soon enough, Reinhart's magic circle covered the whole tower and continued spreading across the island in the sky.

Reinhart, who had his head tilted back, slowly lowered his gaze. "Do you remember the first time you breathed?"

"How could I?"

"I do. For a monster who was born with their throat obstructed, their hands and feet tied, and didn't even know they were suffocating, there's no way I could ever forget."

How could he forget her warmth? Even when she said that she hated him and tried to avoid him or get him to leave, in the end, she would always defend him. Even though Reinhart had been a slave that nobody cared about, she still worried about him. When he watched the girl who could never turn a blind eye to an injured animal getting crushed under Count Delight's foot, watching her heart shrivel up, he'd been thinking...

*"Master. If you had one wish, what would it be?"*

He could still vividly remember the question he'd asked her in his mind. It was a conversation they had had late one night, separated by a door. He had been with her all night, trapped in the dark. With a single blink, he could recall the

scene, the feel of the air, even the shaking of his eyes. It was like that scene was burned into his retinas.

She had trouble answering his question, saying nothing for a long time, trapped on the other side of the door. The moment he was about to crouch by the door, he heard her. A small voice that he would never forget.

“A home I can return to...”

It was a whisper, murmured sleepily...

“I wish I could have a safe and normal home I could return to. A place where I could rest.”

Those words lingered in Reinhart’s mind. After learning about the sky room, he thought it was the utopia she was talking about. However, it would be impossible for her to rest comfortably there if she didn’t agree.

“I don’t know what you expected from me, but I’m not here because of some calling,” he said. “I needed a home to return to. That’s all.”

If it wasn’t for that, he would’ve just gone someplace else with the girl. He was confident that he could fool the imperial castle, and he didn’t care if he had to cross the ocean to do it. All the while, the magic circle was still growing, soon encompassing the whole of the island in the sky.

Reinhart sighed. The magic circle began to glow. “I guess I made the wrong choice to enter an established group. I can see why my master was like that.”

Even if she became a part of a group, she already knew that it’d be impossible for her to fully integrate, so she had stepped out of her own volition. It only made sense. She had always been sensitive and defensive.

“Even though I can’t manage the tower, the least I can do is fix the creaky parts, I suppose.”

Reinhart smiled as he snapped his fingers. Everyone squinted in the bright light. The light instantly spread all over the island in the sky and began to sink into the island. The old, dilapidated parts became new, with freshly engraved magic circles. The places where Caspelios occasionally carried out repairs were fixed instantly with the single brush of his fingers against each other. The watchdog looked at Reinhart, his mouth open with shock.

There had never been a head like Reinhart before. The head of the Magicians' Tower had always been more powerful than the average magician, but never to this extent.

"I'll look for a home elsewhere. I've failed my master again," Reinhart said with a frown. If she found out that he'd abandoned something halfway through, she'd probably make a face. That was just who she was.

"Are you leaving us behind like this?"

"You have to protect your own home. It's not right asking other people to do it for you, hm?"

"You're not even going to tell us what happened?" Balteer asked.

Reinhart smiled. "I just need to take care of what I started, no?"

It wasn't like it was impossible for him to capture the culprit. He remembered seeing the magic circle somewhere. If he just meditated for a few days, he'd be able to recall where he'd seen it. And even if that wasn't the solution, it wouldn't be hard for him to draw the same magic circle according to his memories.

"Why won't you deny that you killed them?"

Reinhart narrowed his eyes. At Balteer's words, the magicians' murmurs grew even louder. Reinhart sighed and threw a look toward the older magician.

"Is there any point?"

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying that people only believe what they want to believe. Would it make a difference what I say?” Reinhart asked.

“You’re acting like a child, thoughtless and lacking judgment.”

“Hmph.” A scoff escaped from Reinhart’s lips. Pretending to be an adult was twisting his insides. He snapped his fingers.

“Ahh!”

“I-I can’t... breathe!”

“Do you know what’s most important? It doesn’t matter if you’re an adult or a child...”

*Thud!*

One by one, the magicians fell to their knees. At once, the air around them became heavy. It was as if the air in the tower had turned into weighted lead. The only people still standing were Balteer, who was clenching his teeth; Caspelios, who had no proper body to begin with; and Kurt. The magic stone embedded in Balteer’s staff was glowing. It wasn’t perfect, but it was blocking Reinhart’s magic.

“It’s power,” Reinhart said. “As long as I have power, you will always kneel before me and despair.”

*Snap!*

The moment he snapped his fingers again, the heavy air dissipated. The magicians clutched their chests, gasping for breath. Reinhart’s gaze lingered on the red-faced magicians, who were desperately sucking in air.

"So, if I'm feeling charitable and saying that I'll step aside, you should say, 'I understand.' The only reason why you're still alive is because of that socoro."

"My lord, are you really leaving?"

"You're self-righteous and thoughtless. You're turning a blind eye to your calling. The Magicians' Tower is..."

"Simply not my home," Reinhart finished for him.

*Snap!*

Another magic circle appeared beneath the magician's feet and instantly illuminated the room again, the light stronger than the last. When everyone opened their eyes again, Reinhart was gone.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 73

“No...”

The magicians sat in disbelief. Balteer looked at the spot where Reinhart had disappeared from, then slowly looked around the conference room. The Magicians’ Tower and the island in the sky, both of which had fallen into disarray in the absence of a leader, had been completely repaired. Normally, it would take a long time for such restorations.

*To think he did that with a single snap...* Balteer could tell—of all incarnations—the current head would be the most remarkable leader yet. But only if he chose to settle down in the tower, at least. The Magicians’ Tower wasn’t the only thing that was fixed. The island in the sky, which had been losing altitude, was now higher than ever. As if he was sharing the same thoughts, the watchdog of the tower made a face.

“Kurt.”

“Yes, Balteer?”

“Do you know where that socoro... I mean, the person that his lordship was talking about is?”

Kurt kept his lips sealed at Balteer’s question, still reeling from the shock of being abandoned. He slowly nodded and blinked as if he was still coming to his senses.

“I’d better pay her a visit. Can you tell me where she is?”

No. There was no way he could reveal the location of the person that his one and only master had ordered him to protect. He didn’t feel like telling the older

magician anyway. In Kurt's eyes, the socoro and his lord were mere children.

"I don't mean her any harm. It's just... I simply wish to speak with her since it seems like the head has no desire to talk."

"I'm sorry. I can't reveal that information," Kurt eventually said, shaking his head. He'd have to talk about this with Silon first, but he couldn't just tell Balteer where Valeta was. Wasn't it his duty to protect her?

*Whoosh!*

The moment he spoke, a magic circle appeared on the floor. Kurt turned his head toward the magic, one that he was familiar with. Silon emerged holding a magic staff, his white robes fluttering with the breeze.

"Kurt, we have a problem..."

Silon paused, then he frowned as if noticing the strange tension in the air. He looked from side to side and blinked. His gaze shifted from the dubious-looking Balteer to the disheveled magicians and then back to Kurt.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Our lord has left the tower."

"What?" Silon blinked a couple of times, stunned. The news was like a bolt of lightning on a clear, blue day. Knitting his brows, he brought a hand to his cheek. "How?"

Kurt began to explain, providing him with a brief summary of what had happened.

Silon nodded, his face serious. "Isn't this because of the attack that happened earlier? He didn't seem like he was in a good mood."

"An attack?" Balteer asked.

"Oh, well... I was with the socoro when a magic circle I'd never seen before caused the entire building to collapse," Silon said. He didn't think it was anything to hide since the incident should've been reported to the Magicians' Tower. After all, the head of the Magicians' Tower had been attacked.

"The problem was, while that magic circle was present, we couldn't use magic at all..."

"His lordship had to use magic to force his way out of where he was trapped," Balteer surmised, nodding.

"Even if we try our best to explain what happened to Miss Valeta, she'll only scold him."

"Scold? Really?" Kurt looked exasperated by Silon's choice of words. The girl always treated Reinhart a little too casually for his liking, but scolding him?

"Silon, what do you make of that person?" Balteer asked.

"Valeta's still very young. And not all that different from his lordship... Perhaps it's because they've been together for so long, but they are both very bad with emotions and have a hard time trusting people. It's as if the two of them have built a world of their own."

Balteer stroked his beard as he listened. If he was able to appease either of the two, he could bring the head back to the tower. *It'd be a shame to let him go.* He had such great potential. If only he continued to learn and flourish. Balteer wondered if Reinhart knew exactly how amazing his powers were.

"A world of their own?"

"It's like their worlds only revolve around each other... No, maybe it's better to say that they're the only people who can understand each other," Silon

explained, with a vague look on his face. He couldn't be certain because he hadn't spent that much time with her, but judging by the way Reinhart clung to her, she unquestionably trusted the former.

"Miss Valeta is also an extraordinary alchemist. She is a remarkable figure among alchemists, much like how our lord is among magicians. I think that's why they're able to sympathize with each other."

"If I seek her out, do you think she would talk to me?"

"Perhaps. She's better at pretending to be normal and adapting to society."

Silon could tell just by being around them. Both Reinhart and Valeta wore thick masks. They were anything but ordinary, but they hid their true natures and their true feelings in order to fit into a normal life.

"Could you introduce me to her?"

"I don't mind, but... She's not an easy person to deal with. On top of that, right now's a little..."

"Did something happen?" Kurt asked.

Silon nodded. They were in a tight spot. Right now, she was at another duke's house, but there was no telling what would happen. "The socoros won't listen to our explanations and decided that the incident was an act of terror by his lordship. And Miss Valeta has been named as an accomplice."

"Miss Valeta...?"

"She was nearly taken to the imperial castle, but the duke who was looking after her defended her. However, the situation doesn't look good."

"Then why didn't you bring her here?"

The magicians listened to Kurt and Silon's bickering, slightly stunned. They weren't used to the way these two were talking about the socoro. It was as if they cared for her. Both Kurt and Silon were the epitome of magicians who hated socoros.

Balteer studied them for a moment before smiling gently. "If you don't mind, can I pay her a visit with you?"

"How about visiting her tomorrow, then?" Silon suggested.

"Why tomorrow?"

"It's time for her to sleep right now," Kurt responded, answering in Silon's stead. Balteer's wrinkles deepened when he turned back to Silon, only to find him nodding. He wasn't the only one who was bewildered. The other magicians clearly felt the same way, but after hearing Kurt's reasoning, Balteer decided not to press it.

"Then, we'll go together when the shift changes."

"I'll let you know in advance."

"Thank you."

Kurt nodded. He took out his staff and chanted a spell for long-distance travel. Then, he disappeared along with the magic circle.

\* \* \*

"You failed?"

"Yes. Duke Delphine swore on his House and stopped us from taking her. After all, House Delphine is a distinguished family, so I didn't want to take any chances," Guilian reported as he knelt before the emperor.

The emperor's mouth twitched. He rubbed his temples with a sigh, a look of frustration crossing his face. "I didn't realize that he formed such a connection with her."

"It was unexpected for me as well."

"He's never been one to ignore the weak and pitiful. What a troublesome fellow."

Letting polluted water run freely through the empire wouldn't do them any good. The heads of the two most powerful houses were the most trusted people in the empire, so they couldn't be caught getting their shoes muddied. They were indispensable to the empire and he didn't want to resort to losing them in order to get what he wanted. It wasn't the smart choice.

"It seems like we have to be more decisive..."

The emperor knitted his brows, troubled. Originally, the magic circle was supposed to explode the moment the head of the Magicians' Tower made contact with the girl. He hadn't realized that the duke would be with them at that moment.

"What's Miloyd doing?"

"He seems to be quite shocked by the things she said." Guilian paused for a moment. "And there was also something unexpected..."

"What's that?"

The imperial alchemist's expression darkened at the question. It was something he couldn't wrap his mind around for many reasons. "She said something strange. As she was distributing potions to the injured, she said something about wanting to open a pharmacy where she can sell potions for cheap..."

The emperor's face grew hard as Guilian finished speaking. He scoffed and

stroked his chin. After a moment, the emperor's lips quirked into an unsettling smile.

"She's a clever one."

"What do you think she's trying to do?"

"She's trying to earn the trust of the people. She's thinking about using the people as a shield. She knows what they would be willing to do for her abilities."

The emperor's shoulders shook as if he were enjoying himself. This was fun. It had been a while since he had such a clever opponent. His interest was piqued. This would be very entertaining, to say the least.

"We've been monopolizing all the potions. It's obvious, but it's hard for commoners to come by potions. And if she sells them at a low price..."

"Everyone would want to buy them. But creating potions at that scale would be impossible."

"Still, commoners would be able to buy them."

The emperor stroked his chin. Yes, it was entertaining, but perhaps it was because of the way the girl had been brought up in a birdcage. She was too young and immature. He could clearly see what she was thinking.

"All of the subjects would become her hands and feet. If we tried to take her away, the backlash would be great. They'd watch her every move, but in response, she'd have knights protecting her."

"She's... a smart one."

"It would have been nice if young Valeta had been able to experience what it's like living in the real world."

But she hadn't, so this at least would be his victory. It was her fault for showing her cards. Shouldn't he use the opportunities he was given to make the first move?

"An object has no need for a good reputation, correct?"

"What?"

The emperor rested his chin on interlocked fingers. "Guilian, do you know how to deprecate a valuable item?"

"No."

"If the item were a respectable lady, you could defile and sully her. If it were a beautiful, valuable jewel, you could say that the gem is cursed," the emperor explained.

Guilian's eyes grew wide. The emperor smiled wordlessly. There were many ways to devalue an object. The easiest way was to spread a rumor.

"And what would be the best way to tarnish the reputation of an alchemist who heals people? What could be the truth behind someone who sells expensive potions for dirt cheap?" The emperor's eyes narrowed as he crooned his sweet words. The girl must've revealed her master plan because she was desperate, but it wasn't a wise decision.

"It'd be nice if the victims came forth. You said that the injured drank her potions, right?" he asked Guilian.

"Yes, she gave her potions to the injured."

"Good. Then that's perfect! How about this?"

The emperor's voice was tinged with happiness as he began to speak rapidly, without pause. Guilian nodded intermittently to indicate that he was listening.

His lips slowly curled into a smile. The emperor raised a thick index finger of his and made a slashing motion across his neck.

Guilian quietly stared at the emperor's moving mouth. A smile spread across the alchemist's face as his shoulders shook with laughter.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 74

"Let's proceed with this. It's time for that girl to learn that the world isn't so easy."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Guilian said.

"Also... Leave the investigation of that case to Miloyd."

"Yes."

"You may take your leave."

Guilian bowed as the emperor dismissed him from the room. He turned and left the emperor's office. Sensing that nobody was left in the room, the emperor slowly rose from his seat.

He pulled out four thick books from the bookshelf behind his desk. A book from the top right shelf, another from the bottom left, a third book five books to the right of that, and the second book from the top left. More precisely, he pulled them out just a tiny bit so they still rested on the shelf. The center of the bookcase opened with a click as if something had unlocked from the inside. He slowly opened the door and took a step into the darkness.

Closing the door behind him, he skillfully locked it. On the outside, it was back to looking like a perfectly ordinary bookcase. The emperor took a step and the candles flickered on with a slight whoosh, illuminating the dark passage, which he followed down to a large room. In the center of the room was a bed and lined along the walls were bookshelves. On one side of the room was a desk neatly organized with pens and bottles of ink.

A figure lay curled up on the bed. Her long, disheveled, sky-blue hair fanned out

on the bed, looking as though it had been neglected for a long time. The emperor took a quick glance around the room before he walked over to the desk, pulled out a chair, and dragged it over to the bed.

"How about you show me your face, Eliza?"

Silence.

"Do you want me to punish you again? Is this not enough?"

The woman flinched, her shoulders shaking. The emperor waited for a moment. The woman slowly looked up. Her joints creaked as if she had been lying there for a long time, but she raised her head and turned to the emperor. Her mouth was bound with a cloth as if it were there to stop herself from biting her own tongue off and ending her life, and her neck was covered in wounds as if she had tried to scratch herself.

One of her eyes was a black void, missing. It was easy to see that she had dug it out. Her one remaining eye was a deep blue. The emperor reached out and untied the woman's gag with a single hand.

"Kill me..." she rasped.

"Miloyd would be sad if he heard his one and only mother say that," the emperor replied.

The woman's wrists were bound with large shackles, so heavy that they made it hard for her to lift her hands. The emperor reached out, easily lifting her shackles.

*Clack.*

They came undone as if his hands were the key. The emperor reached into his pocket, pulled something out, and shook it. A red marble. Eliza's eyes widened in recognition.

"I found something interesting, Eliza."

"Who did you..." Her subdued voice shook with anger.

Unbothered, the emperor put a hand on her cheek, a gentle look on his face. Eliza made a face, as if disgusted, but didn't avoid his touch.

"An alchemist. A very powerful one too. Maybe this will be able to turn you back to your normal self."

"You... and that foolish dream..." Eliza spat out, her teeth clenched. Her cheeks were sunken, her body nothing gaunt as if she wasn't eating properly. She was so thin that her bones protruded from her body.

"It pains me to say this, but if you disobey me again, I'll cut off Miloyd's arm and bring it to you. Or would you prefer Largris' right leg?"

"Oh..."

"I already presented you with his right eye and left arm. Living without arms seems difficult, so I think his right leg would be appropriate."

"I'll kill you!" Eliza screeched as she reached out in an attempt to strangle the emperor. He easily caught her by the waist, pulled her into his lap, and slowly kissed her neck. She was a lovely, pathetic woman, so easily deceived by his lies.

"Why did you reject me? Why did you try to abandon me? The both of you. You and Largris both rejected me, leaving me no choice but to turn into a monster."

Eliza's body quivered. The emperor gave a low laugh as he caught her wrist, which she had raised in horror. His eyes flashed dangerously as he kissed her wrist.

"Don't forget, Eliza. You... No, you and Larg brought this upon yourselves."

"You son of a b\*tch!"

"No foul language here." Contrary to his words, the emperor laughed as if he was thoroughly enjoying himself, scoffing at her show of refusal, knowing that she was powerless.

"Anyway, you better start eating again tomorrow. If you die, I'll violate Miloyd and Larg in front of your dead body. I'll have them take your place for the rest of their lives, even if they beg me kill them."

"Why, Kynos? Why...?"

Eliza collapsed in his arms, her face contorting, as though she was near tears. The emperor gazed down at the woman for a moment, his eyes filled with indifference, before carrying her back to the bed.

"You're the bad one," he said. "You're the one who tried to make your own world with Larg after you said you trusted me and said that you'd be with me forever. You're the one who tried to destroy the world... A world with the three of us."

"I thought we were friends..."

*Friends.* She meant that she trusted him as a friend. That she'd be with him forever... as a friend. As she hung her head in despair, Kynos shook his head. This was all her fault. This was all beyond his control. He slowly smiled as he set Eliza back down on the bed. The smile was filled with madness, darker than the deepest depths.

"I still love you, Eliza," he said as he lightly grabbed her by the neck. Smiling, he gently squeezed his hand. "So what do you have to say?"

"I... love you, Kynos."

Although she spoke as if she were reciting a line from a book, the emperor gave a satisfied smile. He grabbed the shackles and rose from his seat, his face

emotionless.

"I'll be back tomorrow."

Turning back the way came, he returned to his office. Once outside, he neatly organized his bookshelves and left the office as if nothing had happened.

\* \* \*

"Ugh..."

It was strangely hot. Valeta shifted a little, wondering why the bed she slept in by herself was suddenly overheating. A soothing hand reached out and started patting her on the back. She groaned at the extra heat.

"It's hot..."

"Um... Miss Valeta, are you awake?"

"Mmm..." She stifled a sigh as she heard the troubled voice coming from somewhere above her head. She slowly blinked a couple of times, sighed, and forced herself to look up with some difficulty.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Valeta saw that a firm chest and arms were holding her in an embrace. Stiffening, she realized who this dazzling, inhumanly beautiful person was. Reinhart slept so peacefully that it was hard to believe that he was the head of the Magicians' Tower, the very same one who had massacred so many people.

"Oh... You..." Valeta covered her eyes. He would be the end of her. When had he snuck into her bed again? He usually pretended to request her for her permission first. She sighed and slowly got up.

"Master...?"

“What are you doing here?”

Instead of answering her question, he simply clung onto her waist, rubbing his cheek against her, his eyes still closed. “I was kicked out. Please, pet me.”

“What?”

“My head.”

Still dazed, Valeta stroked Reinhart on the head a couple of times, her hand just barely pressing into his hair. She turned her head, feeling the chilly silence from Silon, an awkward smile pasted on his face. Next to him, Kurt was avoiding looking at them. A middle-aged man stood behind them, looking very embarrassed and confused about the whole scene.

“When did we all agree to meet here...?” Valeta asked, surprised. Reinhart had already fallen back asleep again, his breaths even, and still holding her waist.

*Is he a dog or something? Why was he hiding in her bed? She scoffed. There was a chance that he'd snuck into her bed using magic... No wonder I didn't wake up last night.*

She wished that she could've slept longer, but her head was clear enough. To think that she could feel this refreshed simply by not having a nightmare.

She could get addicted at this rate.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 75

“What’s this about him getting kicked out?”

“Well, that’s... Would you like to have a cup of tea first?”

“It’s too early for tea,” she said.

Silon smiled awkwardly at Valeta’s retort. The older man in brown robes who was standing behind Silon slowly approached.

Valeta looked up, and Reinhart remained hugging her around the waist.

“It’s nice to meet you, Miss Valeta. My name is Balteer Baroksis. I wanted to talk to you about something, but...”

“Oh...” A low sigh escaped her lips. Come to think of it, she remembered Kurt saying something during their shift change yesterday, something about a visitor, but Valeta had just nodded along. “Oh, the visitor? Ugh... But you didn’t say that we were meeting in the morning.”

She glowered at Kurt.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She didn’t think that she’d be talking to someone from the moment she opened her eyes. Sure, he was her guard, but to be inviting other people to someone else’s manor? And more importantly, didn’t this person hate socoros?

Valeta started getting goosebumps, imagining the servants milling around outside. This would lead to more misunderstandings no matter how well she tried to explain it.

“Besides, Balteer...”

She wondered what this man wanted from her. Didn’t he have a prominent position within the Magicians’ Tower? Valeta furrowed her brows and looked at Kurt with a sullen face.

“Please don’t blame him,” Balteer said quickly. “I’m sorry, but it was a matter of urgency that I talk to you.”

“Well, all right.”

Balteer’s eyes widened at her uninterested response. “It seems that you already know me,” he said with a benevolent smile that concealed his surprise.

Valeta gave a slight nod. More accurately, she knew Balteer because of the rumors she’d overheard in the library and also from what she remembered from reading the novel. “I heard about you when I was at the tower.”

“Can I ask you what you heard?”

Valeta directed her gaze at Balteer as he spoke. He was hiding his emotions behind those dark brown eyes. That was the door to figuring out if he was enjoying talking to a socoro.

“You’ve probably heard of it before. About the rolling stone taking out the embedded stone.”

“Hmm...”

Valeta didn’t have to be any clearer for Balteer to understand. He nodded and stroked his chin, a troubled expression on his face. After a long while, he tapped the floor with his staff.

“Would it be too much to ask for a cup of tea?”

"Not at all," Valeta replied with a shrug. "Only if you get this off me."

She pointed to Reinhart who was still clinging onto her waist, a weary look on her face. There were times that he would lean on her for warmth, but it was particularly bad today. Balteer's expression grew strange as Valeta spoke. He thought it would take a long time to find the head of the Magicians' Tower's whereabouts, but this scene before him left him speechless.

The head of the Magicians' Tower, the oppressor of people, was sleeping so soundly as he clung onto the woman like a child.

"Hey. Get off of me." Valeta gave Reinhart's forehead a firm poke.

Balteer's eyes widened when he saw her look of annoyance. *His source of air, hm?* He felt like he could finally understand his lordship a little. She must've known that Reinhart was the head of the Magicians' Tower. She must've seen him kill dozens of people before her very eyes. Yet, it was like she thought nothing of him. How could he give up someone who treated him just like any other person?

"What did you have to say to me?" Valeta asked.

"I wanted to talk to you because it concerned me when the head of the Magicians' Tower suddenly said he was going to give up his position and disappeared."

"Oh..." Valeta glanced behind her and sighed. She wondered what it was this time. Maybe he was in shock at not being able to use his magic. "In that case, you can take him back right now."

"He'll probably run away again."

This was him "running away"? More like he'd simply chosen to give up, finding everything too troublesome to deal with.

She let out a short sigh. "Why did he run away?"

"Simply put, we had a minor disagreement," Balteer said quietly. It was a strange sight watching the girl carry on a conversation while she was in bed with Reinhart wrapped around her.

She pointed to the chair at her desk. "I'm afraid I'm not being very hospitable, but please, take a seat."

"Thank you."

Kurt brought over the chair. Balteer rearranged his robes around his body and sat down. "The difference between what we think of the socoros and the socoros... No, it's just that we didn't agree on how his lordship showed up with you, Miss Valeta."

Balteer gave Valeta a brief account of what had happened yesterday as she listened attentively. When he finished speaking, she quietly shrugged.

"You've been quite patient, haven't you?" she said, resting her chin on her hand as she gazed down at the neat face of the man who was pretending to sleep on her lap. Reinhart gave absolutely no response. "What was he supposed to do when the magicians were hostile to him from the moment he got there? He was probably letting things play out as they were."

In fact, this was true. Wasn't it better to let the stone roll rather than shattering it completely? The rolling stone could come in handy in certain situations.

"You mean, just to let things continue as they are...?" Balteer replied.

"Yes. Isn't that better than having a complete stranger come along and destroy everything?"

But wasn't he the head of the tower? It was their lord who had allowed all of this to happen when he could've put a stop to it at any time. To leave things

alone meant that he didn't know much about the system. *I should have explained it better*, Balteer thought. Although he was born with great power, he had probably lived his life in fear and awe of other people. Or was it an intense dislike for socoros?

"I'll talk to this guy la—"

*Thump!*

Pain coursed through her chest as if someone was squeezing her heart. Valeta curled over, her hand clutching at her chest, swimming with pain.

"Miss Valeta?"

"Are you all right?"

Valeta couldn't bring herself to answer Silon and Balteer. It sounded like their voices were coming from far away. Reinhart, who was lying in her lap, quickly opened his red eyes.

"Ngh..."

"Master." Reinhart quickly got up and scooped Valeta into his arms. Cold sweat dripped down her body.

"It... hurts... Ahh!"

She screamed, clutching at Reinhart's robe, and his face contorted. He glared at Silon and Balteer. The two people shook their heads.

"Ngh..."

"Breathe, Valeta," Reinhart said softly, patting her on the back. Even so, she held her breath as if she couldn't hear a word anyone said. There was nothing she could do to make it any less painful.

Reinhart lifted a finger and pressed it to her forehead, a magical method for preventing pain. Only then did Valeta's face slowly relax. She let out a ragged breath as if the pain had passed before her face contorted again.

"Aaah!"

Reinhart's face hardened at her convulsions. He laid her down on the bed and gently placed his hands on her stomach. Closing his eyes, he slowly channeled his magic into her and let it flow through her body. He quickly rubbed his neck and then clenched his fists as he rose from his seat.

The sound of panting filled the room. Still doubled over, Valeta slowly took a deep breath, feeling the throbbing pain. She gritted her teeth, her fingers trembling. She had felt this kind of pain before.

"Rein... hart..."

"Yes, Valeta?"

"You... bastard... Where's... the necklace...?"

Reinhart's face stiffened, unable to say a word.

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## Chapter 76

\* \* \*

Valeta took a ragged breath as she slumped onto her bed, eyes closed. The pain disappeared as if whoever had the bead had stopped squeezing at that very moment.

“It’s gone.”

“You son of a b\*tch.”

Reinhart smiled bitterly, acting unconcerned about Valeta’s foul language even though she was one to rarely curse. He slowly brushed back her disheveled bangs.

“Break the curse now.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It seems... Someone stronger than me has placed a curse on it.”

Valeta’s eyes widened. Who could be more powerful than the head of the Magicians’ Tower? Silon and the other occupants were just as shocked to hear Reinhart’s response.

“Someone more powerful than you, my lord...?”

Valeta sprang out of bed and grabbed Reinhart by the collar. Recalling how gruesome the pain was when Reinhart had first used the bead on her, she trembled with fear. She would rather get stabbed by a sword and die than go through that again. She didn’t want to live in fear that it could return at any moment without warning.

"You...!"

Reinhart placed his hand over Valeta's pale fist, which had grown white from the sheer force with which she had grabbed his collar. "I'll take care of it."

"Do you expect me to sit here while some stranger has control over my heart?" she snapped.

Reinhart narrowed his eyes. If the curse was engraved on anything other than her heart, he would've used a different strategy. However, it *was* her heart they were talking about. The smallest mistake could kill her. After all, the heart was sensitive and fragile. He couldn't tamper with it carelessly.

Reinhart slowly rose from his seat. He first had to find a way to remember where he'd seen the magic circle that had brought Duke Delphine's manor to ruins. *This isn't the time to act like a child.*

Fury emanated from his red eyes as he set his feet down on the floor. How dare they touch someone dear to him? It was clear that the perpetrator was the imperial castle, but they couldn't have been acting alone. It was impossible for another magician to be stronger than the head of the Magicians' Tower. However, there could have been another method—if it had been magic developed over a long time and one that deviated from the norm...

"Nothing ever goes right when you're tangled in it," Valeta muttered through gritted teeth as she put her head in her hands.

Reinhart, who was putting on his robe, froze. He pulled the hood over his head silently, then said, "I'll protect you. I've never hurt you before."

"That's rich. What about the massacre?"

"That's the exception. I told you, I did that because I was taken by surprise," he said with a laugh.

Valeta sighed.

Reinhart, lightly tapping the floor with the tip of his toe, conjured a bright magic circle that lit up the area. "You should all go back now. I already said that I quit. I'm no longer head of the tower, so you don't have to stay by her side anymore. She's already halfway on their side."

Dealing with it was the only thing she could do. He never would've thought that he'd lose the necklace. So preoccupied with other baffling things, the magician hadn't even thought about the accessory in a while.

"A home..."

Just as Reinhart was about to leave the manor, he heard Valeta's whisper. He slowly turned to face the girl who still had her head bowed. His expression grew strange.

"You... You remembered what I said that day," he said.

"I remember everything you say. One day, we'll have a place where we can fold our wings and rest."

Born with too many burdens from the very start, neither Valeta nor Reinhart had ever had a chance to rest. But even so, they would eventually find a place where they could finally have their peace. Even with all these hands reaching out to hinder them.

"What about the roste?"

"Oh, that." Valeta stepped down onto the marble floor. She reached for her desk, pulled a book from her bag, flipped to the middle, and held it out to Reinhart. "I feel like it might have something to do with alchemy. Can't say for certain," she said as she rubbed her temple.

After some experimentation, she realized that she could create something

similar to roste. However, no matter how she tried, she couldn't replicate it exactly. It didn't make sense. How was it taking something away from all these random people?

"So far, I've found out that if the roste is made by alchemy, then it's a slow-acting formula, probably made from a combination of various types of formulas."

"Hmm..."

"There are at least four different formulas being used. For now, I figured out that there's hardening, decomposing, weakening, and weathering."

Reinhart nodded as he looked at the notebook filled with all sorts of alchemy symbols. "But you're saying it might not be? Made with alchemy, that is?"

"It's complicated, considering the different factors and symptoms. I feel like something like this would be easier with magic."

She was smart. Wasn't this why so many people wanted her?

"Did you start this yesterday?" he asked.

"No. I started two days ago. I didn't have enough information to start any earlier... It would be nice if I could see someone who succumbed to the disease myself."

"That certainly would be a good way to collect information."

Balteer's eyes filled with horror as he listened to their conversation. He could see what Kurt and Silon meant when they said that these two lived in their own world. How could someone be so smart yet be so lacking in empathy?

There was something odd about the way the two of them talked about the death of other people so casually. And that wasn't all. Among all the different types of magic, magic that involved "creation" was the most difficult of all.

Creating a new magic spell or circle was no simple task. However, chasing after these magical formulas was an even more formidable task.

“It could be a magic circle, so you should look into it too.”

“Yes, I will.”

“It’ll take some time to solve if it’s an alchemy formula, but if that’s the case, we can figure out how to destroy it by reversing the process. What will you do?”

“I remember that it was an ancient magic circle that destroyed the building.” Reinhart shrugged and smiled as he answered her question. While he’d been listening to the magicians’ trivial conversation yesterday, Reinhart was able to recall the same ancient magic circle buried in his old memories. “I only caught a glimpse of it, so it’ll take a while to restore it, but a circle that seals magic narrows it down. I’ll look into it and find out soon enough.”

“What about those massacres that they’re blaming you for?”

“I’m... not sure about that. I’ll have to do more investigating,” Reinhart said as he stroked his chin. His hood hung low on his face, casting shadows over his eyes. Valeta could tell that he wasn’t in a good mood. “But first, I need to find out who had the nerve to steal my possession.”

Reinhart’s eyes curved beautifully, smiling. He looked perfect, without even a single wrinkle marring his face.

“If I find him, I’ll tear off his limbs and feed them to the dogs.”

“Also, you belong at the Magicians’ Tower,” she said. “Give it a second thought.”

At her sudden words, Reinhart looked at Valeta and silently considered her for a moment. Then, he turned to the three other men in the room and shrugged.

“Take care of yourself,” he said to her over his shoulder. “They’re going to launch

a full-scale attack now they know what you're planning."

"Surviving against crazy people is our specialty."

Reinhart quietly chuckled at Valeta's retort, his shoulders shaking with mirth. He smiled brightly. Then, quickly approaching Valeta, he kissed her forehead.

"I'll be back."

"Don't bother."

He pressed a hand to his chest. "You wound me."

The magic circle shined under his feet.

"You two go back," Reinhart said, commanding Kurt and Silon with one last look before he disappeared in a burst of light.

Valeta let out a deep sigh as she looked at the traces of the magic circle. *Which bastard has taken my necklace...?*

She fiercely shook her head.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 77

\* \* \*

"Are you saying that this is linked to Valeta?" Miloyd asked in a dubious voice as he gazed down at the red marble he held in his hand. Besides the strange character embedded in the surface, there was nothing special about the red marble rolling around in his hand.

"Yes, we haven't made an official announcement yet, but it's only a matter of time before we put out a warrant for her. She has destroyed another building with the new head of the Magicians' Tower."

"I don't believe it. She might be different than she used to be, but..."

"That's not all. Just this morning, we received a report of numerous casualties," the emperor said, shaking his head with worry.

Miloyd's eyes widened as he realized what his father was saying. Then, his face quickly hardened. "Again! Did he also annihilate another village?"

"No. This time... They were Duke Delphine's servants."

"Ah... You mean those people who were crushed by the building. Yes, I heard that it was bad. But I also heard that Valeta handed out potions, and many of the injured were healed..."

He narrowed his eyes. The emperor did not look happy. Miloyd admired his father, so his own face grew dark when he saw his father's displeasure. He clenched his fists.

"Don't tell me that she had something to do with it...?"

"Those who drank her potions developed complications."

"What? No... I'm sure they were beyond saving."

"On the other hand, all of those who were saving the potion for later survived."

Miloyd grew pale. He shook his head as if he couldn't believe it. That was impossible. She may have looked like she had changed, but she wasn't someone who would indiscriminately kill people like that. She wasn't *that* evil. "Are you saying that she intentionally poisoned the potions?"

"We didn't find any traces of poison. I asked Guilian, and he proposed two possible explanations."

"Two?"

"It's either an unfortunate incident born from an inexperienced alchemist or some kind of experiment..."

Miloyd said nothing. Guilian was the best alchemist in the empire. His knowledge was second to none. *But Valeta's alchemy skills are unparalleled...* He had heard Guilian acknowledge her skills and the other alchemists sing praises of Valeta's ability. Her potions were flawless. That was why it was hard to believe that her potions had failed. But if that wasn't the case... Then what? The only explanation left was one that he didn't want to believe.

Miloyd squeezed the bead in his hand.

"So what's this?" he asked.

"She's incredibly talented. We can't let her roam around, but we can't lock her up in prison either. It'd be inhumane." The emperor lightly drummed his fingers on the desk. He didn't really care what he had to do as long as he could get his hands on her. "Once the allegations are confirmed, she'll be captured and brought back to the imperial palace. However, she will put up a fight. So, you'll

use that to keep her in place.”

“What?”

“She’ll be yours if you keep that with you. You’re my one and only heir, aren’t you? Don’t lose her to the head of the Magicians’ Tower.”

Miloyd’s mouth opened and closed several times, struggling to utter a word. “I don’t want to get her that way...” he croaked.

The emperor smiled gently, satisfied, as he looked at the bead clutched in his son’s hand. His son knew nothing, and he was all the more lovely for it. He probably didn’t even know what it was that he was gripping onto while trying to soothe his own emotions.

“Miloyd. Keep her tied to you long enough, and she’ll learn to develop feelings for you. That is, if she comes to despise you once you have her.”

“But...”

“And if you’re serious about her, you should use whatever method in order to get what you want. You’re next in line for the throne, after all,” the emperor said as he stood up and squeezed his son’s shoulder.

Miloyd slowly dropped his head. His kind, dazzling blue eyes began to slightly cloud over with tears.

“Miloyd, you can’t have that child with how you are now.”

His shoulders shook. His mouth fell open in disbelief.

“Do you want me, Your Highness?”

“Yes. Am I not allowed to? After all, you’re my fiancée.”

“I’m afraid that role is too much for me to take on.”

Their conversation remained lodged in his mind. In an instant, his heart became heavy when he heard the same words coming from his father.

“Why, Father? Why? Why do I... Why...”

Why did everyone say that he couldn’t have her? What was so bad about loving someone? He liked how she didn’t see him as the crown prince. He liked her because it felt like she was seeing him for who he was. He liked her because she didn’t try to win his favor through flattery.

“That child is deep in the depths of a mud pit. If you want to get the pearl that’s at the bottom, shouldn’t you dip your feet in the sludge too?”

“And then I’ll have her?”

“That depends on you. If you don’t want to lose her, you need to keep her in your hands. Make sure you hang on to that bead.”

Miloyd’s face grew glum as he listened to the emperor. He wanted to believe that it wasn’t her. Yet all signs pointed to her as the culprit. Everything was a mess.

“I... understand. What will happen to Valeta?”

“We’ll detain her in the imperial castle. Then... we’ll have to re-educate her.”

The emperor had to turn Valeta into somebody who would never disobey him. He was confident that he could manage this, and he had a lot of talented people around him who could help. He patted the crown prince on the back.

“Go on, now. You have to be ready in case another event calls for an investigation.”

“Leave it to me, Father.”

“I will. I have faith in you. Now go.”

“Yes, Father.”

Miloyd gently released the bead from his hand and put it around his neck. The emperor stroked his chin as he watched his son walk away. Things were getting interesting.

“Jan.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“The fifth village will be Aspel.”

Aspel was a sizable village near the capital, home to over a hundred citizens.

“What do you say?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Take that useless thing in the basement. He’s only useful in times like these. And you don’t need to bother coming back this time.”

“What? Do you mean...”

“If you’re successful with this, you don’t have to return.”

Jan’s eyes widened. She was left speechless for a moment. Then she quickly nodded her head.

“I understand, Your Majesty,” she said.

Jan knelt in the shadows before suddenly disappearing. The emperor slowly leaned back in his chair. He blinked slowly a few times, licked his lips, and leisurely propped his chin against his hand.

*Everything's finally falling into place.*

Taking out the trash was too easy.

"Have you heard the rumors?"

"What rumors?"

"Oh, you know! That young lady who said she was going to open a pharmacy. Don't you remember?"

The man set down a crate inside the store, wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand, and turned around. A skinny man who was standing off to one side quickly approached him, looking extremely excited.

"Oh, right. The rumors. Shocking, isn't it? I'm so curious about what kind of potions the nobles take. Have you heard any news about when it'll open?"

The man unloading the crates leaned against the stack, interested in what the skinny man had to say. "News? What news? All of the people who drank the girl's potions died!"

"What? What was wrong with the potions?"

"Man! You've got to be kidding me! Are you living under a rock? Haven't you seen the wanted poster on the bulletin board? They're saying that she's still inexperienced at alchemy..."

A wanted poster? It was rare for a wanted poster to feature a member of the nobility. Unless it was for murder, it almost never happened. This would be a huge blow to any nobleman. Putting out a wanted poster for a noble was no different than bringing their life to an end.

"Weren't there rumors saying that she was an extraordinary alchemist?"

"That's the thing! People are saying that maybe she was experimenting with an unfinished product."

"Pfft... Impossible. Duke Delphine does so much for us," the man said with a shake of his head and a bitter smile.

Everyone in the capital knew what a great man Duke Delphine was. Both he and Duke Leon were always willing to step in and help out using their own expenses if something happened.

"That's what I'm saying! That wench who massacred everyone in her manor also tricked our dear duke! My best friend's daughter died after drinking that potion!"

The skinny man cried as he stomped his foot, unable to hold back his anger. The other man stared back at him, the sweat cooling on his back.

"All right, all right. You're getting really worked up."

"I saw imperial knights headed toward House Leon. I feel sorry for Duke Leon and Duke Delphine."

"Hm, I see. I need to get on with the rest of my work. Go easy on the booze, you hear?" the man said as he went back to lifting crates again.

"Yeah, yeah," the skinny man called out to the retreating man's back. But the skinny man remained in his seat, humming to himself as he emptied the tin canister hanging from his waistband before turning away. "Ah, those nobles. Good riddance to them!"

He was in a great mood. A laugh escaped him at the thought of somebody losing their status of nobility, never being able to regain it again. The skinny man shoved his hands in his pockets as he swaggered away, his uplifted mood

unchanging as he headed toward a damp alleyway.

A man leaning back against the alley, box in hand, narrowed his eyes.

*Better get going. It was time to get ready.*

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 78

\* \* \*

“An invasion?”

“No, Your Grace. His Majesty the Emperor has decreed that Lady Valeta Delight is to be arrested. Here is the warrant with the imperial seal,” the knight said as he unrolled a scroll, showing it to Duke Leon.

Duke Leon glared at the man who was clearly the enforcer. He inspected the scroll with his arms crossed, still guarding the door. *He’s going all out.*

It was clear the emperor was trying to cut off their path of retreat. Duke Leon, Duke Delphine, and Valeta were all aware of the rumors that had started spreading a few days ago: Those who had taken the potions that the girl had painstakingly created had all died after falling comatose.

If the people who hadn’t drank the potions had also died, they could have blamed it on something else. The problem was that those people had survived. To make matters worse, they’d testified, saying that the perished had woken up at night, vomiting the potion back up, and then died.

Furthermore, near all the bodies of the dead, they’d found traces of what looked to be a potion. By this time, rumors about Valeta had begun to spread, and the victims’ families were incensed. And the rumors picked up speed.

For that reason, Duke Leon hadn’t left the manor for a few days, remaining at home and on guard. The people were beginning to protest in front of his house. The initial rumors mixed with more malicious ones, blowing the story out of

proportion. Since that day, Duke Delphine had quickly moved to another manor, the one he used as a villa in the capital. He seemed to be investigating the issue on his own, but he couldn't stop the spread of so much information at once.

"What are the charges?"

As if accustomed to Duke Leon's terse words, the man leading the group of knights opened his mouth in acknowledgment.

"We have orders to take her into custody for serial murders. Also, we received a report that Lady Valeta has been experimenting on people at Delight Manor."

"Experimenting?"

"Yes. We discovered various equipment and potions in the basement of Delight Manor, along with corpses that were long dead before the massacre."

"What about Count Delight? The child was abused by him."

"We suspect that Count Delight was the orchestrator of all this. Lady Valeta Delight is being charged as an accomplice to his crimes and as an accomplice to the Delight Manor Massacre. She's also being charged with poisoning people with her potions."

Duke Leon said nothing. It made sense. It was all clear. The public had already made their judgment. No one would believe him even if he spoke up. However... He slowly looked down. He could stop them. It wouldn't be hard to use his power as a duke to stop them. No, the real troubles would come after that.

"Lady Valeta Delight must be taken into custody for these charges."

"And her punishment?"

"His Majesty himself will decide her punishment, which will be decided upon after the trial."

Duke Leon furrowed his brows. He was starting to get annoyed for the first time in a long time. It was frightening how much power and glory the emperor possessed.

"I won't allow it."

"It's illegal to support and protect a wanted criminal, captain."

The knight shook his head. The deputy knight commander was a man who deeply respected Duke Leon, but at the same time, he was stupid and tactless.

"I won't allow it."

"Won't allow what, Dreux?"

"Go back inside," Duke Leon said with a frown.

With the snowta in her arms and a bag on her shoulders, Valeta peeked through the crack in the door. Completely ignoring Duke Leon's orders, she fully emerged from behind the door. She was wondering what all the commotion was and had come to check it out.

*They're here for me.* She had been expecting this. She had already lost the first round by revealing her hand, by making the first move. That had been her mistake. Keeping her head in a game she had already lost wasn't going to solve anything. She glanced at the deputy commander with an indifferent gaze.

"Lady Valeta," the deputy commander said, "you are under arrest as a suspect in a series of murders. You must come with us to the imperial castle."

"I'll go with you if I'm allowed to bring this with me." She lifted the snowta slightly.

The deputy commander pressed his lips together as Valeta spoke, caught off guard as she confidently replied to him. His face stiffened and he clenched his

fists. She looked as though she had no remorse for killing all those people.

"Is that right?" he asked.

"I lost this game anyway. Of course, I'm a little disappointed. I really thought I'd win."

"Valeta," the duke called out in warning.

"Well, I'm not going to let things end here," she said. "We need to prepare for the next round."

While observing Duke Delphine, Valeta had come to the realization that a person's age and experience were rather important.

Duke Leon frowned. He was about to reach out his hand when Valeta shook her head. "I'll be back. Please tell Carlon that I'm sorry."

"He'll be mad."

"Oh yes, I wanted to find out how those people died. What a shame that was."

"You-!" The deputy commander pulled out his sword when he heard Valeta's cold, emotionless voice. The tip of the sword trembled near her neck.

"Who are you again?" she asked.

"The deputy knight commander."

"You sure are hasty," Valeta said, even as she knew that her words were intentionally provocative. She was feeling a little annoyed and couldn't help it. But she obediently closed her mouth and shrugged. With a sigh, she took a step forward. "All I have to do is follow you, right?"

The deputy commander was speechless at her audacity. With great difficulty, he managed to conceal the emotions on his face.

"Yes."

"Can I bring the snowta and my bag?"

"Generally, we must confiscate any animals or possessions."

"Possessions too?"

This was no good. She had all kinds of information in her notebook. If the roste was made through alchemy, that meant that it was only alchemy that could reverse the condition. Of course, there were also other formulas in the notebook that she had developed herself. Tilting her head, she sighed deeply.

"I left something in my room. Can I go get it?"

"I'll go get it."

"Very well. Please get the notebook that's on my desk in my room. The fourth room on the second floor."

The deputy commander's green eyes filled with annoyance. Then, being the seasoned knight he was, the man suppressed his frustration and entered the manor, giving Duke Leon a slight nod on his way in.

Valeta pulled a small notebook from her back as the other guards approached her and handed it to Duke Leon. He gave a small shrug and put it in his pocket.

"You okay...?"

"Yeah. I'm sick of being protected."

She was tired of all the violence being perpetrated in the name of guarding her. She didn't need it. She could stand and set forth on her own. She had the power to handle all of these problems herself. *Reinhart was right. I'm glad I didn't use my elemental powers.*

She had him to thank for that. Because of him, she had one more card up her sleeve. Soon, the deputy commander returned with the insignificant notebook in his hands. Placing it in her bag, Valeta walked away with the knights.

"Thank you... Dreux."

"I'll visit," Duke Leon said calmly and with a faint smile. Valeta's eyes widened before she shrugged.

Duke Leon watched as she entered the carriage and stood there long after it had disappeared into the distance. "Not gonna say goodbye?"

"It's fine... It's not like I'll never see her again." Carlon Delphine sighed as he stepped out of his hiding place. "What's that?"

Duke Leon flipped through the notebook Valeta had given him before passing it to Duke Delphine. After studying the contents, Carlon turned to see where the carriage had gone.

However, all he could see were the sprawling gardens of his friend's manor.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 79

\* \* \*

- The fourth town in northern Kertanan -

The half-moon sitting in the midnight blue sky faintly illuminated the dead village. All that was left of it, devoid of life, was a deep darkness and the lingering presence of death.

*Step. Step.*

Reinhart took a light step into the land of the dead.

"Did they say that this was the first village?"

He could feel an ominous energy the moment he entered the village. The further he went, the more the smell of blood tickled his nose. His red eyes sparkled with curiosity. Maybe it was because it was a small village, but all of the houses were crowded together in a huddle. Here and there, Reinhart could see that this village once had signs of life. Bodies were piled up to one side, poorly taken care of.

The corpses were of all shapes and sizes. Reinhart tilted his head as he carefully observed the dead. *Alchemy or magic, this is strange.*

Usually, people who died through the hands of alchemy or magic tended to look similar. If they had exploded, then traces of the explosion would be evident. If they were torn apart, then they should all have been torn apart. There had to be consistency in how they died. However, some of the bodies looked like they had been torn apart, while others looked like they had been cut clean with a knife.

*On top of that... Reinhart observed his surroundings. "Strange..."*

Corpses inherently attracted living creatures. More precisely, they lured in animals. The smell of decay and blood attracted creatures who would feast on the remains of the dead. Yet, Reinhart couldn't find one rat around the long-decomposing pile of bodies. Not even a single ant. He strode toward it, unperturbed from being in a village full of unburied bodies.

*Snap!*

The corpses rose into the air.

*Snap!*

His magic then arranged the bodies out on the ground. Reinhart walked between the dead, nudging them with the tip of his foot.

"They're decaying all right."

Where were all the animals? Naturally, their instincts were better honed than their reasoning. If they knew that a creature was stronger and more dangerous than them, they naturally avoided them, having the ability to avoid danger through smell alone. They could sense natural disasters and flee even before humans noticed. Marine animals were known to vacate the area if they sensed an oncoming tidal wave or storm.

In other words, animals had the best survival instincts. It was something they sensed naturally, not something you could predict by calculations or through experiments.

Reinhart bent down, grabbed a corpse by the collar, and brought it up to his face. One of its eyeballs fell out of its socket and landed on the ground with a *plop*. Inside, he could see maggots squirming around.

*Not a single thought in this head.* It couldn't sense danger or know how to handle

a crisis. In other words, something was up. There was no reason why the village wouldn't be crawling with animals if all of these decomposing bodies were filled with maggots. *I better investigate the village.*

He tossed the dead body aside and as it landed on the ground, its neck snapped at an odd angle. Disinterested, Reinhart gave the ground a purposeful kick.

*Crack.*

Reinhart turned when he heard a strange noise coming from behind him. His bored eyes lit up with excitement and widened slightly with surprise. He couldn't help but laugh.

"What's this?" he asked, even as his laughter continued, sounding as though he'd been consumed by madness. He stood there, staring at the scene before him.

*Crunch.*

*Crack.*

The dead bodies were twisting and turning. It was as if their ruined muscles were forcing themselves to stand upright. The corpses rose strangely with their necks bent and limbs twisted out of shape. Their arms dangled at their sides, and their tongues hung out of their mouths.

Reinhart's red eyes glittered. "What kind of crazy bastard would do something as interesting as this?"

He covered his mouth with his hand as if he was trying to hide his hopeless smile. The bodies started shuffling toward him even though most of their organs and eyes had already been consumed by the maggots.

"Gaaaaah...!"

“Grrrr...!”

The corpses’ arms dangled at their sides as they walked, like babies learning how to walk for the first time. Sniffing the air, they all started heading in the same direction.

“Oh...”

They all turned to Reinhart and howled. These creatures were no different than beasts, he observed with interest.

“How is this possible?”

This wasn’t any kind of magic, that was for sure. There was no magic circle, no light that came with using magic. Plus, he couldn’t feel any indication of magic being used. It was amazing how these corpses were moving at all. However, the dead were very slow. Reinhart was able to get a safe distance away from them with a few nimble steps. However, no matter where he ran, the dead would immediately turn to follow him.

“Graaaaaa...”

“Interesting.” Reinhart lightly ran a left finger across his right hand. With magical strength, he grabbed one of the dead with his hand. It wasn’t phased even though Reinhart was gripping it so hard that its muscles were bulging. It didn’t howl or even look like it was in pain. Instead, it tried to reach out and grab Reinhart, its mouth snapping over and over again. Its teeth clashed together so forcefully that some began to come loose and fall out.

*Is it trying to eat me?* He could see that it was trying to rip his neck out.

“You can’t feel pain, but you feel hunger?” Reinhart muttered to himself as he clenched his fist. The strengthening magic allowed him to easily break the neck of the corpse that was in his grasp.

Crack.

The corpse's neck snapped at a ninety-degree angle with a sickening crunch. The magician tossed it to the ground.

"It's weaker than it looks."

However, it had no fear, perhaps due to its lack of intelligence. It was as if it had transformed into a beast, leaving nothing but instinct. The monsters in front of him would never back down, no matter what horrors stood before them.

"Graaa!"

Reinhart's eyes widened in slight shock. The monster he thought he had killed by snapping its neck was rising up again. Its arms, which had flung back, dropped forward again. Its neck was still broken.

Reinhart took a step back.

"Gahhh!"

The moment it started screaming, the corpse charged at Reinhart. He watched as it approached him before snapping his fingers.

The dead creature's right shoulder exploded. The arm went flying, landing on the ground a distance away, and the other corpses threw themselves at it.

The one that had just lost its arm gave the briefest pause, as though it was shocked by the loss of its limb. It then lunged for Reinhart again. Blackish blood gushed from its wound. It was a lot faster than before, almost as if it were agitated.

Reinhart's breath hitched in his throat. "This is..."

*Snap!*

Reinhart snapped again. Flames burst from under the magician's feet, quickly engulfing the corpse, but it continued to lunge for him, still snapping its teeth as if it couldn't feel the flames. He narrowed his eyes. After ten minutes of withstanding the flames, the corpse slowly grew still and crumpled to the ground. Its hair was completely scorched, and its body was completely burnt to a crisp.

"This isn't good," Reinhart muttered.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 80

The smell of burning meat filled the air. Curiously, however, the other corpses had pounced on the raw flesh but not the charred carcass, which smelled distinctly of cooked meat.

“This is going to be troubling... for other people.”

The burning body had continued moving as though it could withstand anything, and only after ten minutes of being in the flames did it finally go still. Trying to kill it with a sword or other physical attacks would've been laughable.

The sound of flesh and bone being devoured finally stopped. The corpses' eyes seemed to glow red, Reinhart noticed, when they all turned to him at the same time.

“Graaa!”

“Kraaaa!”

In unison, they ran toward Reinhart. The magician, frowning, jumped into the air. The dead looked to where he floated in the air above them and stretched their arms out in his direction.

“Hmm...”

One of them began to jump voraciously, causing another to fall, but even then it did not stop, jumping on top of the fallen corpse. Reinhart's eyes widened. *This is going to take a while.*

Having come to that conclusion, he snapped his fingers. Numerous icicles appeared around him. Bright as lights, they filled the air around the entire village. Reinhart's eyes narrowed. With a wave of his hand, in a flash, the icicles

came pouring down like rain.

*Stab. Stab.*

The icicles mercilessly skewered through the crowd of the dead, and the grotesque beings were impaled into the ground. Despite the commotion, not a single person rushed in to help.

*Was this village abandoned because it's in the countryside?* Still, leaving piles of bodies like this... With eyes still narrowed, Reinhart landed on the ground again. The dead squirmed like hedgehogs that had been speared with ice.

“Graaa!”

While some of them were no longer animated but still conscious, there were still a few of them who were alive and well, flailing their hands about. And on the other hand, there were some that hadn't come back to life at all. With a flick of a finger, Reinhart separated the corpses that were truly dead from the ones that were still moving. Then, he brought forward the ones that were alive but remaining still.

Reinhart's eyes slowly flicked between the three groups of bodies. The dead that didn't come back to life looked like they had been completely torn apart by animals. The ones that had reanimated looked like they were missing body parts or were very neatly dismembered... like other victims of the roste.

“Hmm, I see,” Reinhart murmured in a low voice, a smile creeping over his face. This was definitely interesting. Even ordinary humans would've been able to fight these.

*How is this even possible?* Even with all the knowledge that he possessed, no magic of any kind could bring back the dead. From the giant, ancient magic circle that appeared under Duke Delphine's manor to the incredible sight of the dead coming back to life... *Seems like things will be entertaining for a while.*

Though, with the way things were, it looked like he would have to return to the Magicians' Tower for the time being. He needed a book from their library. The information inside his head was surprisingly insufficient. It would take a long time to sort through the inherited information, as most of it was biased knowledge or memories that weren't his own.

*If this is just the first village...* That meant there was a chance that something similar was happening to the other villages. From his pocket, Reinhart pulled out a map and studied it. After confirming the locations of the other villages, he turned to kill the rest of the corpses. Those who had not died even after having dozens of icicles raining down on them and were still flailing about finally met their end in one fell swoop.

A magic circle appeared underneath Reinhart as he glanced at the corpses falling like dominoes.

"Better check the other villages too."

And he vanished, leaving behind the bloodied bodies of the dead. The village, which had briefly come alive with the living dead, fell silent again.

*Crunch.*

*Crack.*

"Graaa..."

Not long after the magician's departure, a single body rose again from the pile. The corpse blinked a couple of times, trembling intermittently with its arms dangling by its sides. The soulless being grabbed the icicles that were sticking out of its stomach and shoulders.

*Shunk.*

The corpse pulled out the shards of ice from its body, veins bulging disgustingly

from its hands. Its arms dangled again, holding an icicle in each hand.

*Scrape, scrape.*

The icicles dragged along the ground with each step. The corpse lurched forward with eyes as white as a dead fish's. It stood there for a long time before turning and trudging out of the village. The corpse limped like a sick person, and from a distance, it looked undoubtedly human.

\* \* \*

"Balteer Baroksis, what you just did was quite interesting. I had time to reflect on myself too, thanks to you."

As Terion entered the imperial city with the rebels to face off against the emperor, Reinhart stood before the man who had sealed him away for ten years, ready to finally put an end to the game.

"I gave you multiple chances, my lord. You're the one who let me down."

"You had no use for a Magicians' Tower without a head, so you decided to destroy the whole thing?" Reinhart asked.

"When I saw the tower I love crumbling to pieces, I thought it'd be better to destroy it myself."

"Yes, I suppose the island in the sky was on the decline, even though our little dog was taking good care of it."

"That watchdog!" Balteer growled when he heard Caspelios' nickname. He'd been the only one to get in the way of his plans. Who would've imagined that a watchdog, belittled and looked down on by others, was hiding so much power?

"I tried to convince him, but he wouldn't listen to me. Instead, he concealed his body and defended the island," Balteer said with a snort. The gifted magician

who had led the tower to ruin was also now ruined himself.

Reinhart listened to Balteer tell his story, his face as impassive as ever.

"I can guarantee you that the admirable Magicians of the Beginning would've wanted to destroy Magicians' Tower now that it's in this state."

The twelve magicians who had created the island in the sky and the Magicians' Tower—they, too, would've rather seen the ugly island in the sky gone than tried to maintain it in this poor state.

"What's done is done. Before my time is up, the island in the sky will have fallen. Then, it'll all be over. This is all your fault," Balteer scoffed. "Not as an honest leader, but as a tyrant!"

Reinhart shifted his gaze as he listened to the man with an aging voice and white hair speak.

"What a shame."

"What is? It's already too late..."

A magic circle began to glow under Reinhart's feet. He directed his cold stare at Balteer as the magic circle spread across the whole of the island.

"Oh, many things. The first is that your complacency tells me you don't understand the first thing about the will of the twelve magicians who built this island and tower..." Reinhart's red eyes began to turn silver like this hair.

Balteer took a step back as he watched the other man's eyes change as if silver dye were being poured into them.

"The second is that I had such blind faith in your abilities."

A thin smile spread across Reinhart's lips. The magic circle encompassing the

entire island began to glow brighter. The ruined homes and the remains of the tower slowly rose into the air and returned to their respective places. Everything was going back to where it belonged.

"The third was that you dared to join hands with some socoro to seal me away, giving me time to cool my head."

"I-impossible..." Balteer's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

It wasn't just that broken things were restoring themselves or putting themselves back into place. Reinhart was turning back time. He was tapping into a realm that humans could never reach, and he wasn't doing it with a magic staff. Just with the snap of his fingers. A smile spread across his face—a beautiful, seductive smile.

"The last is that you underestimated my abilities."

The moment he uttered these words, a light covered the entire island, which started rising higher into the air, shining as bright as the sun in the night sky for a moment before the light started to wane. By now, Reinhart's eyes had turned completely silver and radiated in a way that didn't seem human.

Balteer slumped onto the floor, slack-jawed, and looked up at the other man, stunned.

"Transcendence...?"

As Balteer muttered in a dazed voice, Reinhart slowly looked around the revitalized island.

"I came to a few realizations after you sealed me away and became the leader of the tower and the imperial castle's dog. It's a constraint on transcendence."

"A transcendent... Impossible..."

"It's troublesome having to kill a lot of people myself. That's why I raised an interesting human, a little toy that would kill the emperor of Socoros," Reinhart quietly explained in a soft, musical voice.

Balteer shook his head when he heard the joy in the younger man's words. How could someone so mad and bloodthirsty be the head of the noble Magicians' Tower?

"Why would someone like you... You have no right to be..."

"Balteer, a lot of things in life are unfair. And this was inevitable," Reinhart replied, crouching down in front of him, bringing himself eye level with Balteer. "Ignorance is a sin, while arrogance and pride lead directly to death."

Reinhart slowly ran a hand over the old man's wrinkled face. His face gradually broke out into a smile. "Did you know, Balteer?"

"What...?"

"The twelve magicians loved the tower even more than you. Even if it was plunging to the ground as you said it was, they wouldn't have given up on it. They would've poured their hearts and souls into keeping it going."

"Ah..." Balteer's mouth dropped open in a daze. "No..."

Reinhart's slim fingers lightly brushed across Balteer's face once more before landing on his shoulders, giving it a couple of pats.

Whoosh.

Fire.

"N-no!"

"It's the island's policy to burn trash, no?"

“Ahhhhhhh!”

The fire that had started from Balteer’s face engulfed his body in an instant. Balteer quickly reached for his staff and tried to put out the flames with water.

*Whoosh!*

Instead, the fire grew larger, almost as if water was oil. Terrible screams filled the island in the sky, but Reinhart floated in mid-air, observing the spectacle with his chin resting on his hand. Eventually, Balteer’s burnt body slumped forward, struggling until the very end. Reinhart nonchalantly tossed the body, burnt beyond recognition, beyond the edges of the floating island.

“Game over.”

This was more boring than expected. The socoro emperor’s wish to spread all sorts of malicious rumors was vain and pathetic, to say the least. Reinhart looked at the island in the sky that had returned to its original state before he disappeared.

It was just a dream. Usually, it ended there, yet oddly enough, Valeta continued to follow Reinhart, her perspective changing along with his. However, the place he returned to was one she was already very familiar with.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 81

*The sky room?* Valeta thought about this place from time to time, but this was the first time she was returning. She held her breath in the suffocating room. *Was it always this big?*

Reinhart had one hand placed on the glass of the sky room and was looking down with a bored and listless look on his face. There was nothing in his emotionless eyes. Valeta stood there dazed and blinked at the memories that began to unfold before her like a film. She had of course read the book, but she couldn't understand why her memories of it always resurfaced like this.

*When can I get out of here?* It was beyond uncomfortable. She knew Reinhart couldn't see her, but she still felt like she couldn't breathe. So this was how he had ended up alone. It would be his last scene in the novel.

She knew that the rest of the novel followed Terion from his perspective. After killing the emperor and bringing peace to the world, Terion, now a young man, would marry the love of his life. *I never imagined that Reinhart would have been sealed away for ten years.*

After the novel switched to Terion's point of view, Reinhart was never seen again. She finally recalled the reason why, and it was a strange one. Wanting to see what he was looking at, Valeta slowly moved to stand next to him. She copied him by putting her hand on the glass and looked out the window. It made sense when she thought about it. Although Reinhart was effortlessly talented, a genius, unlike those who had gained their skills over time, it was also his weakness.

*He acts like a child.* He craved affection like a child. A perverse, twisted affection. She was afraid of him, so she pushed him away, knowing that he only wanted

her to look at him.

"So... How long will you continue to stand there and hide, intruder?"

Valeta jumped, whipping her head around. He couldn't have been talking to her. She was certain. But, he *was* talking to her. He had even turned his head and was staring straight at her. His silver eyes had reverted back to a familiar red at some point. Valeta gasped.

"Are you a *drifter*?" he murmured in a low voice as he gazed at her.

"A drifter?" Valeta repeated, stunned.

"Drifting is a phenomenon that happens to those who are extremely sensitive sometimes, one where your soul moves around while your body stays in place," Reinhart replied quietly. His frigid gaze and equally chilly voice sent shivers down her spine.

"Of course..." Reinhart slowly reached out. His long, pale fingers wrapped around her neck. She ignored the hand against her throat, finding it non-threatening. The older Reinhart definitely looked more mature, colder, and merciless. "Drifter or not, you shouldn't trespass on private property. And you trespassed the sky room of all places, hm? What is your purpose here?"

Reinhart squeezed her neck, slowly looking her up and down. She showed no fear in approaching and questioning him. It was as if she were treating him like an old friend. Even as he strangled her, she just blankly gazed back at him with no intention of escaping from him. What was she putting her trust in?

He squeezed harder.

"That hurts!"

The corner of Reinhart's lips quirked into a smile when he heard the girl's cry. Valeta gritted her teeth and groaned. There was no feeling in Reinhart's eyes as

he continued to tighten his grasp around her neck.

Chills ran down Valeta's spine for the second time. "S-stop....!"

"Stop what?" he replied back in a despicable voice. The corners of his mouth curled up again.

Valeta's shoulders shook as she grabbed onto his wrist. "Reinhart... you... bastard..."

The magician's eyes widened, and he quickly released his hold and drew his hand back. She collapsed onto the floor, her face red.

"You know my name?"

Valeta breathed heavily as she clutched her neck with trembling hands. Paralyzed with fear, it hadn't even occurred to her to summon Gene or to use alchemy. She'd thought death was the only option.

"Are you okay?" Reinhart asked as he crouched down in front of her, meeting her eyes. This Reinhart and that Reinhart were exactly the same. They both carried poison in one hand and the antidote in the other. In response, Valeta bent over and coughed, her shoulders shaking.

"Oh dear."

Grabbing Valeta's hands, the magician put them around his neck and lightly picked her up with one arm. She clutched the fabric around his shoulders and desperately clung to him. It was as if she knew he was the only support she had. She couldn't stop herself from shaking with fear, well aware that she was in the arms of a cunning and wicked man. And yet...

"Hmm..."

Reinhart tilted his head with a suspicious look as he lowered Valeta onto the

bed. The warmth of his body had finally stopped her shivering. Valeta belatedly realized what he had done and pressed a hand to her forehead.

*Ugh, reality check... Why was she so willing to depend on this man who was always running hot and cold? She would've been fine had she just taken a moment to catch her breath.*

Reinhart looked at Valeta before he knelt down on one knee. He met her gaze as he lowered himself down in front of her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I've been searching my memories, but I've never met you before."

"What...?" Valeta murmured as she narrowed her eyes.

Still gazing at her, Reinhart wrapped one arm around her waist and tilted his head. Then, he kissed her, meeting her from the bottom from where her head was still bowed. Her eyes widened.

Reinhart slowly rose, his hand cupping the back of her head. Valeta's lips parted in surprise, and his soft tongue slipped in. He gently bit her lower lip as their tongues tangled together. At some point, she had been slightly pushed back on the bed with her arms keeping her propped up.

Valeta blinked. Reinhart's face came into view. His red eyes crinkled as he smiled, looking satisfied with himself. He deepened the kiss and explored her mouth. It was an unfamiliar sensation that sent shivers down her spine.

"Mmm..."

He greedily devoured her. He moved his tongue around slowly, as if searching every inch of her mouth. Valeta squeezed her eyes shut at the feeling. Just as she put a hand on Reinhart's shoulder, he pushed her back on the bed and slid a knee between her thighs, pinning her in place.

Valeta struggled to breathe and gasped for air between his kisses. He deepened his kiss once more. Her mouth was completely occupied as if he were making his presence inescapable.

"Stop... Mmph!"

The moment Valeta managed to create a gap between them, Reinhart's mouth immediately closed in again. Still smiling with his eyes, Reinhart's fingers started slipping under her clothes, and her shoulders quivered as his warm touch met her cold body. Her eyes popped open, and she bit his tongue. Though his shoulders flinched, the corners of his eyes crinkled.

Reinhart pulled back slowly with his eyes narrowed as he licked the string of saliva that remained between their lips. He pulled Valeta back upright again. Dazed, she forced back a laugh.

"You... crazy..."

"I asked you who you are, but you didn't respond. I took the liberty of finding out for myself. Seems like you're mine in a different world."

"Who's yours?" Valeta asked, surprised. Her lips were swollen, thanks to all the sucking and biting. Reinhart, who sat unceremoniously on the floor, looked up at her as she remained sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Valeta is?"

She made a face at his mellow voice. "Don't call me that. It's giving me goosebumps."

"What about... 'master'?"

She didn't reply.

"Aha, you seem to be more used to that, master."

It was strange how Valeta could tell that this Reinhart was obviously older. While age didn't matter to a transcendent, she could feel that this Reinhart had years of experience that her Reinhart lacked.

"You're afraid that you'll get attached to me in that world if you call me by my name, right?" He continued, "But I can tell that you already..."

Valeta reached out and grabbed the magician, who was still sitting comfortably on the floor, by the collar. Reinhart's eyes widened at the sudden rough treatment.

"Shut up."

Reinhart's eyes crinkled at her sharp voice. He suddenly leaned forward, gave Valeta a quick kiss, then just as quickly pulled away.

"Do you want to die?" she snapped.

"There's no difference between the me of that world and the me of this world. Our faces and voices are the same. This isn't even reality, so it doesn't mean anything," Reinhart said as he looked at her.

Valeta, who had been staring back into his eyes, sighed as she crossed her arms. She knew that this one didn't have the slightest sense of morality, but now that she was actually facing it, she had no answer.

"Am I not good enough?"

Valeta kept her mouth shut as Reinhart looked up at her, his question hanging in the air between them.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 82

Unfortunately, it was a dream. A world inside of a dream. Even if this world did exist, it wasn't hers.

"You're different from him."

"We're the same person," Reinhart countered, shrugging as if he found the whole thing amusing.

"He's not a liar like you. Also, this world is..."

Reinhart smiled as Valeta spoke. He slowly rose from his seat and leisurely walked over to the glass window and leaned against it. "Do you know what I see out there, Valeta?"

"No."

"I see a world I don't have a place in," he said, jutting his chin to the window. Reinhart, who was dressed casually without a robe, quietly stared out the window for a while. "The sky room is the only world I have, a world that only the heads of the Magicians' Tower can live in."

"You..." Valeta opened and closed her mouth, trying to find the right words.

Reinhart continued to look out the window with his arms crossed, a slightly weary look on his face. "It seems like the other me carved out a world for himself."

His gaze landed on Valeta. He lightly turned and strode to her. Valeta's eyes met Reinhart's red ones, but she didn't move.

"Are you sure you don't want to sleep with me before you go back? I'll treat you

well," Reinhart said as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

Valeta frowned and turned her head. She said nothing, but her silence wasn't a rejection either. He lightly patted her head before snapping his fingers. In an instant, their surroundings changed. Valeta kept her lips firmly sealed in the darkness. The older Reinhart gave her a gentle smile. It was the same smile of chagrin that one would give to a troublemaker.

"You're too nice," she said. "You know that this is just a figment of your imagination."

Reinhart burst out into laughter when he heard the clumsy way Valeta responded, how she didn't deny his words or give him any consolation. That was the last thing she remembered.

\* \* \*

Valeta thought she had been dreaming for a long time, but when she woke up, she found that it hadn't been that long since she fell asleep in the carriage. The deputy commander had shaken her awake. She took a step after him, still dazed. Then, realizing who she was standing in front of, she looked away. She had nothing to say. Why did this man have to be the first person she saw as soon as she arrived?

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

"We met at the banquet not that long ago. Your memory must be failing you."

"What a sharp tongue."

"Not any sharper than the sword at my neck," Valeta replied with a nonchalant look on her face. She gripped her knees to hide her nervousness.

First Reinhart in her dreams, and now the emperor. She was facing one boss after another. *And this isn't even the final level.* Come to think of it, she'd always

considered Reinhart to be the villain of her story. Who would have thought that another one would appear?

*I'm the problem... It could only be her. If she put together the events of the novel, the emperor was supposed to die ten years later by Terion's sword... Simply put, he would die at the hands of the hero. And from the reader's perspective, Reinhart was the final villain of the novel. However, Valeta had overlooked the fact that there was another villain as well. And it was the very man standing before her.*

A few years from now, Terion and Miloyd would develop a friendly relationship. Miloyd, who still trusted the emperor, would start to question his father's actions and would come to learn the truth from Terion, much to his utter disappointment and devastation. Unable to bear his father anymore, Miloyd would join forces with Terion, start a rebellion, and come to inherit the throne after the emperor's death.

However, the story had become twisted in this timeline. Originally, Terion and Reinhart had first met at the Nursery and then again seven years later on the cliff.

*Hang on... Seven years later? Wasn't Reinhart sealed away for ten years? Maybe he had been released early... It would make sense because the emperor would die roughly ten years later.*

From the start, Reinhart had chosen Terion to take down the imperial palace in his place. That was why he'd put the main character through all those trials in order to help him develop. *So that's how Terion found out about the dead coming back to life...*

It was all Reinhart's doing. Valeta slowly blinked. She quickly sorted through all these realizations that flashed through her mind as she stared down at her cooled tea. The novel had multiple plot elements. Of those plot points, Valeta

brought to mind the most significant ones. The living dead. The emperor. Alchemists. Magicians. The false charges against Reinhart and the roste.

*I feel like something's missing, though.* Valeta racked her brain. Then, she swallowed hard. *Something about the people who came back to life...*

The dead had come back to life in the novel, too, not long after Reinhart was framed. Valeta tousled her hair. She knew *what* was going to happen, but things were flowing in a way she never expected them to. She stifled a wry smile. This wasn't what she wanted.

*The empire's going to be in chaos.*

The dead would live again. She remembered reading about it in the novel. Valeta ran a hand down her face, frustrated. Even nobles had sacrificed their lives for this. She was sure that...

*[Rezir went out of control across the empire. Corpses that had recently been reanimated were easy to deal with, but the ones that had been around longer could learn how to use weapons. These living dead were called "rezir." In order to stop the outbreak, Duke Leon, one of the two pillars of the empire, led an army to the center of the crisis but ended up killing himself after he became infected following a long battle. Many mourned the loss of Duke Leon as he had killed thousands of rezir before his death.]*

Valeta stiffened at the sudden memory. She reflexively reached out for the snowta that had been given to her by Dreux before remembering that the deputy commander had confiscated it.

*Damn it...* She couldn't recall the year it would happen. However, the most significant plotline of the story hadn't changed, so the rampant outbreak of rezir would be inevitable.

"What are you thinking about? I'd love to open up your head and pick your

brain."

At the emperor's voice, Valeta slowly blinked and lifted her head. She tried her best to calm her racing thoughts for she couldn't afford to be distracted when her opponent was the emperor.

"Even if you did, you'd see nothing but an organ."

"You're right. It's a real shame that it'd mean nothing if it wasn't attached to you. You're an alchemist of the highest class, Lady Valeta," he said with a chuckle. The savage words didn't match his kind voice, but his leniency made it sound like he believed that he completely had Valeta in his hands.

She said nothing and narrowed her eyes as she proceeded to slowly scan the room from her seat.

*Where am I?* From what she could tell, it looked like an office, but it was so hard for her to focus. It was because of all the books in the room.

"This is my office."

"Office...?"

There was a strange feeling about the room. How could she describe it? It had that unpleasant aura of intruding into someone else's space. Valeta silently clenched and unclenched her fists.

*I've felt this before...* Her eyes narrowed. She managed to swallow and slowly leaned back against her chair. Maybe it was because she was nervous, but she felt like she couldn't think straight. Quietly clicking her tongue, she shook her head.

"Just one moment. Our guest will be here soon."

"Not like I can leave," she said.

The emperor smiled, his half-lidded eyes curving slightly. Valeta stiffened when she saw the way his smile didn't reach his eyes. Instead, his gaze was cold and disgusting.

"Didn't I tell you? You should mind your words. It's not hard to inflict pain. There are many different ways to make someone surrender," the emperor hissed, not unlike a snake.

Shivers went down Valeta's spine. Indeed, it felt like a snake was slithering up her body, starting from her ankles and climbing around her neck, baring its venomous fangs in warning.

*Knock, knock.*

At the sound of someone knocking on the door, the emperor's cold eyes melted away into gentleness, and with the murderous look now vanished, the atmosphere completely changed.

*"Come in."*

The door opened, and heavy footsteps made their way inside. Valeta didn't turn around. She didn't want to. The situation was bad enough without *him* getting involved.

*"Father," Miloyd said in greeting.*

This couldn't be happening... Valeta lowered her head, a weary look on her face. Did she have to see him now?

*"Have a seat."*

*"Yes."*

Suppressing a sigh, she turned. *Why is this man...*

In the end, her sigh came out anyway. Why did he have to sit next to her on the couch? Well, she supposed he couldn't sit beside the emperor. As he took a seat, a familiar red bead dangled from the chain around his neck. Valeta's eyes widened when she saw the necklace.

The culprit was obvious. Valeta clenched her fists. She had an inkling, but she didn't know for sure that the emperor had taken the bead. And she most certainly hadn't expected him to give the bead to his son.

"It's been a long time, Lady Valeta."

"What are you, on drugs?" she blurted out. The moment she saw the necklace around the neck of the crown prince, she couldn't help but feel a surge of irritation as she recalled the pain it had inflicted on her.

She had seen Miloyd not that long ago. What in the world was going on?

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 83

“What...?”

“A long time, my ass. Is that the only thing you people know how to say?”

“Is something wrong? Why are you being so cold?”

Valeta held back from sighing at the frowning prince. *Is something wrong?* Of course, something was wrong. Wasn’t that obvious? The fact that he had that around his neck was one thing, but the problem was that she’d been forcibly dragged here in the first place.

“Where did you get that necklace?” she asked.

“It’s mine.”

“It looks almost like mine... No, it looks *exactly* like mine.”

Miloyd gazed at Valeta as her violet eyes flashed. She glared at him, her fists clenched. Feeling her gaze, the crown prince calmly said, “I received it from my father. Does that not make it mine?”

“Didn’t you learn that you shouldn’t take what’s not yours?”

The corner of his lips quirked into a smile as if he had heard something funny. His blue eyes were briefly shadowed by his long eyelashes before reappearing again. “No, I suppose not.”

“What?”

“I’m the crown prince, born to be the next emperor. What’s wrong with getting what I want?”

Valeta was speechless. She had never heard his clear voice filled with such greed before. She had never imagined that he could be this way. Miloyd crossed his legs as he looked at the bead around his neck.

"Do you know what that is?" she asked.

"Yes. Guilian told me."

"And you still won't give it back to me?"

"No." His reply was firm and concise. Valeta sat, stunned. Had this man always been like this? Miloyd's blue eyes softened as if he were telling her not to worry.  
"But I won't use this as a threat."

"Then give it back."

"I can't do that. What if something dangerous happens to you if you leave my side or get kidnapped by the head of the Magicians' Tower again? I'll do whatever it takes..." Miloyd's hand started to move toward the necklace, almost as if he was reaching for the bead. "Even if it means I have to punish you for it."

Just as it seemed as though he was about to squeeze the bead, he paused. Valeta flinched. Glancing at her, the crown prince tucked the necklace under his shirt. She watched him with nothing to say.

Damn it. What was she supposed to do with not one but two crazy bastards? She wanted somebody, anybody, to give her an answer. With a huff, she lowered her head. So this is what it felt like to be at a loss for words. She tried to suppress the rage boiling inside her.

"Have you... gone mad?" she asked.

"No. I'm perfectly fine. I'm just doing what you said."

"What I said?"

"Yes. You said that I couldn't have you from where I am right now. So I'm trying to put myself on the same level as you."

Valeta huffed again as she ran a hand down her face. No matter how many times she rubbed her face, her frustration didn't lessen. Her expression darkened. *What does he mean by "on the same level"?* She couldn't bring herself to ask. It was highly likely that she would become infuriated if she did. Valeta forced herself to take a deep breath.

"The same level as me...?"

"Yes, though I don't know if I'll be able to sympathize with the way you experiment on and kill people, Lady Valeta."

She was struck speechless. "I experiment on and kill people?"

Miloyd quietly nodded at Valeta's bewildered question. He himself had investigated the case because he, too, had had a hard time believing it. However, the evidence was too strong. All signs pointed to Valeta as the culprit, and there was no doubt about it.

She rose out of her seat, unable to look him in his blue eyes. *Patience*, she told herself. It would've been easy to summon Gene and break out of this palace. But if she gave in to her impulses, she would be revealing her hand to the emperor, allowing him once again to win the next round.

"I'm tired. May I leave to rest?"

"Why did you kill them?"

The emperor was watching his son with interest. Valeta couldn't tell if he was watching Miloyd as his son or as a precious pet he was raising. She paused as she turned around and narrowed her eyes at the bookshelves behind the emperor's desk. Then, she turned back around as if nothing had happened and

sighed.

"Can I get my snowta back? And my bag too."

"We'll return them once we finish examining them. You didn't answer my question."

"Why does that matter?" Valeta asked back, frustrated. "You already think that I did it. Why waste our time talking about this at all?"

"I'll escort the lady back to her room, Father."

"Of course."

The emperor gave Valeta a subtle look before nodding cheerfully. She spun on her heels and left the office. She strode down the hallway, but Miloyd was able to catch up to her in a few quick steps. He had certainly kept up with his training because he was not at all winded.

"Are you mad?" he asked.

"No. I'm just taken aback, so please don't talk to me," Valeta said, drawing the line. She had a lot to think about, and continuing to talk was just going to piss her off. It was a little different when Reinhart did it. She was used to him, so she could understand him to an extent.

"I'm disappointed, Lady Valeta."

"I'm sure you are."

"Yet, I can't let you go."

"So you took my heart hostage?" Valeta fired back.

Miloyd was at a loss for words. Quiet for a moment, he took a breath. "If I didn't..."

He hesitated, his lips quivering slightly. Valeta glanced at the man just as he reached out and grabbed her firmly by the wrist, the strength of his grip involuntarily stopping her in her tracks. She lowered her gaze as if she didn't have the strength to break out of the prince's grasp.

"I thought I wouldn't be able to get near you otherwise."

"Are you happy now?" Valeta said, trying to shake him off.

Miloyd paused, caught off guard by her caustic remark. He stared at her for a moment before he spoke. "Would you hate me if I said yes?"

Valeta wordlessly looked down at her captured wrist. Although the prince had a firm grasp on her, it wasn't strong enough to hurt or leave a mark. She'd be lying if she said she hated him, but she was surprised. Miloyd had always been sweet and kind. He had always been considerate and smiled despite her chilly demeanor, always willing to take a step back and wait for her. She was the one who had disregarded all that and continued to draw boundaries.

*Now we've come full circle...* She wasn't proud of herself. She had naturally developed a certain attitude after living in this world for so long, believing that even if she opened up to the people around her, they would disappear one day because it was just that kind of world they lived in.

This world had transcenders, wars, and classes. Loss was prevalent. It was too easy to kill or be killed. So she pushed people away. She hurt them. Not just Miloyd, but Reinhart as well. She regretted none of it because it was for her own survival, but...

*I wish there had been another way.* She hadn't meant to bring Miloyd down into the abyss with her. When Valeta said that she wasn't in the same position as Miloyd, she'd been telling him to give up on her, that he should stay up there where he belonged because he certainly didn't belong down here with her. She hadn't been suggesting that he lower himself to the bottom of the barrel.

"What do you want to do now? You finally have your hands on me. What's left?" she asked.

"I'm going to make you mine," Miloyd replied, his words calm.

Valeta turned her head away from him. Closing her eyes, she sighed as if she were tired of being held into place by her wrist.

"I want to rest."

"I'll escort you."

Their conversation came to an end. Miloyd took Valeta up to her room and ordered a guard to stand watch. Her room was on the third floor, impossible to escape from. It had a window, but even then, she would need a key to escape.

*It's no different than a prison*, Valeta thought. Should she have been comforted by the fact that the bed looked plush and comfy? When the hell would she get her snowta and bag back? She took a step into the room.

She gasped, suddenly feeling a heavy weight on her shoulders. *It's the same as before. I knew it. This is...* It was a strange, uneasy feeling, the same feeling she had while she'd been in the emperor's office.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 84

Valeta pretended not to notice.

“The snowta and my bag?” she asked.

“I’ll get them to you by tomorrow.”

“Please don’t let the snowta starve.”

Miloyd gave a small smile and nodded, and Valeta pressed a hand to her forehead, unused to the prince’s quiet demeanor.

“I’m telling you this now, Lady Valeta. It’s impossible to use magic or alchemy in this room.”

“What did you say?” A look of surprise flashed across her face, which then contorted into a combination of bewilderment and frustration. She clenched her fists.

“It’s exactly as I said. This room has been sealed, preventing any use of magic circles or alchemy formulas.”

“And you locked all the windows as well?”

“Just in case. You never know who might try to break in.” Miloyd’s blue eyes narrowed as he stared outside for a moment. Then his gaze turned back to Valeta. Seeing the look on her face, he bent forward to kiss the back of her hand. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Good night.”

“Are you really doing this to me?” Valeta asked before he could leave.

Looking back at her, Miloyd smiled softly in response. He wordlessly bowed his

head and left. Valeta glared at the closed door, stomped around a little in a huff, and slumped back onto her bed.

“Ugh, he must be crazy. Seriously.”

She had obediently gone along with her arrest, but she had nothing to say about the thoroughness with which the emperor had prepared her prison.

*If alchemy and magic are impossible...* Did that mean summoning elementals was still possible? Valeta’s eyes flashed as she sat on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands. She leaped off the bed and pressed her ear against the door. It seemed quiet outside. Even if there was a guard outside, the door was tightly sealed, so no light would leak through the cracks if she summoned an elemental.

“Gene,” Valeta called out in a low voice.

*Whoosh!*

A whirlwind began to materialize. Noticing that the curtains were flapping from the wind, Valeta quickly reached out to secure them.

“Quietly, Gene! Make yourself smaller!” Valeta said, her small voice mixing in with the clamorous wind.

The raging wind gradually became smaller and smaller. A hawk the size of her hand flew up to Valeta, flapping its tiny wings. Much to her relief, he didn’t look at all dangerous. Gene, however, looked dissatisfied.

“*What do you take me for?*”

“Gene? Ah, they said that alchemy and magic are sealed here. Can you tell?”

“*The nasty feeling alone tells me enough. The seal’s engraved on the floor.*”

“Can you get rid of it?”

The hawk sighed and glared at her as if he didn’t know what she was talking about. He landed on the back of Valeta’s hand and shrugged. “*I can erase it, but only if you’re fine with your captor noticing.*”

“You... think they will?”

“*Of course. The seal is deeply connected to the creator. Of course, they’d notice.*”

As she listened to Gene’s explanation, Valeta brought a hand to her chin. That strange aura she had felt around the castle... Whatever it was, she was feeling the same thing now as what she’d felt in the emperor’s office.

“Still, he prepared this very quickly. It must’ve taken a long time for him to make a seal like this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This is a seal they made to keep me captive, right? It’s to prevent me from using my abilities and contacting Reinhart.”

Gene tilted his head to the side, cleared his throat, and shrugged. “*This seal was not made yesterday. It’s been here longer than that. In fact, it was likely created before you were born.*”

“Before I was born?”

Why did they need the seal back then? Valeta’s expression grew strange. No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn’t think of a reason. Her best guess was that they used to keep magicians and alchemists imprisoned here. Come to think of it...

“I felt traces of alchemy in the emperor’s office.”

*“Traces of alchemy?”*

“I can’t say what it was for sure, but... It’s definitely one that he’s able to use over and over again as I can feel the traces of multiple layers,” Valeta whispered. Though it wasn’t a simple formula, it was not one that she wouldn’t be able to solve either. That is, if the person who made it was Guilian.

*What the hell is Reinhart doing now? He should’ve shown up by now, but he hadn’t contacted her even once. Of course, he was probably busy looking into various matters of his own.*

“Gene, you can probably go back now. I just summoned you to see if I could.”

*“You’re really...”*

“Hurry, before someone sees you.”

Gene trembled at Valeta’s urging. After a prolonged moment, he slowly vanished. Once he was gone, Valeta contemplated for a moment with her lips pursed.

“Nereid. Come out!”

A large vortex appeared before quickly shrinking into a smaller one, and a mermaid the size of Valeta’s palm emerged from a water droplet with a pop. A blue mermaid floated midair, its tail swishing back and forth.

*“Why, it’s been so long! Didn’t you just call Gene?”*

“I did, but there’s one more thing I wanted to check with you.”

*“Very well. It’ll cost you a magic or alchemy stone. I really do love those things.”*

Valeta thought that she could get away with giving her blood, but this elemental had high tastes. After hearing Nereid name her price, Valeta awkwardly

scratched her cheek, as if troubled. “I don’t have anything with me right now since everything was confiscated. Could I pay you back next time?”

*“Pfft! Are you negotiating with an elemental right now? Such fun, this is!”*

The little mermaid started swimming around in the air. Valeta frowned as she watched Nereid hold her stomach as she laughed. It was fortunate that only she could hear the elementals’ voices. It would’ve been a problem otherwise.

*“Ah, this is fun. I’ll grant you a wish free of charge today! However, I’ll need proper payment next time. The more luxurious the item, the better.”*

“I’ll try...”

*“So, how can I help you, child?”*

“I heard that you can go anywhere as long as there’s water. Somewhere in this castle, there is probably a corpse that was brought in for an autopsy after it died from drinking a potion.”

*“I see. Would you like me to bring it to you?”*

“No, but could you memorize what it looks like... and show me?”

“Sure!” Nereid brought her hands together with a clap. When she opened them back up, a fist-sized droplet of water appeared in them. Nereid pushed the collected water toward Valeta after it grew to be about the size of Valeta’s face.

“Hands!”

“Oh. Okay.” Valeta put out her hands in front of her, and Nereid gently set the water into her palms. The surface was soft and smooth.

“Now, keep this in your hands. Just look into the water and I’ll show you what I find,” Nereid said briskly. With a

giggle, she disappeared in a small whirlpool.

It was amazing to see the whirlpool grow smaller and smaller until it was a single droplet of water before vanishing. Valeta sat on the bed and sighed. The water in her hands felt like a small sea. She stared into the empty ocean as if she were waiting for a sea creature to emerge from the waves, but nothing happened.

Suddenly, the calm sea began to ripple as if disturbed by some noise, and an image appeared in the water: a corpse. It was definitely one of Duke Delphine's servants, judging by the clothes it was wearing, and it had pink liquid dripping from its mouth.

*"Ugh, gross."*

Nereid continued to grumble in dissatisfaction, but she showed Valeta the dead bodies one by one. Valeta suspected that the droplet of water was showing her Nereid's point of view.

*"Strange..."*

Valeta narrowed her eyes and took a deep breath. "That'll do, Nereid."

*Splash!*

The image reflected in the water disappeared. A whirlpool formed again before her eyes, and Nereid reappeared. The mermaid, giving a quick clap, dispelled the pool of water Valeta was holding.

*"That's it, right?"*

"Yes, thank you. You can go back now."

*"I'm going to charge you twice as much next time, kid!"*

"All right," Valeta said with a nod as Nereid disappeared.

After the water elemental departed, Valeta took off her shoes and sat on the bed, hugging her knees to her chest. She realized that something was strange. *I need more information than this.* Not only did she need more information about alchemy, but she also needed to know more about the roste.

On top of that, she also needed to find out what the emperor was hiding in his office. And... *I also need to find out about those zombies, the rezir...* From what Valeta could recall, Terion wouldn't be able to solve that problem either. He had simply managed to reduce their numbers until they were considered mere monsters.

"There's got to be a solution."

If Duke Leon was caught up in it, then that would mean Duke Delphine would be too. She didn't want either of them to be involved.

"My head hurts..." Valeta clutched her throbbing head and pushed herself under the covers. It had been a while since she had been able to sleep properly.

After much tossing and turning, she finally fell asleep.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 85

\* \* \*

"Is there a reason why I have to have breakfast with you first thing in the morning?"

"I wanted to have breakfast with you, Lady Valeta," Miloyd asked.

"And I don't get a say in that matter?"

Miloyd said nothing as he neatly placed a plate of food in front of the girl. Valeta looked down at the food and pressed a hand to her forehead. Her head was throbbing.

*I couldn't sleep at all last night.* She knew that her insomnia was bad, but it appeared to have gotten worse now that she had more things to worry about. The only things she had in her room were books on alchemy and the bed. There was nothing that she could hurt herself with, nothing sharp or dangerous.

The room was literally a prison. The windows could only be opened by the maids who came in the morning to clean. And even then, it was only open for a short ten minutes. It was more than enough time for her to escape with the help of Gene, but Valeta knew that she shouldn't act so rashly.

"What am I supposed to do now that you've wrangled me here?"

"You can do whatever you want... as long as you wear this."

Miloyd held out a choker-style necklace. An amethyst-like gem was embedded in the center of the black leather strap. Valeta reached out and inspected the necklace, ignoring the plate in front of her. An alchemy-sealing formula was

written into the leather strap, and inside the gem was a magic circle that sealed magic. She had seen the formula so often that she had it practically memorized by now.

"Amazing, I can't believe you had this made in a few days."

"My father gave me what he had. We can't just keep you cooped up in here."

"How far can I go with this?" she asked.

"You can only walk within the castle walls. You can't go outside with it. If you want to go to the garden, you'll have to go with me or the deputy commander."

Valeta was struck speechless by this answer. Having nothing to say, she let out a low chuckle, her bewildered laughter closer to a sneer than anything else.

"You're truly pathetic."

Yet she put the choker around her neck. She needed the freedom to leave her room if she wanted to investigate. Having free range within the imperial castle would be enough. She needed to know what that hidden alchemy was about. Even more so if it was a weapon she could use against the emperor.

"You're the one who said that I couldn't have you if I was always on the right side," he said.

"I didn't mean you had to become this corrupt too."

"You should be careful with your words."

"At least Reinhart tried to lock me up with his own power. You also have power, but you're still relying on the emperor," Valeta said, provoking the crown prince. Of course, the reason why he abided by the emperor's words was because he still trusted his father.

Miloyd had always had a strong sense of justice, and his true nature wouldn't

change so easily. *And he'll turn his back on the emperor once he notices his corruption.* He would even lead a rebellion. However, that wouldn't happen for another ten years...

"Please don't compare me to that devil. He killed people, completely innocent people."

Valeta made no reply.

Shrugging, she stabbed a piece of fruit, popped it into her mouth, and rolled her eyes as she munched on the sweet and crunchy apple. Once she finished it, she rose from her seat. "Now that the choker's on, I can wander around on my own?"

"Yes. It's impossible to use magic on the premises of the imperial castle. Don't expect him to come rescue you."

Valeta was just about to grab the door handle when she turned slightly to Miloyd and said, "I think you've misunderstood something, Your Highness. I've never trusted him once in my life."

Miloyd frowned, displeased by what he was hearing. "You don't have to lie to me."

"I don't trust him or expect anything of him. It simply is what it is." Valeta turned. Standing guard outside the door was the deputy commander who had come to pick her up. She'd been under the impression that he was under the immediate control of Duke Leon, but... "I want to go to the gardens right now. Do you mind escorting me? They said I can only go outside if the deputy commander escorts me."

"I understand..."

His green eyes narrowed in irritation, but he nodded. Valeta walked down the

familiar path with the deputy commander. She had always walked on this path with Miloyd after their meals.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Kien...”

“Are you a commoner?”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, I just thought it’d be just like Duke Leon...” Valeta said with a shrug.

Fortunately, there was no one else in the garden. Standing in the middle, she took a look at her surroundings. For about three minutes, nothing happened.

“How long are you going to hide?” she said.

“I was wondering if you called me by mistake again.”

Valeta heard the snickering voice from above. The leaves of the trees swayed, and a robed Reinhart landed gracefully on the ground, his silver hair flowing behind him.

“You...!”

Reinhart’s gaze met Kien’s the moment the latter was about to draw his sword. In that instant, Kien froze. His lips were firmly sealed, and the only thing moving was his eyes.

*Ah, that’s unfortunate. His sword was frozen in his hand.* Valeta looked at Kien with a slight look of pity as she recalled what had happened during the Delight Manor Massacre. His eyes were bloodshot. Reinhart snickered and snapped his fingers.

“What did you do?” she asked.

"I reflected an image of you looking at the flowers. If anyone looks at you, that's all that they'll see. No one will know we're having a conversation."

"How did you know that I was going to look at the flowers?"

Valeta's question brought a subtle smile to Reinhart's lips. "Is there anything I don't know about my master?"

Where on earth did his confidence come from? Giving him a reluctant look, she sighed. Reinhart scanned Valeta from head to toe and back up again until his gaze came to rest on her neck.

"That looks interesting. I look away for one second and you become someone else's property. How troublesome."

"What are you talking about...? This is the price of freedom in the imperial castle."

Kien gritted his teeth. He wanted to move, but he couldn't even lift a finger at the invisible force that restrained his body. His stomach churned as the two people in front of him carried on their conversation.

"Did you find out anything?"

"Of course," Reinhart said smoothly. "Are you sure I don't have to kill him?"

"No. He's one of Duke Leon's men."

"Hmm..." Reinhart crossed his arms and observed the muscular knight. He was a man with no unnecessary fat on his body, the result of a lifetime of training. "Want to hear something fun first? Have you ever heard of a corpse coming back to life?"

Valeta's eyes widened, unable to hide her surprise. Reinhart tilted his head as he looked at her, and she made a face when he burst out into laughter.

“Stop laughing.”

“You’re so cute I can’t...”

Valeta sighed. Reinhart and his wily words... Seeing the glimmer in his eyes, it was clear that something interesting had happened. And it probably had to do with the rezir.

“I was curious to see who dared to impersonate me, so I went to the village in Kertonan where the first incident happened.”

“Hm.”

“While I was examining the dead, something strange happened. First, there were two types of corpses. Some had been torn apart and mutilated, while others had had their limbs cleanly amputated. Some were even missing their eyeballs.”

“Roste.”

“That’s what I think too. Second, the bloodied corpses were infested with maggots but didn’t attract any animals.” Reinhart stroked his chin. “And then all of a sudden, they came back to life.”

His eyes were lit with amusement. Everything was simply a game to him. Valeta nodded as she looked at him. Kien’s groans faded, and glancing at the knight, Valeta noticed that he was listening in to their conversation with shock. She turned and made eye contact with Reinhart again. As their eyes met, the magician gave her a faint smile. Valeta’s breath hitched in her throat when she saw the way his eyes curved.

“Stop... Mmph!”

Suddenly, she was reminded of the kiss she had shared with Reinhart in her dream. The sensation of his lips on hers suddenly rushed through her mind.

Valeta's face turned red as she covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 86

\* \* \*

“Master?”

Valeta lifted her head and took a step back to avoid Reinhart, whose face appeared before her.

“What? Why are you smiling like that?” she asked.

“Ahh... Just because.”

Valeta scoffed at the nonsensical response. What the hell was he saying?

Reinhart shrugged at her bitter gaze. “I’ve been waiting in the southwestern village of Northern Talos because I believe something similar is going to happen.”

“You think it’s magic?”

“I doubt the villages have been annihilated by magic. There are signs that the corpses were torn apart by animals.”

“Animals?”

“Yes. That being said, there’s a chance the roste is a form of magic. Also, I’m certain that the reanimation of corpses is not magical by any means. On the contrary, it might be a work of... alchemy.”

Reinhart’s musical voice carried a slight tinge of skepticism. In other words, he wasn’t entirely convinced of this hypothesis either. However, it could have been because he didn’t have any talent or interest in alchemy.

"What else did you find?" Valeta pressed.

"There are traces of ancient magic in the northern area. If I'm not mistaken, that's where we'll find the magic circle that activated the roste."

"The roste..."

"I suspect an ancient magic circle was used to also demolish the duke's manor. I don't know who created it, but I know that it's someone who can harness even more powerful magic than I can."

Reinhart crossed his arms and spoke without a hint of irritation on his face. On the contrary, he seemed rather nonchalant, as if this were entirely within the realm of possibility.

"So why are you trapped here again, master?"

"There was a surprise attack at House Delphine, remember?"

"Yes, using a large, ancient circle meant for mass destruction."

"After that, I made potions and distributed them among the injured. But everyone who drank the potions later died. Along with that incident, I was also accused of being your accomplice in the Delight Manor Massacre," Valeta said, shrugging.

She didn't seem too bothered. On the other hand, the frozen Kien, who had been listening the entire time, was shocked. From what he had just heard, the girl had been wrongly accused, yet she remained perfectly calm.

"Is there a chance that you made a mistake?" Reinhart asked with a cheeky smile.

Valeta's face hardened, clearly displeased, and the magician's tongue snaked out to lick his lips as he stared at her.

"Not a chance," she said, resolute. Reinhart shrugged. "I don't doubt my abilities. Plus, I also used the potion on the snowta. And it was perfectly fine."

"Really...? How interesting."

"And there's something off about the corpses too. When I checked, the wounds looked like they were healing, which meant the potion was fine. But something..." Valeta slowly blinked. Something else had to be going on. Was there a chance that those potions weren't her own? What if the victims had drunk a different potion?

"Did you find out what the emperor's motives are yet?" Reinhart asked.

"Not yet. But I think he's hiding something in his office. I noticed traces of alchemy."

"I wish you could come to the village and see the living dead for yourself. I'm unable to sense anything related to alchemy."

"Just wait a little longer."

"Not only that, but the destruction of all of these villages seems far different from anything that could be caused by magic or alchemy. That's why I want you to come with me."

Valeta didn't reply. That's what she wanted, too, but she couldn't leave right now. Hesitating, she rubbed her forehead. "I didn't tell you yet, did I?"

"What?"

"The necklace that you lost... The crown prince has it. The emperor must've stolen it."

Reinhart's expression went cold, and Valeta sighed upon seeing his face. She honestly hadn't expected the crown prince to be involved in any of this.

"That blondie has it?" Reinhart's fingers twitched. "I've always hated him. Shall I kill him?"

"No, you can't. After I find out what's going on here, I'll go with you to the village."

This time, Reinhart's shoulders twitched at Valeta's words. He crossed his arms, a bitter look crossing his face as he nodded slowly.

Valeta sighed and turned around to face Kien.

"Let this man go."

"Is that an order?"

With furrowed brows, she looked at Reinhart's smiling face. She pressed a hand to her forehead and nodded. "Please, Reinhart."

His gaze fell back onto her as she spoke. She pointed to Kien with a meaningful look on her face.

*Snap!*

The invisible binds around Kien vanished. Reinhart, who had obediently released the knight at Valeta's command, said nothing more.

Kien stared at her with disbelief, as if he were expecting to be attacked at any moment. "Why did you bring me here...?"

"Dreux trusts you," Valeta said. "And I trust that you'll keep what you heard here a secret."

"I don't trust you," Kien replied, his face hardening.

Valeta looked confused. "Who asked you to trust me? Just tell Dreux and Carlon what you heard and then forget everything. That's all I ask."

She needed someone to tell the dukes what was going on, and also to warn them since Dreux would inevitably get caught up in everything.

"Also, tell them to be careful of the rezir."

"Rezir?"

"The living dead. Didn't you hear what this guy said?" she snapped.

Reinhart turned to Valeta as she spoke. It was a word he was familiar with as ancient languages were his specialty, just as it was Valeta's. Magic and alchemy had ancient histories, and it was even said that they shared the same roots. In other words, there once was a time when magic and alchemy had been one and the same.

"Rezir... means 'the revived' in the ancient language," he added.

Valeta nodded in agreement.

Kien calmly stared at them. It was clear that the two were much younger than him, but they were clearly skilled enough to handle any situation thrown their way. "If what you two say is true... You're quite nonchalant despite being falsely accused."

In response, Reinhart burst into laughter. He rubbed his chin, looking rather amused.

Valeta glanced at him for a moment before responding. "You could say that survival is our specialty."

"You dim-witted simpleton. Do you think we're lingering here because we can't escape?"

"What...?"

"You can't compare me and my master to the likes of you. She and I could destroy everything and slip away from here right now, but we're still here matching your pace," Reinhart said, his voice tinged with laughter. The knight's eyes widened, and the magician shrugged as he saw Kien's look of incomprehension. He turned toward Valeta and continued. "I'm trying to live in that ordinary framework that you speak of. If that's what my master wants, it's my job as her slave to assist her. Isn't that right?"

"Quit calling yourself a slave."

"There's no other suitable word, is there?"

Valeta turned away and sighed as if she were tired of speaking on this matter. Talking to Reinhart was always so frustrating. Kien stared at the two in a daze. The two were living their own world, the way they so easily admitted that they didn't fit within societal standards...

"Can you report this to Dreux? Tell him never to involve himself in the rezir problem because we will handle it."

"I will..."

"And about what happened here..."

"You looked around the garden," Kien said stiffly. "I don't know anything else. However, I won't turn a blind eye if this happens again."

Valeta nodded. There was nothing more she wanted from him. Reinhart watched her as she sighed again before slowly tilting his head back. The sky was very blue, and he blinked slowly as he admired its brilliance.

"I'll be back," he said to her.

"Okay."

His gaze landed on Valeta. She couldn't ignore the look Reinhart was giving her.

"What?" she asked.

"Something's off about you today," he said.

He stood there for a long time before vanishing with a snap of his fingers.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 87

The spell was broken in an instant. Valeta turned away, immediately distracted by more important things.

“This room is suffocating...”

Where could she get more information? It wasn’t like she could just march into the office right away.

“Could you take me to the library?” she asked.

“Okay.”

Valeta didn’t react to Kien’s disinterested reply. If magic couldn’t revive the dead, then there was a good chance that it was alchemy that was behind it. It also meant that she needed to get more information on alchemy.

“Oh, here you are,” a new voice said.

“Master Guilian.”

“Where are you coming from?”

“We were just in the garden. Is there a problem?” Valeta said in annoyance, cutting off Kien, who was clearly a poor liar.

Guilian shook his head at Valeta’s sharp response, looking at her as if she were a child. “Not at all. If you have time, would you like to have a cup of tea?”

Valeta furrowed her brows. She didn’t want to take anything Guilian offered, not even a single drop of water. There was always a chance that he would put something in it. She may not know much, but she was sure that he was the one who had killed the victims of the collapse using potions of his own making. At

the very least, Valeta knew that it had been his bright idea.

"I'm afraid I must decline. I was on my way to read books at the library," she said.

"Books?"

"Yes. I wanted to find some research papers on alchemy because I felt cooped up in my room." Valeta sighed with annoyance.

Guilian looked back at her with raised eyebrows, as if surprised by her answer. Looking at him now, she could see he had deep wrinkles and heavy bags under his eyes. She observed Guilian further. One eye was sunken and tired, while the other was still covered with an eye patch.

"I see... Are there any in particular that you've found interesting?"

"I quite liked Arpana's *Origins of Alchemy*."

Guilian smiled as he stroked his chin. "If you wanted to read about the origins, isn't *The Beginnings of Alchemy* by Bertas better?"

"I've read a copy of it, but I didn't agree with their thoughts," Valeta replied bluntly.

*Her education has been thorough.* Guilian briefly sized her up as he continued to stroke his chin. Not only was she extremely talented, but she had a deeper understanding of alchemy compared to the average alchemist. It was surprising. Amazing, even. Not very many people sought out papers written by other alchemists. Papers written by authors like Arpana and Bertas were minor works at best.

"Which parts exactly are you talking about?"

"Personally, I don't like the argument that one should be selfless and altruistic,

as was also mentioned in *The Alchemy of Salvation* by Lamuda. However, I don't agree with the opposite argument either."

Guilian's eyes narrowed. She was clearly widely read. Lamuda's *The Alchemy of Salvation* was one that he didn't particularly care for. The paper was full of nonsense, claiming alchemy was originally a gift from God to save people. However, it was that very logic that made the book a best-seller.

*It's a shame we had to meet this way.* It would have been exciting to meet Valeta elsewhere, as one scholar meeting another. Guilian clicked his tongue. It had been a while since he'd felt this disappointed.

Valeta continued, "And Bertas claims that alchemy originated from human experimentation. Of course, we can't say that it's completely untrue, but even if it is, it doesn't really matter either way."

In truth, she simply wasn't interested in that kind of information. She shrugged.

Guilian nodded in agreement. He scratched under his eye patch, chuckling lightly.

"After all," she continued, "he is known as the demon of our world, a condemned alchemist. It's illegal to even own his books in the first place. In fact, they say the original manuscript contains detailed data from the human experiments."

"That's certainly true," the imperial alchemist replied.

"Why would they have outlawed the original if it wasn't so terrible?"

"Well, if you've read the original, you would know why they chose to do that." Guilian looked down at Valeta as if she were a child.

She looked back at him with narrowed eyes and said, "I see," before turning away. It was a shame, but she didn't want to continue this conversation any

further.

"Would you like to read the original manuscript?" Guilian asked. "It's in the palace's restricted library."

"Restricted library...?"

"Yes. There are many banned books there. It's hard to check those books out, but I'm sure we can get permission if you're interested."

Valeta didn't respond. As a scholar, she was interested in the contents of the library, but she wasn't sure if she was up to reading some disturbing material.

*But... human experimentation?* The rezir flashed through Valeta's head.

Resurrected corpses. The wandering dead that couldn't be killed. What if the rezir could be the result of human experimentation? If what Reinhart said was true and the rezir weren't created through magic, then the most likely explanation was alchemy. But if that was the case, then what kind of hellish soul were they using for the exchange?

"Could you bring it to my room...? I can't take anything out of my room anyway, so wouldn't that be the safest place?"

The imperial alchemist smiled. "Certainly, as long as you agree to have some tea with me."

Couldn't they just talk as they were doing now? She didn't understand the point of shoving liquid in her mouth just to have a conversation with someone. But she nodded anyway.

"I'll send someone to get it for you," Guilian said.

"Great. I'll be going to the library now."

And with that, Valeta left, following Kien as he led her to the library. Once

there, she borrowed several innocuous books on alchemy, particularly papers and books on ancient alchemy. Thankfully, it wasn't difficult to take the books out of the library after mentioning Miloyd's name and having Kien's guarantee of the books' safe return. He had, however, started looking fed up after Valeta had picked out a tenth book. Of course, it hadn't been very obvious. Kien was just like Dreux in how he was able to control his expressions, but Valeta could see it in his eyes: *What the hell are all these?*

"I can carry them."

"Oh. Can you take these three for me, then?" Valeta handed three of the books over to Kien, who then stared at her for a moment before reaching over to take the remaining seven books out of her hands. Her eyes widened. "I'll carry these myself."

"Guilty or not, you are still the crown prince's fiancée and under my watch. I'll look ridiculous if I don't do this for you."

"Really?" Valeta tilted her head and nodded in understanding.

Kien strode easily to Valeta's room, unbothered by the weight of the books.

"Aren't you scared?" he asked out of the blue.

"Of what?"

"The emperor is a terrifying man. He has no mercy. But you don't seem afraid at all," Kien said bluntly as they walked up the stairs. There was no emotion in his voice. Of course, there was no sympathy either, so Valeta just shrugged.

"I suppose you develop stronger nerves when you grow up thinking that you are inevitably going to die."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Looks like we're here. You don't have to come by anymore."

With great effort, Valeta took the books back from Kien and entered her room. Tossing the books onto her bed, she turned back toward the open door where Kien still stood, waiting.

"What do you mean I don't have to come here anymore?"

"You won't have to escort me around anymore. Have a good day."

She closed the door. An ancient book sat on top of her desk, so faded and yellow that Valeta was worried it might crumble under her touch. *I'll be tired whether I sleep or not. Might as well stay up all night and read.*

She hated the thought of waking up in a cold sweat or waking up feeling like she was falling into a deep hole. It seemed wrong to sleep soundly in a place like the imperial castle. Thankfully, there was water in her room, along with paper and pens. There was also a candle, so there wouldn't be any evidence if she burned her notes after she was done.

With her back against the bed, Valeta sat on the rug. She had a pile of books by her side and another book propped up on her knees. She carefully opened the heavy tome and began skimming through the text. Quickly becoming absorbed, she began flicking through the pages faster and faster.

Valeta continued to read throughout the evening until the moon was high in the sky.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 88

\* \* \*

“Ngh...”

Valeta’s eyes were dry and blurry. She hadn’t looked up from her book once until after she’d reached the last page. It figured that the imperial palace would have these kinds of books. *What time is it?* Seeing that the moon was high overhead, she figured it was just past midnight. As she rubbed her tired eyes, her vision blurred for a moment before returning to normal.

“Ah...”

She slowly dropped her head. “Gene. Could you come out quietly?”

Exhausted, Valeta tilted her head back, her neck making a cracking sound as the back of her head landed on the mattress. She sighed deeply. She was happy to be reading, but now that she was done, she was hit with reality.

“*Do you think I’m some kind of pet you can just summon and dismiss at will?*” the wind elemental asked.

“No, sorry. I’m sorry, but...”

Valeta pulled her knees up and rubbed her forehead. Gene, seeing how exhausted she was, coughed slightly before fluttering over to sit on her shoulder.

“*Ahem. Are you okay?*”

“Yeah. The emperor’s office... Can you check to see if anyone’s inside the office just off the second corridor on the first floor? The one with the painting of a dragon.”

*“Just check?”*

“We’ll have to figure out how to get me there, but...” She needed to find out what the emperor was hiding in his office. Valeta furrowed her brows in exhaustion.

*“If you need to travel around, then call Nereid as that’s the water elemental’s specialty. She can go anywhere where there’s water. If you need to go underground, then a ground elemental is what you need.”*

“Is that right? Nereid.”

*“Hello!”*

A smiling Nereid popped out of nowhere. Valeta nodded at her then slowly rubbed her face as she got up. The only thing that was left was Bertas’ paper on human experimentation.

“If Gene says the office is empty, can you take me to where he is?”

“Of course. It’s as simple as making a pool of water on both sides!”

With a cheerful clap, Nereid brought her hands together to produce a fist-sized droplet of water and placed it in Valeta’s hands. Tittering, Nereid smacked Gene on his wing.

*“Hush! Can’t you take this more seriously? You’re supposed to be a high-level elemental.”*

“Oh, lighten up, old man! This is why nobody likes you.”

“What? You watery tart!”

Valeta watched the two elementals bicker. She rubbed her eyes again. *What am I watching?* Catching the sigh that escaped from her lips, Nereid and Gene glanced at each other before disappearing, and once they did, Valeta pushed the

pile of books out of the way. She slowly turned, careful not to drop the water in her hands.

Suddenly, it rose up from her hands like a wave and consumed her. The water swallowed her whole, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, and the once fist-sized droplet of water now covered her entire body. Valeta closed her violet eyes. The droplet engulfing her grew smaller and smaller, and soon, the water was gone.

The room was empty.

\* \* \*

*Splash!*

The droplet of water unceremoniously spat Valeta out onto the floor. She gasped for air as she tried to push herself back up.

*Cough! Cough!*

*“Nereid! You fool! What do you think you’re doing?!”*

*“Oh, dear! I’m so sorry. I forgot that humans can’t breathe underwater! Are you okay?”*

“Yes...” Valeta managed to cough out.

She took a few more deep breaths. Once she felt normal again, she carefully got back up on her feet. The office was clean and smelled like ink. It was almost impossible to believe that it belonged to such a monster.

*“Here! You’re all dry!”*

Nereid, who had dried the soaking Valeta, hovered anxiously by her side. She raised a hand, indicating that she was okay, and slowly looked around the room.

*I knew it. There's something here.*

Alchemy. She slowly scanned the office. It looked untouched, as if everything in here was simply for decoration. There wasn't a single speck of dust. It was clear that the attendants and maids often cleaned this room. Valeta took a deep breath as she trailed a finger along the books, one by one. She didn't notice anything out of the ordinary by the shelves.

"Gene, Nereid, do you see anything around here, like a device of some kind?"

*"Hmm, not really."*

Valeta nodded. She stood behind the desk in front of the shelves. It was meticulously clean here too. Her finger continued to brush along the spines of the books.

"Oh."

She paused as she noticed a subtle difference. There were a few small scratches on the bookshelf, a scratch that could only have been caused by the repeated motion of pulling a book out. With narrowed eyes, she brushed her index finger over the mark. It was faint, but it was definitely there.

She lifted the book slightly and peered under and into the shelf. The markings continued into the middle. Her finger dropped to the next shelf. Scratches in the top left corner, the top right corner, the bottom left corner, and again a little further away from that... There were scratches in four places, ones that were made from partially pulling out books. Valeta contemplated for a moment before carefully pulling out the books one by one.

When she took a step back, she heard a click from somewhere inside the bookshelf. A door in the center of the bookshelf appeared with a fluttering sound. It looked like it had materialized out of nowhere. A *creation formula*? There was no glow nor the feeling Valeta got when she used alchemy, but it was

definitely an alchemical creation.

*Creak.*

She gulped as she looked at the swinging door. It was dark inside, no different than the dim of night. She had no idea what was at the end of the corridor, but it was clear that the emperor was hiding something inside.

She hated the dark. Her breath hitched, and her fingertips trembled. With shaky hands, Valeta reached out and scooped Gene and Nereid into her arms.

*"H-human! What are you doing?!"*

*"Don't leave me..."*

*"Child, your heart's about to burst out of your chest!"*

Valeta took a deep breath as Nereid laughed. She grabbed the door to the bookshelf with a trembling hand. By default, alchemy was a one-time thing, so there had to be some condition for maintaining something like this. Something had to go back to its original state. Only then would any evidence disappear, along with any traces of alchemy. The emperor was probably utilizing this concept. Valeta stared into the darkness and slowly closed the door behind her. The light filtering in from the bookshelf entrance disappeared.

*Click.*

Valeta heard the sound of the lock and the books returning back to their original state. She carefully took a step forward, still hugging Gene and Nereid in her arms.

*Whoosh.*

The crackle of flames tickled her ears. Valeta couldn't help but flinch at the sudden noise. Candles illuminated the dark passage. She slowly began to relax

as she watched the candles flicker in the darkness.

*"I see. You're afraid of the dark."*

Valeta didn't respond to Gene's comment. Instead, she kept her gaze fixed on the path and moved forward. Gene shook his head, still trapped in her embrace.

They hadn't been walking for long when they came across a large atrium. Actually, it was more of a large room than an atrium, though it was larger and a bit more eccentrically shaped than a typical nobleman's room. The dreary room was spherical and had a bed placed in the center. An extensive collection of books circled the perimeter.

A single desk was tucked between the massive amount of books. There was nothing dangerous about this place. The only other thing she could see was a jar of water. Valeta took a step forward and looked at the bed. She could see what looked like sky-blue threads strewn out on the white sheets. Her breath faltered for a moment as something on the bed moved. Her eyes widened.

A person? She froze, unsure if she should approach them or not. They didn't look dead, but she didn't have to be close to tell that they were very, very thin.

"Why are you here again? Weren't you just here? How long must you..."

The figure spoke in a voice that was a mix between a sob and exhaustion. Valeta squeezed the elementals tighter, pulling them into her chest. Gene, unable to stand it any longer, started flapping his wings, hitting her arms.

The woman lay on the bed, not bothering to look at the intruder in her room, as though her mind were completely disconnected from reality.

"Um... Hello," Valeta said, clenching her fists in fear.

The figure flinched harshly. The woman, who had been listlessly lying with her back to the room's entrance, began to move. She slowly pushed herself off the

bed with thin arms. Then, she turned.

"Who are you?" she asked.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 89

“Ah...” Valeta was momentarily at a loss for words. A pale, beautiful woman was on the bed, her long hair spread out across it. Her skin was pale as if she hadn’t seen the sun in many years, and her bones protruded from her skin. One of her eyes was a pitch-black hole—it seemed she had lost it—holding a deep darkness within it. However, her remaining eye was a shade of deep blue even more beautiful than Miloyd’s.

“How did you...”

“Oh, uh...”

What could Valeta say? That she was here because she wanted to find what it was that the emperor was hiding, but that she had never expected to find another person...? No, she couldn’t say that. But there was nothing else in the room that could possibly give her an excuse for being there. No precious treasures, no evidence of the emperor’s many evil schemes. No corpses lying around, no signs of human experimentation. It was honestly a little disappointing.

“I thought that the emperor was hiding something,” she said. “I went looking for it, and my search led me here.”

“Fascinating. This place couldn’t have been easy to find.”

The woman’s voice was like a whisper. A soprano, cool and gentle. It was very pleasant to listen to. Her voice was like a breeze against Valeta’s ear.

“Are you an elementalist?” she asked.

Valeta blinked. “Oh, uh... I know a way to summon elementals, but I’m not an elementalist.”

The woman had kind eyes and a gentle voice, but Valeta could feel a deep loneliness, an indescribable despair, and an overwhelming sense of weariness within it.

"Then what are you?"

"An alchemist."

"An alchemist..." the woman repeated, murmuring. This guarded child was the first person she'd spoken to in a long time besides Kynos. "I'm an alchemist too."

"Really?"

"Yes. Well, I was an alchemist. I was so disgusted with that power that I gave it up. But I couldn't escape from it in the end."

Valeta's eyes widened. Shocked, her gaze landed on the prone woman's missing eye. The only people who could use alchemy were those who had an ancient magic circle engraved into one of their eyes. However... *Gave it up...?*

If the woman herself had given up her alchemy, that meant she had tried to remove the ancient circle by herself. There was only one way to remove it, and that was to carve out the part that was infused with magic.

"What do you mean you couldn't escape?" Valeta asked.

"I thought he was obsessed with me because of my alchemic powers. That's why I gave it up."

"The emperor was obsessed with you?"

The woman's lone blue eye landed on Valeta. She didn't say anything, but Valeta could feel a gloomy aura emanating from her missing eye.

"I never should've met him..." Her face twisted into a grimace. Her pale hands

gripped the sheets. She looked like she was about to cry, but she didn't shed a single tear. Valeta couldn't do anything but watch. "I shouldn't have told him that it didn't matter what I looked like."

This was... the end. She could see it, her worst possible ending reflected in this poor, unknown woman.

After a while, the woman raised her head again. She smiled awkwardly, looking a little more composed. Valeta looked at her crooked smile, which was as awkward as her own. She remained silent, waiting for the other woman to speak first. Not only did Valeta not know what to say, she didn't have the confidence to speak either.

"My name's Eliza. And yours?"

"Valeta. Valeta Delight."

"Delight... You mean that sneaky, greedy fox?"

Valeta stammered wordlessly at the woman's sharp, caustic remark. Of course, she wasn't wrong. She had just never heard anyone be so critical of her father before. And it was coming from someone who had been on the verge of tears just now.

"Uh, yes..."

"I never thought he had it in him to raise a child. Did he marry?"

"No. I'm an illegitimate child."

"Ah, figures. An alchemist born under a greedy man like him must've grown up feeling trapped," Eliza said, her voice brighter than before.

Valeta, coming out of her daze, took a step forward. She could tell that Eliza had been imprisoned for a long time. "You seem to know him well."

"Of course. We were peers."

"We?"

"Kynos, me, and Larg. We met when we were young and were friends for a long time."

By Kynos, she must mean the emperor. Eliza was the beautiful woman before her. But who was Larg? After thinking for a moment, Valeta nodded and continued the conversation.

*The emperor must be in his early to mid-forties...* Did that mean this woman was also in her forties? Another expression crossed Valeta's face. If the woman who had been trapped here for many years and had undergone enormous stress was still this beautiful, just how beautiful had she been before?

"What did Kynos do now?" the woman asked.

"He wants to have me. I don't know why."

Eliza's eyes widened as if she knew something. "You must be the interesting alchemist that he mentioned."

"Probably," Valeta said with a nod.

The woman laughed bitterly and ducked her head. "You need to run. Run from Kynos as far as you can."

"I wish I could do that, but..." Valeta pointed to the choker around her neck. Eliza's eyes narrowed, and she moved to get out of bed.

*Clank.*

Valeta looked around to see where the sound of iron clinking together was coming from. She frowned when she saw the shackles around Eliza's ankles.

The chain was very long, so it didn't stop her from walking around the room, however, it seemed to stop just before the corridor where Valeta had entered from.

"Can you come a little closer?" she asked.

"Yes." Valeta stepped a little closer and stooped down.

Eliza slowly brushed her hand along the choker before sighing. "I made this."

"What?"

"It's an alchemy seal, one that I made before. Kynos asked me to make one. Said that he was going to imprison an alchemist criminal with it." Eliza's face twisted into a grimace. Her expression suggested that she wasn't expecting it to be used this way. She sighed and rubbed her face.

*"Seems like she's also the one who put the seal in your room."*

Valeta nodded along in agreement with Gene.

"This room has a seal too. One meant to hold me captive. There's no real point in it after what happened to my eye, but I'm sure it still works."

"If you made the seal, then you must also know how to nullify it. Why didn't you do that and run away?"

Whenever an alchemist created a new formula, they also had to find a way to reverse it. It was so the creator of the formula could take responsibility if something went wrong.

Eliza lowered her gaze at Valeta's question. "I couldn't... Someone dear to me is also being held captive. And now I'm even more powerless without alchemy."

This definitely wasn't in the novel. Though implied that the emperor was hiding

something, there had never been a character named “Eliza.” Either the author intentionally hadn’t revealed it, or this was part of the villain’s backstory. After all, what author would bother taking the time to explain the backstory of a villain who was meant to die anyway?

“Who is it?”

“The man I mentioned earlier, Larg. Largris, my lover.”

“Largris...” Valeta echoed in a low voice.

Largris... She felt like she had heard the name somewhere before. It wasn’t entirely familiar, but it wasn’t completely unfamiliar either. *Where have I heard that name before?* It must have been somewhere, but she couldn’t remember where.

“Have you heard any news of him, by any chance...?” the woman asked.

“No. I’ve never heard his name before.”

“Really?” Eliza dropped her head in disappointment.

Seeing the weary, exhausted look on the woman’s face, Valeta suddenly said, “I can look into it and come back.”

“You would? But it’ll be dangerous for you to come back here.”

“Gene and Nereid will help me,” Valeta said with a shrug. It wasn’t a problem as long as she didn’t get caught. However, she had to be extremely careful as the emperor would notice even the slightest bit of disturbance.

Eliza spoke up again. “Do you know anything about a child named Miloyd?”

“Yes. He’s the crown prince, though he seems to be rather influenced by the emperor these days,” Valeta answered with disinterest. She couldn’t escape, not

as long as Miloyd had the bead. The only thing she could do was steal it back from him, but he constantly wore it around his neck.

"There is an obedience curse on my heart that's engraved into a bead, which Miloyd currently has," Valeta explained. She gestured at herself. "A lot of people want this good-for-nothing body."

"That child...?"

"Yes. This choker is a problem, but that cursed bead is an even bigger one. I have to get that necklace, but I don't even know where to start."

Valeta sighed, shrugging. There were several ways to take the bead back, but all the options would involve clashing with the imperial family, and she didn't want that.

Eliza quietly listened as the young girl spoke. After a moment, she let out a small chuckle. Valeta blinked at her bright laughter.

"Did you know that there's something called 'substitution alchemy'?"

"Substitution alchemy...? Is that alchemy?" Was it similar to the teleportation alchemy that Carlon had used? Valeta's head tilted as she mulled over this.

"Actually, I had meant to use it with magic, so I studied it a bit with Larg. I'm sorry, but could you grab me a pen from that desk over there?"

Valeta gave Eliza a dubious look but did as she was told and brought her a pen, a little suspicious as to why Eliza couldn't get it herself. She may have been shackled, but that didn't mean that she couldn't move at all.

*She's acting like she can't walk...* Valeta handed the woman a pen, one that had been lying on the desk.

Eliza held it in one hand and grabbed Valeta's hand with the other. She turned

Valeta's hand so that her palm was facing up.

"Eliza...?"

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 90

"Patience, Miss Valeta. I know it doesn't sound like alchemy, but I assure you, it is."

Valeta leaned down a little as she listened to Eliza's melodious voice. With a gasp, Valeta was pulled down to sit beside Eliza on the bed. The tug of her thin wrists was practically nonexistent, but Valeta didn't resist and let herself get dragged down.

Eliza began to draw something on Valeta's palm. It was a circle, and on the inside, she drew a detailed symbol. Valeta tilted her head as she looked down at it. It looked like it had something to do with the 'detaching' formula, so was Eliza planning on detaching something?

It was a rather complex symbol. On top of that, it was one that Valeta had never seen before. It looked nothing like the typical alchemy symbol. If anything, it looked more like a magic circle.

"There. All done. It'll work with anything you hold in your hand. Want to try with this pen?"

Valeta took the pen.

"Now put it down," Eliza said.

Valeta did as instructed and put the pen down on the bed.

"Open your hand."

"Okay, but what is this supposed to..." Valeta started asking, wondering where this was going. Then, she stopped, her breath hitching in her throat. She had a pen in her hand, the very same pen she had set down on the bed. Her gaze

dropped down to the bed, clearly taken back. *But the pen's still there...*

What kind of sorcery was this? Valeta glanced between the two pens before looking back at Eliza.

"You're swapping it with the new one you made. Actually, the one in your hand is the one I made, while this one is the original. It's like magic, isn't it?"

"Yes... But what's the price?"

"There is none. You can't even call it true alchemy, so a seal can't stop it. Alchemy like this is few and far between."

"This isn't alchemy?" Valeta asked.

Eliza made a slightly troubled expression before tapping her lips a few times. "That's a trade secret. You could call it taboo—alchemy that you're not supposed to do. There's a bit of deception involved, so it can't be maintained for long."

"Really?"

"Yes, so let's leave it at that. Why don't you take this and see how long it'll last? That will determine how long you'll be able to deceive someone."

Valeta committed the symbol she saw earlier to memory. If she timed it right, she could potentially use it to escape from here within a few days. All she had to do was get in contact with Reinhart.

"What's your relationship with Miloyd?" Eliza asked suddenly.

"We were arranged to be married. However, I have no intention of marrying him, so now he wants to lock me up."

"I'm sure that's Kynos' doing. He's always been very good at handling people."

That was something Valeta could agree with. The emperor was someone who

could say anything in a kindly manner, someone whose whole demeanor could change with a mere smile. On top of that, he was a decent-looking man, so it was easy to like him. But he could—and he would—stab someone in the back with that smile of his.

“He was made emperor from a young age. Even though we were from another country, he treated us without formality. Larg and I thought we were all friends.”

That was the problem: they treated him like a friend. Someone like the emperor would have desperately wanted someone who could stand on equal ground with him.

Lying and concealing his greed from an early age, he’d smile to win the people’s favor, whispering lies into their ears. Those who knew who he truly was feared him, while those who had never witnessed his true side stayed busy flattering him. In the middle of all that, Eliza and Larg had stepped into his territory.

Valeta furrowed her brows. She could imagine it all too well.

“I hope Miloyd doesn’t turn out to be like Kynos.”

“I’m sure he won’t.”

The truth was though, Miloyd was the next in line to the throne, so it would be impossible to tell what would happen if he fell further and further into the abyss.

“Also, if you don’t mind... Could you find out what happened to Largris?”

Valeta nodded. “I will. Thank you for showing me this symbol. Are you sure you don’t want to escape from here?”

Eliza just smiled in response.

Valeta saw the sorrow and despair in her eyes and knew that there was no

convincing her. If Eliza didn't want to run away, then there was no point in helping her. *Why am I even trying to help her in the first place?* Valeta knew that it would've been easier not to know, but there were some things she couldn't ignore.

She furrowed her brows and brushed her bangs. "It'll be dangerous if I stay any longer. But I have one more question... Why didn't this formula glow when you used it?"

"Hm? Oh, I guess they don't teach that these days. Ancient symbols don't shine."

"Really...?" Valeta's eyes widened.

Eliza smiled and nodded, noticing the sliver of emotion on Valeta's otherwise impassive face. *If that child grew up, he must be around her age...* She didn't ask the girl for her age, but she assumed they must be peers. She couldn't remember the last time she had talked this much. The muscles around her mouth were already sore, but Eliza ignored the pain and asked, "You know that ancient alchemy is a combination of circles and symbols, right?"

"Yes, I do."

"And that the newer form of alchemy is more simple to use than the ancient one?"

Valeta nodded in agreement.

This woman in front of her must have been trapped for a long time, yet her memory was still sharp. So not only was she smart, she was extremely resilient. It was amazing she hadn't gone crazy after being trapped in this place.

"Yes. I heard that it was simplified to save time on drawing circles."

"True, it was simplified for convenience's sake," Eliza said. "But that's not how it

is with the original. That's why when you draw an alchemy formula with the ancient language, it won't glow."

Valeta nodded again. She wouldn't have been able to find this information in any of her books. In fact, while she was a voracious reader, it was the first time she had heard anything about ancient alchemy.

"However, many of the ancient alchemy symbols are taboo. Some are even dangerous, as they involve human sacrifice. There's a reason why they're prohibited." Eliza continued, "So, remember. It's your job to decide which symbols you're going to use."

She smiled. Valeta nodded and gave the woman a slight bow. She wouldn't be able to come for a while without arousing suspicion, but the next time she did, she wanted to come with news for Eliza. *I'm sure that will be the last time, though.*

Eliza waved in farewell as she watched Valeta bow then turn and walk back out into the corridor.

With Gene and Nereid's help, Valeta safely made it back to her room. She sighed deeply.

*"Seems like that woman doesn't have long to live. Right, Gramps?"*

*"Who're you calling Gramps—"*

"What do you mean?" Valeta asked, cutting Gene off.

The palm-sized mermaid nodded as she floated around in midair, like the sky was her ocean. Then, she flopped down in front of Valeta, propping her chin on her hands.

*"The ancient circle that's engraved in the eye is basically like an organ, right?"* the water elemental asked.

"Right. There's no way you can survive with one of your vital organs torn out like that. I think she's been able to survive because of the seal in that room, but even that is reaching its limit," Gene said, slowly flapping his wings.

Valeta remained silent. Eliza seemed like a brilliant person. Finding out that she was going to die not long after they met was... *Everyone always dies...* This is why she was afraid of becoming close to someone. Calling them by their name, making promises. If she went to see Eliza again only to find out that she was no longer there...

"You're saying that she'll die whether she escapes or not?"

"Well, more or less?"

"I see..."

Valeta let out a soft sigh. If she had known that this would happen, she would've taken a closer look at Eliza's wound. However, there was no way she could bring back something that had been lost long ago...

Potions were powerful, but they were useless on a wound that was already healed. For example, if someone had lost their arm and drank a top-tier potion on the spot, they would grow a new arm. However, if the wound had already healed and left a scar, then there was no way to bring the arm back.

"You can go back now. Thank you for your help."

"Go to sleep, human."

"See you next time, kid. But you better have a magic stone the next time you call, or I won't help. Got that?"

Valeta nodded again. Taking a seat at her desk, she flipped to the first page of the book Guilian had given her.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 91

\* \* \*

The book was full of astonishing things. It contained various studies on alchemy and human experimentation. Alongside those were detailed stories and notes on the different components required for human experiments.

Valeta found various records of these strange experiments, such as how to fasten another limb to a wound that couldn't be healed through alchemy. If this book wasn't an introduction to the creation of chimeras, then what in the world was it? However, it seemed that Bertas, the original author of the manuscript, had been unsuccessful in the end. With difficulty, Valeta rubbed her face. She had been concentrating on the book long past sunrise.

It was all too shocking. All of the formulas were written in the ancient language and many of the stories were hard to believe. But with a little bit of study, she knew that it wouldn't be too difficult to make a clay doll. And if she could manage to make that dirt, mixed with a little bit of soul, move at her bidding, then it wouldn't be difficult to make a corpse move, either.

However, in order to do that, she needed a human soul. In other words, she would have to use alchemy twice: once to kill a person and trap their soul in a specific object, then once more to tear that soul apart into pieces so that they could be distributed to multiple people. And in order to do all that, an equal cost had to be paid. But what would be considered a fair exchange? What was the price for splitting a single soul into a dozen humans?

"I can see why this book is forbidden." She lightly tapped on the leather cover. It certainly wouldn't be good if this information were common knowledge. Guilian, or whoever had made the rezir, was probably aware of it already. They must have read this book and applied the same technique to raise the dead. "But it

can still be helpful."

If she knew the method, then she could find a way to reverse the rampant outbreak of rezir and return them to their graves. The same would likely apply to the roste too. *I'll have to think about it.*

When the roste was created, there had been no light emanating from a large alchemy or magic circle. People would've noticed if there had been. The fact that there was no light meant that whatever was used to create the roste was ancient in origin.

"Ancient, ancient, ancient..." Valeta muttered, annoyed. Why was everything connected to the damned ancients? Of course, the ancient ways were definitely more powerful and more dangerous, yet discreet at the same time, making the creator less likely to be exposed.

*Knock, knock.*

Valeta looked up at the sound of knocking on the door. She turned to the window and saw that it was broad daylight outside. *Has it already been that long?*

For someone who had stayed up all night, she didn't look the least bit exhausted.

\* \* \*

"What are you doing here?"

"What...?!" Carlon cried, sounding close to tears. He took a deep breath, trying to regain his composure. "Valeta, you really..."

Valeta observed the man as he pressed a hand to his forehead. It hadn't even been a day since she sent word to Carlon. Did he have to visit her at noon the very next day?

*Wait, it's already noon?*

It was exactly midday. The very first knock of the day had been Miloyd, who had come to see her first thing in the morning. She had chased him away and once again became engrossed in her books. She was not expecting the second knock to belong to Dreux and Carlon.

Valeta had a dubious look on her face.

"Kien," Duke Leon said.

"Oh, right. I told him to send you a message..."

"Explain."

Valeta stammered wordlessly at Dreux's curt command. He looked frustrated, standing there with his arms crossed. She hesitated for a moment before she spoke up again. "You heard what Kien said. I don't want you to get involved. It'll be dangerous."

"And you're going to solve it?"

"Yes, probably..."

"Here?"

"No," Valeta replied with a shake of her head. "I'm going to go to the village."

"What can we do to help?"

"I don't think there's anything you can do."

Now that she had a basic idea of the ancient alchemy that was used, she just needed to escape from the castle. All she needed was to take the bead that was hanging from Miloyd's neck. And Eliza's request...

"Oh!" Valeta's eyes widened. "Do you know anyone named Largris by any chance?"

Carlon cocked his head at the question. The two men exchanged glances before looking back at Valeta.

"I do," Dreux said. "Why?"

Valeta was pleased. This would save her so much trouble. "How is he doing now?"

"I believe he's in the underground laboratory of the imperial castle," Carlon said with a tilt of his head.

Underground laboratory? Was he a scholar or a researcher?

"What kind of researcher is he?"

"He's a representative of the magicians of the imperial castle."

"Representative...?" Valeta repeated, surprised.

Dreux cocked his head to the side, and Valeta's face fell. *Eliza's locked up, but her lover's the representative magician? And the emperor's raising her child?* The gears in Valeta's mind slowly turned. She didn't understand. What the hell was the emperor doing? What was he thinking?

"Right. Why do you ask?" Dreux asked.

"Well, there was someone who was asking about him. How he's been doing and such."

"I'm sure everyone knows."

Upon hearing Dreux's reply, Valeta looked away wordlessly. He furrowed his brows and sighed, leaning his back against the wall.

Carlon glanced at his friend before he spoke. "He rarely makes public appearances. He only shows his face when the emperor calls upon him, and even then, he doesn't talk to anyone. He spends most of his time locked away in the laboratory. He always wears a robe and refuses to speak to others."

"Really? Do you know where I might find him?"

"Who knows?"

"If I wait in front of the basement, will I be able to run into him?" Valeta murmured softly. She'd have to pass by multiple people if she wanted to do that. If she waited in front of the basement, someone was bound to notice. Word would reach the emperor.

"Valeta."

"Yes?"

"Why won't you ask the people standing in front of you for help?"

"Uh..." Valeta rubbed her neck, having just come to that realization. Of course, she still wasn't used to asking people for help. It never crossed her mind to ask, so it usually wasn't even an option. She frowned, pursing her lips. "Then..."

She took a deep breath.

*"Nothing comes for free in life, Valeta. Everything comes at a price."*

Her pulse quickened when she heard the voice ringing in her ears. She forced back a bitter smile as she recalled the haunting voice, one she hadn't heard in a while.

"There's not much I can do while I'm locked up. I don't want to draw any attention to myself, so if you could do me a favor..."

"Of course."

"Yes."

Dreux and Carlon answered her simultaneously and without hesitation. They both frowned at each other.

"I'm Valeta's guardian. Why did you answer, Dreux?" Carlon asked.

"Remember when we were drinking..."

Carlon's mouth fell open. He didn't even know how to respond. Valeta's eyes widened as she watched two men try to avoid her gaze. Dreux had blurted his response as though it had already been decided upon long before and he'd merely been waiting for her to ask.

Valeta's jaw dropped. What used to be so difficult for her was surprisingly easy.

Bursting into laughter, she covered her mouth with her hand. Carlon and Dreux's eyes widened at the sudden outburst. Valeta, who barely knew how to smile, held her stomach as her shoulders shook with laughter.

"Valeta? Are you feeling ill?"

"A physician..." Dreux said as he quickly pushed himself off the wall.

Valeta, noticing his sudden movement, grabbed him by the arm. Calling a physician would make things troublesome.

"I-I'm fine," she said with a chuckle.

*Ah, I can't remember a time I laughed this hard.* She really couldn't remember. Dreux looked down at her with a slight frown before taking a seat.

"It's just that you two are so funny," Valeta said. "Oh. If you know Largris, do you also know someone named Eliza?"

"Eliza?"

This time, Carlon's voice was tinged with surprise.

Valeta nodded as she fanned her burning cheeks with her hands. "Do you know her?"

"Yes, in the past, she... she was the chairman of the Imperial Alchemist Association. She was also the empress-to-be," Carlon said.

"That was more than fifteen years ago," Dreux added.

Valeta was speechless. Eliza had been the head of the alchemist association? She remained silent for a long moment, trying to organize her jumbled thoughts.

"So why is Giulian..."

"I heard that Eliza passed away in a large accident at the imperial palace. Largris was there at the time."

In utter shock, Valeta dropped her gaze.

*But... Eliza's alive?*

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Eliza was alive. Did Largris know that? If he did, then there was a high chance that he was being exploited by the emperor. If he didn't...

*Is it out of guilt?* Carlon said that there had been a big accident... Largris might have blamed himself for it. He might be listening to the emperor out of guilt. Whether or not he knew, it didn't seem like he was serving the emperor of his own accord.

"Eliza was a good person. She used alchemy for the good of the people and persuaded the emperor to ensure the people's rights and freedom."

"You've met her before?" Valeta asked.

"Only briefly. She was a very talented woman. A quick learner too."

Valeta nodded. She felt like puzzle pieces were falling into place, but she was still missing a very important piece. The emperor's true motive, the rezir, and the roste... were all still a mystery.

"I don't have to meet him. I just want to send him a letter. Also, I... I think I need to get out of here."

She couldn't learn anything else while trapped here in this castle. Reinhart needed her, and she needed to be out there in the storm. Just the thought of getting further involved was a headache, but she had no choice.

"You think you can safely do that?"

"Yes, don't worry. Also..." Valeta sighed. Now that she realized that they genuinely wanted to protect her, she felt like she had to tell them the truth. It was possible that they wouldn't meet again for some time. "I can actually make

ten top-tier potions a day.”

“What...?”

“Also... Ge— I mean, Nereid.”

Whoosh.

A tiny whirlpool appeared, revealing a small, palm-sized mermaid. Valeta was thankful that the elementals had quickly caught on and started appearing in their smaller forms without her having to ask them. *Less stress on my jaw.* And it was less nerve-wracking too.

“I can summon elementals too...”

The two dukes were silent.

“Also, I discovered a hidden room in the emperor’s office. I met someone named Eliza there.”

Little by little, Valeta told the two men everything she had been hiding from them. She tried to remain as composed as possible, but she was nervous, clueless as to how they would react.

Carlon and Dreux both said nothing still. Valeta, who had her gaze lowered, gave a small sigh. She clenched and unclenched her fists a few times before lifting her head. Dreux gave a dazed Carlon a quick nudge of his elbow. He gestured toward Valeta with his chin, and Carlon began to stammer.

“I-I’ve been waiting for you to tell me.”

“I know you were trying to help me... I’m sorry that it took me so long to tell you,” she said.

Even though it wasn’t much, Valeta could understand what Carlon meant by

what he'd said when they first met. Why the only thing she knew how to do was run, why he wouldn't let her hold a sword...

"Everyone needs time."

"Getting out of here is a given, but... you'll come back, right?" Carlon asked.

"Yes. If I have a place to return to, that is," Valeta replied quietly. A small smile played on her lips.

\* \* \*

"Not this either."

*Slam.*

With deft fingers, Reinhart forcefully closed the thick, hardcover book and put it back in place. The library of the Magicians' Tower was extremely spacious, presumably because it held all the knowledge of the world. The problem was that despite all Reinhart knew, it was impossible for him to know everything that was in the library, and it was also impossible to use magic to find what he needed.

*To think, I have to go through these one by one...* It was a huge waste of time. Still, if there was any consolation, it was knowing that the section regarding ancient magic circles wasn't as large as he thought it'd be. However, the three shelves, which spanned about ten meters, weren't exactly small either.

"Done with this shelf. Is this the next one?" His ruby eyes held a rare, weary gaze. He had entered the library late at night when everybody was asleep and stayed until the library opened, so a lot of time had passed. Yesterday, he'd taken out about half of the books on the shelves and put a phantom spell on them.

He sat cross-legged on the floor and rested his chin on his hand. "I know the

fundamentals..."

But that was about it. He thought he would be able to recreate the magic circle if he was asked, but there were still some parts of the circle that he didn't understand. It was a shame, but he had no confidence in creating an entirely new magic circle.

"I'm so moved, my lord," Balteer said. "To think that you've been studying throughout the night."

"Stop talking nonsense and go back to bed," Reinhart said indifferently as he flicked through the book, his chin still propped on his hand. Then he placed the book back on the shelf. He picked up another book from the stack he had beside him and started flipping through the pages.

*There's nothing about magic circles that can cause mass-scale destruction. The dead were missing entire limbs as if they had been torn apart by animals, but... It seemed too irregular to call it magic. What about the roste? Magic was more likely to be behind it. It was also a little abnormal but not impossible. It's still strange.*  
Though he'd done his best to find information on the living corpses and whether they could somehow be related to magic, it was hard to find anything at all. He rubbed his eyes with his palm.

"I can help you if you tell me what you're looking for."

"Don't bother." Reinhart's eyes moved mechanically, trailing from the top of the page to the bottom without a hint of emotion. *And that obedience curse I can't break...*

It was clear that someone had put a seal, a stronger one, on top of the one he had made. How was it possible for someone to cast such a powerful spell, one that even he couldn't touch? In truth, he could break the spell if he put his mind to it. The problem was that the curse was on Valeta's heart.

"My lord, you need to learn how to utilize your subordinates. If you don't ask us for help, most people won't notice when you need it," Balteer said as he rested a hand on top of the stack of books.

Reinhart snapped his fingers, noticing that he was about to take one of the books. Icicles instantly formed in the air, flashing threateningly as they aimed toward Balteer's head, neck, and heart.

"Do I look that weak to you? I said, don't bother."

"I'm sure I can be of help if you're looking for something. After all, I have been here for much longer than you."

"I don't need your help. I told you that I'll take care of it myself." Reinhart's eyes flashed.

Balteer's breath hitched when he saw the look on the other man's face.

Reinhart's eyes curved maliciously as if he sensed Balteer's hesitation. He lightly got up and walked to stand in front of the older man.

"Aren't you trying to help that socoro— I mean, Miss Valeta?"

"So?"

"If you just say the word, everyone here will follow your bidding."

Reinhart looked at Balteer. Although his brown eyes had faded over the years, they were steadfast as Balteer met the head magician's gaze. Reinhart clicked his tongue and frowned. With his years of experience, Balteer wasn't one to back down easily. Why was he so adamant? A single snap could kill him, sending his brain matter gushing out of each orifice in his head.

"Magic circles for mass destruction."

"I'll see what I can find," Balteer said with a smile. His wrinkles deepened as he gave a small chuckle.

Reinhart dissolved the icicles with a snap and then sat back down on the floor. "Also, are there ways you can get unusually stronger with magic? Like obtaining powers that you wouldn't normally have."

"I can't think of anything right now, but I'll keep it in the back of my mind," Balteer replied as he took a seat opposite Reinhart, who was running a hand over the books again.

Reinhart rubbed the back of his neck, frowning in annoyance. He took his hand off the shelves and tilted his head back. He could see the night sky through the skylight of the library. It was a unique design, one that could only be found in the Magicians' Tower.

*I miss her.*

Reinhart had already suffered through several sleepless nights and wanted nothing more than to sleep in Valeta's arms. It would've been possible if she were anywhere besides the imperial castle.

"My lord, you may have been born with exceptional talents, but even so, you'll always have something that you lack. If anything, I still have many years on you."

"Shut up."

"So please, feel free to ask."

Reinhart's face twisted in annoyance. Why were people so pushy these days? His patience was beginning to wear thin. His lips quirked slightly.

"You're the most powerful head we've ever had," Balteer continued.

"I know," Reinhart replied, his voice filled with apathy.

Admiration, longing, envy, jealousy. He already knew all of these emotions and had them in his head. He felt nothing new. Only Valeta was capable of extracting new feelings from him, feelings that he couldn't experience through the knowledge and memories he'd inherited, emotions that only he could experience as 'Reinhart.' Feelings that no head before him had ever experienced.

He resumed leafing through the pages. Suddenly, he stopped on a page before flipping to the front again. He read that page in silence for some time. Then, he flicked forward a few more pages. He read carefully.

Balteer, noticing the shift in Reinhart, leaned over a little to see what the head magician was looking at. "Black magic...?"

At the sound of Balteer's voice, Reinhart slowly lifted his head to look at the old man. "You know about black magic?"

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Reinhart searched through his memories, but he couldn't find a single recollection of black magic.

"Yes. Black magic is a type of ancient magic. Even among ancient magic, black magic is known as the taboo of taboos."

"The taboo of taboos..." Reinhart repeated. An alluring thought for the craziest of magicians.

"Yes, performing such magic is not tolerated in the Magicians' Tower. It is strictly forbidden, so according to the rules, all related books would have been discarded."

Reinhart found it hard to believe that such valuable items were destroyed by people who were obsessed with magic. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes.

"The reason why the Magicians' Tower was created in the first place was because there were so many users dabbling in black magic, breaking unspoken rules."

"Hm. Is this true?"

"Yes," Balteer said. "It's a tale that often appears in history books we keep. But if you didn't grow up in the tower or on the island, there's a chance that you wouldn't know."

No wonder Reinhart didn't have any memory of it. The only memories he'd inherited from past heads were of various spells and methods of using magic. Apart from that, there were only pointless emotions and duties that the heads were obligated to do.

"That's why the original twelve magicians created the tower—a land just for magicians where no humans could come and go."

"The original twelve, hm?" Reinhart narrowed his eyes. Come to think of it, he knew of someone who could still answer to that title. His lips curved into a smile.

"Once the tower was established, the first thing they did was establish laws, taboos, and punishments for those who broke them."

"And that's what we know as Tartarose?"

Balteer nodded in response. He continued to explain, "Yes, socoros tend to think that Tartarose refers to the tower, but it actually refers to the island's prison, a place that can only be reached through the lowest level of the tower."

"Is that so?" Reinhart's eyes gleamed with interest. If the original twelve had created the tower, established laws that forbade taboo magic, and such magic had started disappearing, surely that meant that they'd known quite a bit about it. "I could just ask him myself."

"What...?"

"Isn't that right, watchdog?" Reinhart asked with a slow turn of his head.

Caspelios suddenly appeared from a hidden corner, his head bowed.

"You didn't even greet me, doggy."

"I didn't think you wanted me to," Caspelios said.

"Dogs are always welcome. Who am I to turn down a dog who runs up to me, tail wagging?"

Caspelios said nothing. He had no response, even when being treated like a

dog, and Reinhart treated him like a real dog. He didn't belittle him or abuse him. Compared to all the heads of generations past who had used the watchman as a form of stress relief, Reinhart was one of the more generous ones... At least from Caspelios' point of view.

Reinhart's eyes narrowed as he looked at the watchman of the tower, who was as quiet as ever. "If you don't want me to call you doggy, tell me your name. You hate the name Caspelios, don't you? Not to mention, it's too long for me to say."

Caspelios twitched. Meanwhile, Balteer's eyes widened to the point that the veins in his eyes were visible.

"Pell..." Caspelios said in a small voice that sounded like iron-on-iron. "You can call me Pell."

"Hm, fine. Pell." Reinhart snapped his fingers. In an instant, the book he was holding slid back into its place on the shelf. He rose from his seat on the floor with his silver hair swaying as he moved. "Where are the taboo books?"

"They have been discarded."

"That's what the keeper of the tower would say. Be honest with me," Reinhart whispered sweetly. His crescent eyes met Caspelios'. In response, Caspelios said nothing. His lips were firmly sealed.

"If you don't answer, I will destroy everything in this tower bit by bit to find them," Reinhart said.

*Snap.*

As soon as he finished speaking, spears made of ice shrouded the entire expanse of the library. Yet the head magician's face was as affectionate as always. He reached out and patted Caspelios on the cheek.

"You're a good boy. Aren't you, Pell?"

Balteer's breath hitched as he watched Reinhart, who seemed determined to seduce the watchman into submission. Balteer had never imagined that someone could have a halo around their head, but he could clearly see one around Reinhart's.

"I can't allow that," Caspelios said.

"So, you're saying that they haven't been discarded." It was as expected. Reinhart smiled breezily and took a step toward the library's entrance.

*Crack.*

The spears of ice that had surrounded them shattered in midair, crumbling into tiny shards. Reinhart walked through the crystals as elegantly as ever. Caspelios was momentarily speechless as he watched the stardust fall from the skylight, twinkling against the night sky.

*"Pell! This is our new start!"*

*"We're leaving the top floor to you! Make sure you decorate it well since the room's going to belong to the head!"*

Caspelios slowly blinked as he recalled the voices of his friends, too faded to be called memories. He hurried after Reinhart. "Weren't you just asking a question?"

"I was sounding it out."

"Ancient magic is like Pandora's box. It's exactly what it sounds like—taboo. I cannot show it to you, my lord," Caspelios said in a rare, lengthy sentence. He strode forward quickly, blocking Reinhart's path.

The head magician paused and grinned darkly at the man standing in his way. "You don't have to show me. I'll find it."

“I can’t allow it. I’ll stop you.”

“How?”

Caspelios was silent for a moment. Reinhart lightly stepped around him and continued on. Caspelios hurried after him, and Balteer chased after the pair, observing their struggle.

*Is Caspelios truly the keeper of the tower?* One of the twelve original magicians, the ones who had built the tower? Balteer shook his head in disbelief. It was laughable how foolish he was.

“Black magic is too tempting to resist... It’s especially easy for those who can’t control their emotions or are filled with madness to be consumed by it. The inability to control black magic can send magicians out of control.”

“Are you saying I’ll be uncontrollable?”

“I can’t say that for certain, but the chances are over 50 percent. I’ll say it again, I won’t allow it.”

Reinhart gave an exaggerated sigh. He had no sense of crisis—everything felt like a joke to him.

Caspelios kept his mouth shut.

“You really can’t allow it, Pell?” Reinhart smiled as he took on a new approach. He took Caspelios’ hands and leaned in close to his face, their noses almost touching.

The watchman’s body shook as he reflexively took a step back.

“Hm?” Reinhart pressed. His beautiful eyes curved. He spoke with the intent of trying to win his opponent over.

Caspelios glared at him through narrowed eyes. This... "This is your way of survival."

Reinhart smiled with his eyes but did not answer. He took a small step back before sidling back up to Caspelios. He leaned down, kissed the back of his hand, and looked up at him. "You look as beautiful as ever, Pell."

Caspelios' shoulders stiffened. Balteer's eyes grew as wide as saucers. He then moved to stop the head from continuing, but Reinhart bent down further. He looked up at the watchdog.

"I'll be more careful from now on. I'm sorry for blocking your way," Caspelios said.

Reinhart casually got down on one knee. He was still smiling. However, Caspelios's face stiffened, and Balteer froze completely.

"Thank you for letting me take out the trash."

"My lord, stop..." Caspelios shook his head, beginning to lose his patience.

Reinhart, still bent on one knee, bowed even deeper. His red tongue darted out, licking his lower lip. Coming to his senses, Caspelios jerked his hand away and, at the same time, Balteer grabbed Reinhart by the scruff of his neck and dragged him back.

"Oh, dear. Why do you look so tired of me, Pell?" Reinhart continued, "You're curious, aren't you?"

He licked his lower lip, his pink tongue darting out again.

"I wasn't."

"Shall I rephrase?" Reinhart smiled as he tapped his chin with his finger. "You all made me this way," he said, his eyes lighting up with cruelty.

Caspelios' body stilled. His jaw dropped and he clenched his fists as he stammered wordlessly. Reinhart's eyes filled with disinterest and boredom as he watched the change come across the watchman's face. He turned toward the entrance again.

"Is that why you killed them all?"

Reinhart took a few more steps before he paused. He blinked very slowly.

"Nobody helped..."

Silence.

"Nobody treated that child like a human being." When he closed his eyes, all he could hear were the whimpers coming from the darkness. The cries had always stayed with him in his memories, and perhaps they would never fade. "I don't see the problem with slaughtering pigs."

"What are you going to do with black magic?"

"Mm... I'm going to find the culprit with my master."

Caspelios stood there for a long moment, rendered speechless.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 94

\* \* \*

“I knew it’d be here.”

“To think the tower had such a place...”

Reinhart slowly scanned the room.

Balteer’s jaw dropped, unable to contain his surprise. He had teleported here with Reinhart, and they were now standing in a room about half the size of the library they had just been in.

Old books were neatly stored as if preserved with magic. The tightly packed tomes were all written in the ancient language. There was a bed in the middle of the room with crumpled sheets, an indication that there was someone living there.

Caspelios trailed behind the two, his brows furrowed. “How did you find this place?”

Reinhart didn’t bat an eye at the scratchy, metallic voice. He never flinched. He never had. He made no judgments against Caspelios. The head of the Magicians’ Tower didn’t frown at him, even if he made him feel bad. He simply treated the watchman like a dog, even after hearing his explanations.

*What a strange person...* But what Balteer had just seen was shocking. He didn’t want to know how the head magician had survived up until now. It was disturbing seeing someone who looked like he could never bow down to another do so easily.

“I looked through the entire tower with magic and noticed an empty space with

no doors. It looked about the size of a library," Reinhart said as he looked over the bookshelves one by one.

The tower was an enormous place. How could Reinhart have enough magic to look through the entirety of it? Caspelios' breath caught in his throat. He was beginning to lose count of how many times he had gasped at the head's potential.

"There is a reason why black magic is taboo. It's magic that shouldn't be used," Caspelios said.

"Hmm. Why not?" Reinhart asked as he started flipping through the pages of a book.

Caspelios' brows remained furrowed, but he didn't stop the head of the Magicians' Tower. If anything, Reinhart's movements felt natural, as if he belonged here.

"Because of the price you have to pay."

"It's black magic, so... human lives?" Reinhart smiled.

Caspelios' face hardened. He nodded, his head stiff and lips hard pressed together. "Yes. It requires the caster's life, but in turn, the magic is very powerful."

"You must have used it?"

"I've... witnessed people ruining their lives by using black magic. It lures people in, people who are willing to give up every last drop of blood in their body for it."

Reinhart snapped the book shut and placed it back on the shelf. He pulled out the next book and slowly scanned it. Anyone could tell that Caspelios' words were going in one ear and out the other.

"If someone like you loses control, nobody will be able to stop you."

"Oh, I'm sure someone will. There's always a hero who shows up in times of crisis," Reinhart said lightly as he thumbed through the pages. His eyes moved quickly as he took it all in.

Black magic would certainly make him more powerful. *But meddling with black magic is...* His eyes narrowed. His opponent must have done their research. Ancient magic, not to mention the elusive black magic, would have been impossible to use if they hadn't studied it deeply.

"Please stop while you can."

"If it's minor magic, can I pay with blood?" Reinhart asked as he read the book. With one hand still holding the book, he brought his other hand down through the air. A cut formed on his white finger, spilling red droplets of blood. "After that..."

"My lord!" Caspelios raised his voice. He was furious, but Reinhart merely glanced at him.

*Reciting the ancient incantation...* This wasn't as easy as he thought it would be. In any case, ancient things were troublesome. While mulling over this, Reinhart opened his mouth.

"Spears of ice."

The reason why magical incantations were long was so the caster could focus on gathering scattered magic into one place. Fortunately, Reinhart was overflowing with magic, so he had no need to gather it. Thus, his incantation was short. Even then, it was more of a command rather than a spell.

*Whoosh.*

The ancient magic circle rose into the air, filling the space with ice spears. The

area became so densely packed with ice that it became impossible to move.

Caspelios was mesmerized by the sight. Reinhart lightly waved his finger in circles, the blood from his finger pooling into a sphere. Then, it disappeared as if sucked into the air. At that moment, the icicles flew into the walls of the library. Balteer and Caspelios' eyes widened in disbelief at what they were witnessing.

*Crack!*

*Boom!*

A loud explosion destroyed the floor of the tower. Reinhart, who didn't even budge from the resulting shockwave, blinked and looked down at his finger. It was still dripping with blood.

“Black magic, huh?”

Originally, he'd only planned on using half of his power. Somehow, magic four times as strong had shot out instead. If he hadn't held himself back, he could have destroyed the tower.

*There was probably a shield, too...* The floor was demolished. Reinhart shrugged and snapped his fingers. The icicles disappeared, and the ruined floor instantly reverted back to its original state.

“You...”

“I only used half of my power,” Reinhart said to Caspelios.

The watchdog's eyes widened. This was what the head was capable of with just half of his power? Nervously, Caspelios snatched the book out of the other magician's hands. “You really are dangerous.”

“Oh, I know. I'm good now. I don't need it anymore,” Reinhart said with his hands raised, a child-like smile gracing his face.

"What do you mean...?"

"I know the basic principles of black magic, and now I know how to make a magic circle. All I have to do is search through my brain to find the answers I need."

"You already understand how to use black magic? You only read two books!" Balteer said.

Reinhart tilted his head and smiled. What was there to understand? As long as one understood the fundamentals, practical application was very easy. "It's not hard. Once you understand the basics, the rest is just application."

Balteer's jaw dropped. He had been studying magic for close to a hundred years. Yet, now, he felt like he had been denied what he had worked so hard for.

"Ah, I miss my master," Reinhart said quietly, bowing his head. He smiled as he looked down at the red cut on his hand. "I wonder if she'll heal me if I tell her it hurts."

Balteer and Caspelios's eyes widened in alarm at the head's gentle smile. It wasn't a fake smile or one that was painted on, but a genuine smile.

"A magic circle that seals magic... It won't activate as long as I don't go in, right?"

"A magic circle that seals magic?" Caspelios repeated with a frown on his face. It was a look of incomprehension.

Reinhart watched Caspelios' confusion for a moment before continuing. "Yes. For example, can I use magic to get to the door of a magic seal and then walk in like normal?"

"You won't get caught. It's fine as long as you don't use magic while you're inside of the seal. Or..." Caspelios pulled out something from the dresser that was next to the bed that was sitting in the midst of all the shelves. He held out

the object in his scarred hand and said, “You can wear this and enter using magic.”

“A ring?”

It was a silver ring, the inside of which was covered with elaborate magic circles. However, the outside was clean and free of any inscriptions.

“This is a ring used to enter the dungeons. All of Tartarose has been engraved with powerful circles that seal magic. This ring has a circle on it that prevents the wearer from being affected by the seals.”

“Is this yours?” Reinhart asked as he picked up the ring and observed it.

Caspelios shook his head. “I have my own. This is for the head of the tower.”

“So where exactly are we?” Balteer blurted out the question he had been dying to ask.

Reinhart slid the ring on his left index finger, looked at Caspelios, and smiled. “We’re in an empty space between the seventy-fourth and the seventy-fifth floors. This is our doggy’s home.”

“Huh, I never heard of the watchdog having his own space...” Balteer replied.

“Are you going to see Miss Valeta?” Caspelios asked.

Reinhart smirked. He looked down at his hand, the fingers on his right hand splayed out. His finger had stopped bleeding, leaving behind a faint red cut. It looked normal now. Looking down at his hand, he took his left hand and drew a line on the palm of his right. A new red cut opened, following his finger.

“My lord! What are you doing?!” Balteer cried as he rushed over and grabbed the head’s wrist.

Reinhart glanced at him and shrugged. He looked down at his palm again. Blood started gushing from the diagonal cut, pooling in his hand. "She'll heal me if it's this bad."

"You..."

This was the first time they had seen someone so twisted. The heads of the tower tended to be irritable, arrogant, and selfish, but Reinhart was on another level. Both Caspelios and Balteer had never met a head magician who had such little regard for their own life.

"Well, I'm done here. I'll be on my way."

"Are you really leaving?"

At Balteer's question, Reinhart frowned in annoyance. He lightly tapped the floor once with the tip of his toe. A magic circle shone on the floor. "Oh, I'll come back later to return this, Pell."

"You don't have to return it. It belongs to you since you're the head of the Magicians' Tower."

Reinhart narrowed his eyes before he disappeared.

Caspelios placed the book back before he looked at Balteer. "You should go now too."

"Does he truly plan to abandon the tower?"

Caspelios didn't answer for a long while. Just as Balteer was about to vanish, Caspelios slowly spoke. "I don't think so."

"Are you sure...?"

"I think he will return for Miss Valeta's sake. There is no safer place for those

two other than this place."

With that, Caspelios shooed Balteer away from his room. He sat heavily on the bed and removed his thick robe, welcoming peace again.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 95

\* \* \*

“Hello, my master.”

“What...? How did you get in here?”

“The watchdog gave me something interesting.”

Reinhart picked up Valeta, who was still sitting at her desk despite it being the early hours of the morning and moved her to the bed. The pen she was holding in her hand clattered to the floor.

“You’re so unpredictable,” she said.

“I missed you.”

Valeta frowned and looked at Reinhart as he kneeled in front of her. She sighed as he rubbed his chin on her thigh, looking exhausted. “Did something happen?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m injured.”

Reinhart’s voice grew small as he looked up at her. He had no sense of urgency, no indication of pain, despite saying he was injured.

Valeta’s frown deepened. “Injured? Where?”

“My hand.”

The magician’s smile continued to show no signs of pain. Valeta looked at Reinhart suspiciously before shrugging.

“Let me see.”

"Here."

He held out his right hand, smiling. Her breath hitched when she saw the blood dripping from his hand. Was he crazy, coming to see her like this? She could see where the flesh was separated. The cut was deeper than she'd expected.

"Are you crazy??"

"About you? Yes, I am," Reinhart said in reply as he took her hand into his own and kissed it.

Feeling his lips on her skin, Valeta slipped her hand out of his grasp. "I can't use alchemy here."

She couldn't use alchemy in this room, and she didn't have the tools either. They said that they'd return her possessions to her the next day, but she still didn't have her bag or the snowta.

Reinhart snapped his fingers and a medicine box appeared in the air. "I have the tools."

"Wouldn't it have been faster to find a physician instead of getting that ring?" Valeta grumbled. Even so, she opened the box and rummaged around for the disinfectant.

Reinhart smiled, the corners of his mouth twitching. It was a beautiful, dazzling smile. Even now in this injured state, was he trying to seduce her? Whenever she saw him, she couldn't help but think about the version of him she had met in her dreams. The man whose eyes were more cold-hearted, more disinterested in the world. The man who would remain like that until the very end.

"It hurts..."

Upon hearing Reinhart's complaint, Valeta only briefly paused from applying the

disinfectant and wrapping the wound. He leaned his cheek against Valeta's thighs, looking like a child.

After she finished bandaging the wound, she put the materials away, closed the box, and pushed it to the side. Valeta reached out and stroked Reinhart's head. His shoulders jolted in surprise. Then, he closed his eyes and slowly melted into her lap.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I was kicked out, master," Reinhart replied, whining.

"You left on your own two feet." Despite her retort, she continued stroking the magician's silky hair. She wanted to ask how he took such good care of it.

"Valeta."

She paused, surprised by the sweet voice that echoed in her ears. "Yeah?"

Reinhart reached out and wrapped his arms around her waist. She stopped stroking his hair and looked down at him. She was the only image reflected in Reinhart's scarlet eyes.

"What?"

"Don't you want to leave this place with me? We can look for the culprit together," he said.

She shrugged in reply. His pleading voice was sweet to her ears.

*Pfft.* Valeta snorted lightly and nodded. "That was my plan, too, but I can't leave just yet. I still have to meet someone."

"Then when?"

"I'll be in the garden tomorrow."

"Understood." Reinhart kissed the back of her hand again before standing up. Blood seeped through the tightly wound bandage on his hand.

"Oh, can you give me a couple of mana stones?" she asked. "If you have any."

At Valeta's request, Reinhart placed a few high-quality mana stones into her hands without question. They were all about the size of her fist. They would fetch a high price if they were placed on the market.

"I just need two."

"Are you sure? I can give you as many as you want."

"It's fine. You can go now."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow," Reinhart said. However, he didn't move. He stood there for a long time, looking at Valeta's pale neck. Then he bent over and pressed his lips to the spot where Valeta's neck met her shoulder. "I'm going now."

Suddenly looking revitalized, Reinhart vanished, leaving behind a flabbergasted Valeta. "What's with him...?"

Heat rushed up her face, and Valeta patted her burning cheeks. All she could think about was how the Reinhart of her dreams and the Reinhart she knew now were the same person.

Sighing again, she stretched and rose from the bed.

"Gene, Nereid," she called out.

A tiny sigh of exasperation escaped from her as she watched two tiny tornadoes form. It was time to take care of things.

\* \* \*

Going to see Eliza again was easier the second time. With Gene and Nereid's help, Valeta stepped foot into the hidden room in the emperor's office once more.

Eliza turned, her shackles clinking together. Her eyes widened slightly, then curved into a smile as Valeta approached her. "You're back so soon?"

"I plan on leaving tomorrow. I'm here to deliver the news as promised."

"You have news?"

Valeta nodded, looking into Eliza's expectant eyes. She didn't have a lot of information. "Yes. Largris is currently the representative magician of the imperial castle. I wasn't able to meet him in person, but someone had seen him recently."

"So... He's safe. But the representative, you say?" Eliza frowned. That meant he was working for the emperor. Why was he working in the imperial castle? Why didn't he return to the Magicians' Tower?

"For now, I sent him a letter informing him about you. I don't know if he'll be able to crack the code, but if he does, he might be able to help you."

"Okay, he's safe... He's alive." Eliza slowly buried her face in her hands. She'd thought him dead. She hadn't even considered the fact that he was alive and had simply asked Valeta out of an abundance of hope. She exhaled heavily.

"Thank goodness... I was so worried. You see, Kynos said that Largris disappeared that day."

Valeta observed the woman closely. She was pale and, looking at her now, Valeta noticed that her breathing was unsteady. The injection marks on her skin indicated that she was receiving regular treatment, but that was about it. *She's in bad shape.* She should've known, even if Gene didn't tell her. She felt like an idiot for missing this.

Valeta clenched her fists, relaxed, and sighed. “Are you in a lot of pain?”

“I used to be, but it’s gotten better. I’m used to it now.”

That wasn’t good. Getting used to pain wasn’t a good thing. It meant that Eliza was losing feeling in her body. Valeta wondered what she could do, then gave up. She had no time or resources. She had to meet Miloyd in the morning, take the bead from him, and remove the choker now that Eliza had taught her how to undo it.

“Thank you for coming to tell me. Largris is alive, I see.”

“Not at all. I’ll come again when I have the chance.”

“Also, please don’t hate Miloyd too much.”

“I don’t hate him,” Valeta replied.

She just didn’t like him either. She bowed to Eliza, smiled faintly, and left.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 96

\* \* \*

"I was sure you'd turn down a meal with me again..."

"Well, I have to eat, unless I want to starve to death," Valeta said calmly as she cut her bread in half and dipped it in her soup. The buttery roll was quite savory and delicious, and the corn soup was excellent too.

"Valeta."

"Yes?"

"Are you sure you don't want to be my woman?"

"I'm sure."

Miloyd was silent for a long moment as if taken by surprise by Valeta's immediate response. She glanced at his neck. She couldn't see the bead itself as it was tucked inside his shirt, but she could see the chain that held it.

"Why not?"

"Do you want my love?" she asked.

He paused. "Am I not allowed to want that?"

"That's up to you, but you can't force me to love you."

Valeta rose from her seat, circled the table, and approached Miloyd. He turned to face her as she placed a hand on his shoulder. Leaning over, she placed her other hand on his chest and brought their bodies closer together.

"For me..."

She smiled as she drew her face even closer, her hand slipping into the slight gap in his collar. Miloyd stiffened. His breath hitched as he felt the hand inside his shirt.

"Even if I do this, I feel nothing for you," she stated, pulling away. As he clung to his chair, Valeta spun around and tucked the bead down her sleeve. She walked back to her seat and took a sip of water without showing any emotion. "That's why you should reconsider."

"Valeta..." Miloyd clenched his fists as he looked up.

Valeta, who was still standing next to her chair, set her glass down and sighed. "I know you'll make a great emperor one day. I don't know why you insist on bringing yourself down to my level, dirtying yourself. Set aside your prejudices and take a look around you. I can't promise much, but if you become a good emperor, I can at least promise that I'll be your friend."

The crown prince's eyes grew as wide as saucers, and Valeta met his shaky gaze before turning away. She walked to the door, holding her sleeve tightly.

"I hope you'll be a good emperor," she said quietly. *So, please, set me free.* If the crazy emperor continued his reign, she'd have to flee the empire... "From the bottom of my heart." And that would be really annoying.

Hence, her words were nothing but sincere. Plus, she felt sorry for Eliza. Turning her back on the speechless prince, she left the dining room.

Miloyd remained frozen in his chair long after her departure.

\* \* \*

Once outside, Valeta continued walking as she placed the duplicate necklace around her neck. She pretended to head back to her room before hiding behind a pillar. Dodging the guards, she managed to make her way to the gardens

where Reinhart was waiting for her, his robes fluttering in the breeze.

"Good morning, master."

"I'm tired. Let's go."

"Of course." Reinhart reached out and traced Valeta's choker with his thumb.

*Fwoosh.*

A blue flame consumed the choker and it immediately disintegrated into ash. Strangely enough, the flame wasn't hot to the touch.

"You can get rid of it?"

"I learned how to dispel magic seals yesterday," Reinhart replied, smiling, as he pulled Valeta into his robe. She frowned at having suddenly found herself trapped in Reinhart's embrace. He tightened his arms around her. "Ah, we can finally be together."

"I'm exhausted."

"Then go to sleep," he said in a low voice.

Valeta frowned and rubbed her throbbing temples. Exhaustion consumed her. On top of not getting enough sleep, she had overworked her brain the last few days. *I haven't been eating right, either.* Her anxiety about trying to escape the castle had definitely taken a toll on her body.

With an arm firmly around Valeta's waist, Reinhart summoned a magic circle under their feet. "Oh, we need to get your things. Just a moment, master."

"Okay."

The magician set Valeta down on top of the magic circle and vanished. A moment later, he returned, her bag in one hand and the snowta held by the

scruff of its neck in the other.

*Mew! Mew!*

The snowta jumped out of Reinhart's grip and burrowed into Valeta's arms. With an exhausted look on her face, she stroked the furball. Reinhart once again firmly wrapped an arm around her before activating the magic circle, all the while casting a disapproving glance at the snowta.

The magic circle shone under their feet, and the two figures disappeared in the blink of an eye.

\* \* \*

-Aspel, the second village in the east-

*Cough, cough.*

"Are you okay, Master Desilian?"

"Yeah..."

Desilian's light blue hair fluttered in the breeze. He was a pale young man with sunken eyes and was busy coughing into his hand. The woman waited on him as if she was used to it.

"I'm sorry, Jan," he said.

"Don't be. We should find an inn soon. I'll take a look around. You stay right here, okay?" The woman rubbed Desilian on his back as he continued to cough. Her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail that brushed her shoulders.

Desilian nodded slowly. "Got it," he managed to answer hoarsely.

Jan, looking worried, asked him several times if he would be okay alone before finally leaving. He watched her run off at full speed before coughing into his

hand again, his shoulders shaking violently.

*Ha... Hack...*

His lungs hurt so much that he felt like he was suffocating. Desilian clutched his chest, feeling like the air was leaking out of his lungs. He trembled as his face clouded over with fear.

“Are you okay, master?”

“Yeah, but the inn...”

“Are you sleepy?”

“My head hurts...”

Perhaps it was because she could finally let her guard down that Valeta was now feeling the stress of recent events overcome her physically.

Reinhart nodded at Valeta’s mumbles. He gathered her into his arms and looked around. “The inn must be that way.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because it looks pretty busy over there.”

Valeta nodded, dazed, and leaned her forehead against the magician’s shoulder. She blinked, catching the gaze of a man who was sitting by the fountain. A young man with sky-blue hair and deep blue eyes.

“Oh, hello...”

The young man greeted her with a smile as their eyes met, his eyes curving naturally. Valeta, who was still firmly in Reinhart’s arms, managed an awkward nod.

"Are you familiar with this place? Is that the way to the inn?" the young man asked.

Reinhart glanced at him before looking away. It was clear that he had no desire to talk to him, but the young man continued to smile, looking unbothered.

"My companion went looking for an inn too. If it's all right with you, would you like to wait together? We can head to the inn together once my companion confirms its location."

"Master, I didn't realize that bugs could speak," Reinhart said.

"Oh! I'm not a bug! I was happy to see other users of magic. Aren't you a magician too?"

"By 'too,' do you mean...?" Valeta asked with a strange look on her face.

Desilian beamed, his face blooming like a flower, happy that someone was talking to him. He quickly shook his head. "I'm not, but my father... I heard that my father was a..."

*Cough! Cough!*

Valeta slowly blinked as the man suddenly started coughing. Her head felt like it was spinning. She felt a strange sensation coming from him. She furrowed her brows, feeling the tingling sensation on her skin. It was the same feeling she had in the emperor's office.

*I must not be feeling well.* Valeta swallowed a sigh.

*Cough, cough!* "I'm sor—" *Cough!*

The young man's throat and lungs appeared to be in bad shape, judging by his pale complexion and dry coughs. *Why do I feel like so many people around me are sick these days?* Valeta sighed as she buried her face into Reinhart's robes. She

felt like her head was about to split open. All she wanted was to get some sleep after having spent so much of her time steeped in anxiety about getting her bead back.

At the mention of magicians, Reinhart's interest must've been piqued. "A magician? Is he at the tower?"

"No, my father..."

"Master Desilian!"

Reinhart narrowed his eyes as a voice cut off the young man before he could finish. He sighed in annoyance. Placing a hand on Valeta's back, Reinhart teleported them away before the woman running their way could reach them.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 97

In an instant, Valeta found herself in front of an inn. With fatigue written all over her face, she hit Reinhart lightly on the shoulder. Taking the hint, he set her down. She pulled out a few coins from her bag and staggered over to the counter. It was definitely smaller than the inn she stayed at in the capital.

“A room for two, please.”

“Just two adults?”

“Yes.”

“How long will your stay be?”

Valeta frowned, displeased with how the conversation was stretching on. Reinhart then approached the clerk with a smile. The clerk’s face immediately turned red.

“One week, please,” he said.

“Oh, uh... Yes, yes.”

“And a single bed will do.”

Heads turned at Reinhart’s sweet voice, which dripped with honey. Valeta began to wonder if her escape was all in vain. Then again, the village was a good distance away from the capital. She doubted any rumors would reach the imperial castle overnight.

*I’m so glad the Internet doesn’t exist here. Their every move would’ve been recorded and uploaded to social media. Although Reinhart acted like he was socially inept, he seemed perfectly normal at times like these.*

"Oh, uh... W-we also offer some... *amenities*. Would you be interested?"

"Amenities?"

"Yes."

Reinhart tilted his head suspiciously, then looked down at Valeta. It felt like a scene out of a movie, the way the three clerks behind the counter looked as if their souls had left their bodies.

"We'll take them," Reinhart said, his eyes smiling.

Valeta was fine not having to deal with the clerks herself, but why did it seem like the conversation was dragging on and on? Was it just her imagination?

"Once you're done using the amenities, please wrap it up in tissue or paper and dispose of it in the wastebasket."

What kind of amenities needed to be wrapped up and disposed of in the trash, Valeta wondered.

Smiling widely, Reinhart murmured, "I see."

Valeta's eyes widened in astonishment as it was beginning to dawn on her.

"Cleaning services will be provided upon request for an additional fee. If there are any traces of coupling, there will be an additional service charge for that as well..." the clerk continued.

"H-hang on. What did you just say?" Valeta coolly interrupted, the exhaustion evident in her eyes.

The clerk, who had been melting in front of Reinhart, turned back to Valeta, all businesslike. "What part do you mean?"

"The amenities you were talking about..."

"Oh, those are additional services we provide for adults staying at our establishment."

"Hmm..."

Reinhart looked at Valeta, the interest in his eyes clear for all to see. She turned her head and made eye contact with him. Just when she was about to open her mouth to say refuse, Reinhart beat her to it.

He wrapped one arm around Valeta's shoulder and pulled her into a hug. Then he smirked at the clerk. "Will you please arrange the amenities for us?"

"Oh! Oh! Y-yes, of course," the clerk babbled.

"You can keep the change as a tip. Buy yourself a nice meal. Let's get going, Valeta."

"You crazy—!"

Reinhart turned with a big smile, having received the keys and the so-called amenities from the clerk. Valeta dropped her head. Her sudden outcry on top of her exhaustion had given her a throbbing headache.

"Lean on me, master," Reinhart whispered into her ear.

Valeta, who had been clinging onto his shoulder, drowsily buried her face into his neck. "Don't bother... the snowta."

"I won't lay a hand on your precious items, master...."

He didn't like it, but what could he do? In the past, she'd cradled all those animals in her arms before having to send them off, and now she had another one again. He would protect it if he had to. He wouldn't take it away from her just like that slaughtered pig had done.

"You can go to sleep. I'll be right here with you."

"I hope I don't have any nightmares."

"You won't," he whispered.

Valeta dropped her head against him and fell asleep with a pained expression on her face. Reinhart entered their room, locked the door, and set Valeta down on the bed.

Meow? The snowta, sandwiched between Reinhart and Valeta, tilted its head up. The magician lifted the snowta up by the scruff of its neck, set it down on the floor, and moved to close the windows and curtains.

After casting a spell on the groaning Valeta to help her sleep soundly, the magician placed the room key and amenities on the table before taking off his robe. He then moved to carefully take off her robe, which looked heavy on her body.

After pulling the thick blanket over Valeta, Reinhart blew out the candle and settled in beside her. He took her into his arms and fell into a deep sleep. While the two were asleep, the snowta, who had been pacing back and forth, stood on its hind legs and tried to jump on the bed.

It dug its claws into the sheets and, after a long struggle, finally managed to climb onto the bed. The snowta turned around in a circle, avoiding the sleeping bodies, before settling down by Valeta's face. With a huff, it slowly closed its eyes. It was an early night for the occupants of the inn.

\* \* \*

A good night's sleep had cleared her head. Valeta could feel the difference from the moment she woke up given that she wasn't bathed in her usual cold sweat or suffering from a headache. Instead, she felt something heavy beside her head

and around her waist.

Valeta frowned as she opened her eyes and saw the ceiling. The snowta sat to the right of her head, playing with her hair, and one large crazy bastard was sleeping away on her left like a clingy dog. *What time is it?* The sunlight filtered through the curtains. It wasn't night at the very least. Valeta nudged Reinhart on the shoulder.

"Hey. Wake up."

He squirmed a bit before snuggling closer to her. Valeta felt like she was going to burn to death with the heat of the furball by her head and the exceptionally warm man attached to her side—to say nothing of the thick blanket covering them.

"Get off me. It's hot."

"Master, I'm cold..." Reinhart opened his eyes as he responded in a uselessly weak voice. His red eyes were still hooded with sleep.

Valeta pushed him away, and he obediently released his arm and let himself be pushed back. "Why are you always so out of it when we sleep together? You don't even need that much sleep."

"You're the same when you're sleeping in my arms."

Unable to counter this with a response, Valeta pressed her lips together as Reinhart smiled mischievously. She shot him another pointed look just as the snowta batted her hand with a loud meow.

"Ah, Snowta. Did you have a good night?"

*Meow! Meow, meow!*

Smiling, the girl scooped the creature into her arms as it chirped away.

Reinhart's eyes widened slightly as he watched, stretching out on the bed, chin in hand.

"How did you come by that?" he asked, pointing at the snowta.

"Dreux gave him to me. He told me to raise it."

"Really?"

Reinhart pouted as he watched the snowta showering Valeta with love, nuzzling and licking her neck. He lazily licked his lower lip and smiled. "Master, how about raising a dog instead of that thing?"

"A dog?" Valeta sat up in bed, an odd look on her face. She gave the snowta a couple of more pats before setting it down on the floor.

"Yes, an obedient dog that can protect you."

She gave him a dour look. It didn't take her long to put two and two together.  
"Are you still dreaming...? Get a grip and wake up already."

"Why not? A fine dog. Perhaps even a wolf, one so beautiful that even you'll fall in love with it."

"You're not my type," Valeta said with a weary look on her face. Reinhart's eyes widened in surprise. He looked to be in disbelief. Swallowing a sigh, she rose from the bed.

"Lies," he whispered. "You used to mutter how you shouldn't get seduced by my face. That's why you tried to get rid of me, isn't it?"

Valeta's face became as white as a sheet. She stiffly turned and saw Reinhart no longer lounging on the bed but sitting cross-legged with his hand on his chin.

"How did... you..." she stammered.

"I heard you talking to yourself sometimes. That's why I tried my best to protect my face. I guess you had no idea." Pushing himself off the bed, the magician reached out and pulled her toward him until they were almost nose-to-nose—right in front of her. "Do you think I'm pretty, master?"

Surprised at his question, she quickly stepped back from him. Reinhart's smile deepened, which only drove Valeta's desire to wipe the smile off his face. *This crazy bastard.*

"So... Where are we?" she said nonchalantly.

He narrowed his eyes, disappointed by Valeta's change of topic. He rested his hand back under his chin and answered in a disinterested voice. "The second village of the east, Aspel."

"Aspel? What are we doing here?"

Aspel was incredibly far from the capital. Plus, the town was larger than she'd imagined it to be. The village didn't seem to have any connection to the incidents, but...

Valeta tilted her head.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 98

"If you draw a circle, this village fits right in it," Reinhart said as he traced a circle in the air with his thumb. "They attacked villages in the north, south, and west. If they are going to attack another village, I suspect that it'd be in the east. And this is the only town in the east that meets all the conditions."

"So, by circle, you mean..."

"It's a giant, ancient magic circle. If you look down from above and picture the circle, all of the blighted villages fit right inside it."

Valeta nodded in understanding. So it could've been caused by either magic or alchemy. What kind of person would do such a terrible thing?

Reinhart continued. "Initially, I thought the magic circle that annihilated those villages was meant to kill, but I don't think that's the case."

"What do you mean?"

"The attack pattern is too irregular. Magic circles are supposed to be uniform, but this is too erratic. There was evidence of what killed the corpses, and many others were mangled beyond recognition. Besides, the numbers don't add up."

Reinhart narrowed his eyes. Strangely enough, the number of limbs didn't match the number of bodies in the village. Intact bodies were few and far between, but there were a large number of mutilated ones. It wasn't that animals had gotten to them. On the contrary, animals hadn't approached the dead at all.

"What do you mean the numbers don't add up?" she asked.

"A few of the heads and limbs were missing."

Valeta was floored. That meant that Reinhart had looked at the dead one by

one, matching limbs to bodies. Not that there was anything wrong with that. In fact, it was a step in the right direction.

"So it's another type of magic circle? What kind?" she asked.

"Indeed. What kind? Can it be called a magic circle? Inside the village, it was worse than I thought, with blood splattered everywhere..."

Reinhart dropped his head and leaned against the bed. If it truly was an attack, then blood was unavoidable.

"It's like a beast ate them," he said softly.

"A beast?"

"To put it more precisely, a beast that tried to eat them but tossed the bodies aside when it couldn't." The magician shrugged.

Valeta dropped her head, lost in thought. He grinned at her as he picked up the items he had placed on the table last night before unceremoniously dumping them on the bed.

"Master, how do you use these?" he asked innocently, a dazzling smile on his face.

Valeta, who was deep in thought, looked up slightly. She went pale when she saw Reinhart open a little wooden tube that was about half the size of his finger. There was clearly a sticky, pink, gel-like substance inside.

"Put that away," Valeta said, trembling.

Reinhart obediently tossed the item into the trash can and pushed the other amenities in front of her. "Wow! What's all this? I wonder what this stick is used for...?"

Valeta covered his mouth with her hand and tossed the rest of the amenities into the trash can. Reinhart smirked as he watched her face grow red. He placed his own hand on top of hers, which was still covering his mouth, and licked her palm.

Valeta attempted to stifle a scoff before sighing deeply. "Why do I have to deal with you?" she murmured as she ran her free hand down her face.

Reinhart lightly kissed the tips of her fingers and let her go. "Master, you seem to know what those are, though."

"Did you forget who my father was?"

"Ahh... Right..." His lips twitched. His red eyes flashed dangerously as he rested his hand on his chin. "I'd never forget. How could I?"

His voice was cold and hard. Valeta blinked slowly in response. They'd never had the chance to talk about what had happened after the incident. In fact, it was like they tried not to bring up the massacre of House Delight.

"Come to think of it..." she said. Reinhart slowly lifted his head at the sound of her subdued voice and smiled when their eyes met. "I never imagined that would happen to you. I thought he'd threaten or warn you a little, then let you off..."

His eyes widened in surprise for a moment before he lowered his gaze, eyelashes fluttering, as if a thought had occurred to him, and shrugged. "It's my own fault—I forgot my place. What kind of person would listen to a doll? They wouldn't be in their right mind."

"Your situation and my situation weren't any different. That's a fact."

Reinhart beamed at Valeta's response. They weren't any different. She'd suffered as much as he had. Valeta had looked up upon hearing Reinhart speak,

and their eyes met again. When he saw her violet eyes, he felt a deep desire to possess her bubbling up from the pit of his stomach. A burning desire to open his mouth and swallow her up. He couldn't help but be drawn to her crooked sense of righteousness and the way she met his gaze without hesitation.

"Is that why you're obsessed with me? Because I suffered in the same place as you? Is that why you won't let me go?" she asked.

At her line of questioning, Reinhart's lips curled into a meaningful smile. He didn't reply, even when Valeta turned away to avoid his gaze. A long time passed before he finally spoke, lightly chuckling.

"Valeta."

"What?"

The way her name fell from his lips sent shivers down her spine. Still, Valeta responded to his call. Reinhart reached out and pulled the girl into his lap.

"I decided to stay by your side. We'll be together forever." He went on, "You also know, right? Now that Count Delight is no more, all we have is each other."

Valeta frowned. The magician reached out with his long fingers to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"It's not me who didn't run away, but you, master. Keep that in mind," he whispered.

"Where could I have to run in that prison...?" Valeta asked, surprised. Reinhart burst into laughter. A weary look crossed her face as she heard his chuckles tickling her ear, and she pushed herself off of his lap. "Somewhere I can't see you?"

"I'd create a whole new world to live in instead."

"A new world..."

Valeta grabbed her bag that was sitting nearby and threw it at Reinhart before she disappeared into the bathroom. He rubbed his chin in frustration as he watched the girl disappear. Then, resting his chin against his hand, his eyes curved like crescent moons.

"When will you be honest with me?" he asked.

He knew that his master found him attractive. As he listened to the sound of water running, Reinhart picked up the snowta by the scruff of its neck and placed it on his stomach. He poked the little beast on the nose, and the snowta began to growl.

The creature hopped around the bed a few times before settling by Reinhart's head and promptly began chewing on his hair. The magician, who had been watching the snowta play, sunk back in the bed and closed his eyes. It felt like peace had returned.

\* \* \*

"Huh? Did you fall asleep?"

The refreshed Valeta smiled wryly as she saw Reinhart looking incredibly relaxed while the snowta played with and nibbled at his hair.

*I wondered if you ever slept when we were still at the manor.* He was always there to wake her up in the morning and stayed with her deep into the night. He probably had trouble sleeping, like her. That, or he couldn't get any sleep at all.

Valeta sat on the edge of the bed, watching the magician sleep. Those days had been hard on the both of them, and peace had been scarce. That was why she didn't want anyone interrupting her newfound freedom.

"If we..." she murmured. "If we had grown up in a different environment and met under different circumstances..."

If they had been born without these powers and had an ordinary upbringing... Would their lives be different then? Would she still have been scared of being in a relationship with him?

"That's impossible, Master."

At some point, Reinhart had opened his eyes and was staring directly at Valeta. Without getting up, he gently pulled her into his arms and tucked his chin on top of the girl's still-damp hair.

"If you and I had grown up with ordinary lives, that would have been it. Our paths never would have crossed," he said.

Valeta sighed as she heard his voice whispering in her ear. It was sweet and honest, yet cruel all the same. It was as if he wouldn't even let her entertain the thought of "what ifs."

"You're right," Valeta agreed.

He slowly blinked. For so long, Valeta had tried to put distance between them. When had they become this close?

"My master must be exhausted."

Count Delight wasn't the only thing that Reinhart had taken down that day. It was also a declaration that he'd bring down the sturdy walls that Valeta had built over the years.

"If you're tired of it all, you can stay in my room, close your eyes, and cover your ears. I'll take care of everything," Reinhart said as he stroked the back of Valeta's head. Her breath caught in her throat as he gently moved his fingers over her, as if to comfort her.

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## Chapter 99

She blinked slowly.

"Then when everything's over, you can go back outside."

"I can never tell what you're thinking," she said.

With a sigh, Valeta put a hand on Reinhart's shoulder and pushed herself off of him. Reinhart smiled and sat up, his red eyes curving gently.

"You always hide your true colors under that smile," Valeta said as she pulled on her robe. She glanced back at the magician and found that he was watching her with an odd look on his face. "I can't trust you."

Reinhart's smile deepened as he rested his hand on his chin. He didn't reply.

Rising from the bed, he strode toward the girl, his smile unchanging.

"It's crooked, Master," he said, rearranging her robes. Then, he smoothly led her to a seat, went into the bathroom, and brought out a towel. "And your hair's still wet."

He began to gently dry her hair with the towel. His hands were very careful and, though awkward at first, he got the hang of it with time.

Valeta's brow furrowed. "I thought you'd use magic to dry it."

"I like this better."

"What a strange guy... Seriously."

After he finished drying her hair, Reinhart procured a brush and started combing through her hair. Familiar with this routine, Valeta let him take care of her hair.

"Master, I feel like you're good at everything, but when it comes to this, it shows that you're a count's daughter."

"If you're making fun of me, then go away. I'll do it."

"I'm not making fun of you. It's a compliment."

"Think about what you just said. Which part of that is supposed to be a compliment?" Valeta growled as he chuckled. The only thing he was good at was laughing. She rarely laughed, and if she did, she felt like the corners of her mouth would rip open from the effort.

"All of it," he said softly.

She tilted her head back, only to be met with the man's annoying smile, then got up from where she was sitting. Still smiling, Reinhart brushed off her robe, gave her another once-over, and took a step back.

"Doesn't your face hurt from smiling that much?" she asked him.

"No. This is the best use for my face."

"Must be nice. And why would you ever need to use it?"

"To seduce you, Master?" Reinhart leaned close into her face. Valeta's breath hitched in her throat. She gulped and pushed him by the shoulders. He acquiesced and snapped his fingers, getting dressed in an instant.

"Shall we?"

"You're going too?" Valeta asked, a sour look on her face. Reinhart, bending his head to the side, seemed to be in disbelief that she would even ask. The snowta leaped onto Valeta's shoulders and dangled from her robes.

"I'm going to eat," she said.

"Then we shall eat together. I believe I saw a restaurant downstairs," he replied with an impassive nod. He seemed entirely unbothered by the fact that it could very well be crowded.

"Come to think of it, I need to feed the snowta. I need to buy feed for it, but I don't know what kind it needs." She felt a little foolish for agreeing to take care of the animal. But it was so cute... More importantly, she had no intention of leaving this clingy little animal behind.

*Maybe I was too harsh on Terion...* She felt like she'd been a little harsh to the snowta too. She could have been better with her words. *In the end, he left for Dreux's house without a word.* It didn't bother her that he'd gone without saying goodbye. After all, she already knew everything that would happen to Terion in his future as the hero of the story. She just wondered if he was doing all right. She hadn't even him much thought after his departure, so why was she worrying about it now?

"Snowtas are omnivorous. You could feed it raw meat, and it'd be fine. It'd probably prefer it over animal feed."

"Really...?"

"Yes. You know, I'm an omnivore too, Master."

Valeta glanced at Reinhart before she marched out of the room. He collected the key, locked the door, and followed after her silently.

\* \* \*

Valeta could see a line forming amongst the throng of people. She opened and closed her mouth as she looked around just as Reinhart was also slowly surveying the room.

"Should... I kill them all?"

"Are you out of your mind?" she snapped.

"What about chasing them all out? Or casting sleep on them?"

Reinhart may have thought it a perfectly good idea, but if he put them all to sleep, then who would take their orders? How would they deal with the aftermath? Although the smell of food was tempting, it wasn't worth waiting in line for.

"Forget it. Let's just buy some apples and eat that."

"Hmm..." Reinhart, glancing around the dining room with a disgruntled look, trailed after her.

"Hey... Mr. Magician?" someone called out.

Valeta stopped walking at the sound of the familiar voice, yet she couldn't place it. Though the voice calling out to them wasn't particularly loud, she couldn't just ignore the fact that someone here seemed to know who Reinhart was.

"We met at the fountain yesterday. Do you remember?"

"Ah..."

It was the man from yesterday. Valeta nodded. The man's deep blue eyes lit up, delighted that Valeta had recognized him. With his wavy, sky-blue hair, in a friendly gesture, he took two steps closer to them.

"Here for a meal?" he asked.

"Yes. But the line's so long that we're going to go somewhere else."

"Oh! You see, we made a reservation last night. Would you like to join us?"

The young man's voice was low and soft, but very clear. It wasn't as raspy as it had been yesterday. He was still pale, but his complexion looked much

improved. *He seems like a completely different person.* Yet he was still as cheerful as ever.

Just as Valeta was about to shake her head, Reinhart came up from behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Could we trouble you? My Valeta hasn't eaten yet, you see."

"You...!"

Reinhart patted Valeta on the shoulder, trying to calm her down.

The young man smiled. "Of course! My companion is already inside, waiting for me. Oh, the name's Desilian, by the way. And you are?"

His sparkling blue eyes were almost overwhelming. Valeta's face darkened as she looked into his eyes, which shined like precious gems. She reluctantly opened her mouth, pressured by Desilian's expectant look.

"Valeta..."

"And you may call me Rein," the head of the Magicians' Tower added. "I'm Miss Valeta's attendant."

"Wow. You seem close despite being her attendant."

"It's because we grew up together."

Desilian's eyes sparkled with envy as he gestured for them to follow him. They confirmed that he indeed had a reservation when they saw him talking with the hostess and were, just a moment later, being led to their seats.

"I see. Actually, my companion is my attendant too. I suggested that we should be friends, but she said that's impossible, even in death."

As Desilian chattered on, Valeta noticed how unbothered she was by his talk.

She was actually surprised by how easy it was to listen to him. *He's just like Eliza.* It had been so long since she hadn't immediately been annoyed by someone else's chattering.

"Master Desilian! Where on earth have you been?" a woman sitting impatiently at the table shouted. Worry filled her dark brown eyes. Her long ponytail swung behind her every time she moved.

"I was on my way back from the bathroom when I ran into the people I met yesterday," Desilian said.

"The people you met yesterday? You mean... the magician?"

"Yes. Rein's the magician. And this is Valeta. Rein is Valeta's attendant."

"A magician who's also an attendant?" the woman repeated, her voice doubtful. She looked at Reinhart and Valeta.

The magician smiled as he met her gaze.

"Ah. Rein, Valeta, please meet Jan."

"Jan?"

"Oh, it's my nickname for her. Her real name's Janice," Desilian said with a smile.

Valeta nodded at the young man's explanation. She then greeted Janice with an identical nod.

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## Chapter 100

Desilian suddenly jumped, urging the two to sit.

"I didn't realize you had to make a reservation for this place," Reinhart said as he pulled out a chair for Valeta, who looked at him with curious eyes and shrugged. *He seems more sociable than me sometimes.*

The server set down two menus for their table, telling them to wave her over when they made their decision, and walked away.

"I heard they have a special here that they only offer during lunch. It must be quite delicious. And they don't normally take reservations, but they do offer seats for those who stay at the inn."

"Hmm..."

Reinhart skimmed the menu as he listened to Desilian. The lunch menu on the first page must've been the special the young man was talking about. He glanced through the descriptions before flicking to the next page, looking unimpressed. He considered a few dishes before glancing at Valeta, who sat beside him. Her brows were furrowed ever so slightly as she read through the menu.

"Should we get the home-cooked set, Mas— I mean, Miss Valeta?"

"Huh? Why? But their lunch menu is supposedly the best." Valeta turned to Reinhart in surprise. She was sure he was going to say, "Shall we have the special too?"

He surprised her by saying, "You hate fried fish."

"How do you know that?"

"There's nothing I don't know about you, Miss Valeta," Reinhart replied. Smiling, he snapped the menu shut. Valeta folded her own menu and handed it to him and, taking it in stride, the magician smirked.

"You two seem quite close."

"Is that so?" Valeta asked nonchalantly, looking away. The restaurant wasn't as noisy as she thought it'd be, given the line outside. However, it wasn't so quiet that she couldn't hear other people's conversations either.

Desilian smiled. "Jan, I'm going to have the lunch special. What about you?"

"I'll have the same."

Janice narrowed her eyes and flagged down the waitress. As soon as Reinhart finished ordering, Valeta could feel the prickle of other people's gazes.

"Wow, everyone's looking over. Must be because Rein's so beautiful," Desilian said.

Janice and Valeta were both speechless. Reinhart was certainly captivating and beautiful, but Desilian was also a handsome man himself. He had clear, pale skin and deep blue eyes. Every one of his features was striking, from his eyes, nose, lips, and even his charming voice. And then there was his smooth, sky-blue hair. It looked soft and silky, swishing around as he spoke animatedly.

*What is this, a shampoo commercial?* Valeta rested her chin on her hand as she turned. Men seemed to be more beautiful than women in this world. That even went for Silon, Kurt, Dreux, and Carlon. They were all above average. *Even the emperor...* He definitely did not look his age. Given another ten years, even Terion would grow up to be a real heartbreaker. And what could she say about Miloyd's appearance? With those genes, how could he not be beautiful? Now that she thought about it, Eliza was no average woman either.

*This is definitely a novel.* These people weren't human—they were fictional characters. Everyone she met looked inhumanly beautiful.

"So what brings a magician to this place?"

"Jan!"

She shrugged. "It's just a simple question. I heard that magicians rarely leave the Magicians' Tower."

Valeta didn't bother answering. The question wasn't directed to her, anyway. She figured that Reinhart could handle it on his own.

"Miss Valeta wanted to travel," he said. "It'd been a while, you see."

"Oh... I see. But I think the sooner you leave, the better. There's been some nasty rumors circulating around this place," Janice said.

"Nasty rumors?" Valeta, who had been sitting silently, repeated curiously.

This time, Desilian chimed in. He leaned in, his eyes growing wide. "Haven't you heard? Apparently, entire villages have been destroyed." He looked around before he leaned in closer, his voice lowered a notch. "And then the dead there have been coming back to life, fighting each other and dying again the following morning!"

"Destroyed?" Valeta asked, feigning innocence.

Desilian nodded.

"Then what brings you two here?" she asked.

"Oh, we were actually given orders from someone to capture a criminal here. We've been traveling all over the country. We received information that this is the next spot where they'll appear."

Valeta's eyes widened slightly. A smile broke out on Reinhart's lips as he watched her narrow her eyes and drop her head. He gazed lovingly at her.

"Who gave you that information...?"

Desilian shrugged. "That's what my father said. He's a magician, so he can see the future, kind of. I've never met him, though..."

"Master Desilian," Janice called out in warning. The young man's azure eyes widened before he gave her a mild nod.

He turned back to the two with a small, awkward smile. "I'm sorry. It's a secret mission. Though, I haven't been successful yet."

"Interesting," Reinhart said. He leaned back against his chair, his lips molded into a smile. It looked like a sweet, pleasant smile, but there was definitely something unsettling about it. "I'm curious, does that magician reside in the tower?"

"No, my father is a magician for the imperial castle. He's been dispatched from the tower."

"Hmm..."

Reinhart narrowed his eyes and glanced at his side. *I wonder what Master is thinking so hard about?* Although she tried so hard not to care about or get attached to people, she always ended up getting involved at the most critical moments.

She acted like it was inevitable that their deaths would take place before her very own eyes and thought that stepping on people to survive was something that couldn't be helped, but she could never completely shake off her concern for them. Even though she had built a wall in front of her, she hadn't exactly stopped others from trying to tear them down. And she hadn't rebuilt those

walls either.

Reinhart's gaze moved down to the wiggling lump in her robes. She said that she'd never take care of an animal again, yet here she was, sitting with a fidgeting furball in her lap, unable to let go of it. She'd even taken the child she believed would die at Reinhart's hands from the nursery and moved him to a safe location.

*Magic that can see the future?* It was a shame, but he couldn't find any recollection of that kind of magic from his memories. Only those who transcended could see a beat into the future, only those who had broken past the threshold. Transcendents who had awakened held the power of a God in their bodies. *But a mere dispatched magician...?*

Impossible.

Either the man was the criminal or knew who the criminal was. It was one or the other. Delighted, Reinhart hid his smile behind his hand. He knew that the criminal was somehow affiliated with the imperial castle, but he couldn't have imagined finding out this way.

"Have you gone to the other villages?" he asked.

"Yes, but every time we went, both Jan and I both nearly passed out. And when we came back to our senses, we..." Desilian dropped his head, his face racked with guilt.

Despite seeing this, Valeta said nothing. It was bizarre to see her not offer any consolation.

"Really? Do you remember what it was like, though?"

"Yes. Kind of. There were just... severed limbs all around, houses destroyed, and traces of an attack."

"Traces of an attack?" Reinhart asked, his face lighting up with curiosity.

Janice looked rather upset, but Desilian, oblivious to his companion's expression, continued, "Yes. There were no survivors. That head of the Magicians' Tower is so cruel..."

"Right? Very cruel. Do you know what they look like?"

Janice suddenly stood up, unable to take it any longer. She gave Reinhart an icy glare. "You! Why is a mere attendant like you asking him these questions? Do you have any idea who he is?"

"Aren't you just an attendant too?" Reinhart's eyes curved, but Janice didn't even bat an eye upon seeing his smiling face.

Alarmed, Desilian looked up at Janice. "Jan... Don't.

"Well, it seems like you don't know who you're talking to either. Who do you think you are to raise your voice in front of my master?" Reinhart said.

His smile deepened. Valeta blinked at the absurd tone of his voice and looked up. *Who am I?* Anyone could tell that she was a vagrant with no status, money, or place of her own. Yet Reinhart looked proud, totally shameless.

Jan scoffed. "Ha! Master Desilian is a wonderful man, perfect in every way!"

"There's no one more noble than my Valeta."

*What the hell are they doing?*

Desilian's neck began to grow red. Valeta watched as the young man began to sink into his seat, melting like a snowman, and turned to Reinhart with a bewildered look on her face.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 101

*Bang!*

They had already been drawing attention to themselves as Janice started quivering and raising her voice. Now, she was basically announcing her presence to everyone in the room.

"Master Desilian is a lovely man!" she said. "It's impossible to ignore his presence!"

"He looks like the weakest of the weak. My master can melt off the faces of those who've done her injustice."

Reinhart's cheeky voice started getting on Janice's nerves. Unlike her, who was raging in anger, the man seemed completely relaxed.

"Jan, please..." Desilian said.

"Silence, you," Valeta said.

At their brief urging, the two attendants immediately quieted down, as if their lips had been sealed shut. Janice sighed and sat down. Valeta, silently picking up her fork, began to poke at the food that was waiting for them on the table.

Reinhart glanced at Valeta, noting her silence. "Master, are you mad at me?"

"No," she replied, her tone emotionless, and started to eat.

The meal was a silent affair. Valeta put down her fork halfway through her dish, unable to finish her food. The food simply wasn't to her taste and, besides, she'd gotten used to having a small appetite. It hadn't been intentional on her part, but old habits were hard to break.

"So, how long do you two plan on staying?" Desilian asked.

"For about a week," Valeta replied, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

Although Janice clearly disapproved of the way Desilian kept trying to strike up a conversation, she didn't try to stop him.

He nodded slowly. "I see, but it might get dangerous here, so you should try and leave as soon as possible."

"We will. By the way, do you happen to know what day it is?"

"It's the twelfth."

Valeta went quiet. She responded with a nod and moved to rise from her seat. Reinhart placed a hand on her shoulder, stopping her from getting up, before standing up and pulling out her chair for her.

"Thank you. We'll be heading off first. Oh, and before I forget, how long will you two be staying?" she asked.

"We'll be here for another four days. We also have other villages to visit."

"Then you'll be leaving before us," Valeta said with a nod and a faint smile. Reinhart easily picked up on her unease as his eyes scanned her from left to right.

"I see. It's a shame we won't have much time together," Desilian replied.

"Yes..." she said with another faint smile and nod. With a slight bow, she bid farewell to the seated pair and turned. Leaving enough money on the table to cover the cost of their meal, the magician followed closely after her.

"You don't look very happy, Master. Why?"

"Sometimes, I come across these truths... and I wish they weren't true."

"Truths?"

"I wish I could've just remained ignorant until the very end."

She wrapped her arms tightly around the creature she'd kept close to her body—the sleeping snowta, which clung to her robes with its claws. Stopping by the butcher shop, Valeta bought raw meat and a hunting knife, then walked over to a lone tree. After she ripped open the packaging and laid the meat down on top of it, the snowta moved to pounce on it with eyes gleaming.

Reinhart caught the snowta by the scruff of its neck mid-leap.

Grrr! Meow! Mew! Grr!

"Wait."

Reinhart looked straight into its eyes, his own red eyes glowing, and the snowta obeyed. With a surprised *mew*, it started whimpering. Crying a few more times, the creature stuck out its tongue and dropped its head.

Valeta glanced at the snowta as she cut the meat into small pieces. "Stop teasing it."

"I'm training it. A beast that bites its master is useless."

"It was trying to bite the meat, not me."

"A beast that doesn't understand the situation is even more useless."

Once Valeta finished cutting the meat, Reinhart tossed the snowta back down to the ground. It flipped midair before landing on all fours like a cat.

"I suppose it's not entirely stupid," he muttered.

Mew!

Valeta crouched in the shade of the tree, wondering what the snowta was chirping so happily about. With a snap, Reinhart procured a handkerchief and began to wipe each of the girl's meat-stained fingers carefully.

"So, what do you think?" he asked.

"I think he might be the culprit."

"You mean that guy who has nothing in his brain?" Reinhart asked as he started wiping her other hand. She didn't understand why he liked doing things the hard way when he could've just used magic.

"That's what you were thinking even though you had that wide grin on your face, huh?" she asked.

"I have no reason to be honest in front of others. However, I'm always honest with you, Master."

"Enough of your nonsense."

"You're too much. It's true, Master."

Valeta couldn't take him seriously with that smile on his face.

When she didn't say anything, Reinhart pressed the subject. "Master, I'd be very impressed if all of that was just an act. But his behavior and way of speaking appeared to be genuine."

"My guess is that there's a chance that he himself isn't aware of it," she said.

Reinhart nodded in agreement.

Valeta tilted her head as she watched the snowta furiously chewing away. "You said you felt... What, an ancient magic circle?"

"Yes. One made from black magic, to be exact."

"While I was at the imperial castle, I learned about and sensed... ancient alchemy." Valeta blinked slowly. "And I felt that energy from him. It's the same energy I felt in my room at the imperial castle and the emperor's office." She hadn't noticed upon first meeting him because she was sick, but it was clear now that she'd had the chance to properly observe him.

"You're saying that pasty weakling is an alchemist?" Reinhart replied.

"I don't think so, but..." Valeta tilted her head. She could sense it directly from Desilian's body. Rather than saying he had traces of alchemy, it was as if his whole existence was an alchemy symbol. "You know, from what I read on ancient alchemy, it's said that the effects are strongest on the night of a full moon. After that, it's strongest at the end of the month."

Valeta scooped the snowta, which was lying on its back with its belly round from being stuffed with meat, into her arms. She folded up the packaging paper, threw it into a trash can, and started walking. She smiled, noticing that the snowta was slightly heavier than before.

Reinhart's eyes widened as he walked next to her. He looked down at the well-fed creature, snoring away in Valeta's arms, before he slowly looked away.

"Do you remember which days the villages were attacked? I don't think I have that information," she said.

"Talrose, the southwest village, was attacked on the fifteenth. Kertonan, the fourth village of the north, was attacked on the fourteenth. The attack on Mysia, the northeast village, was the day before that. And Cicharin, another village in the northeast, was attacked on the last day of the month," Reinhart said, rattling off the information.

Valeta was speechless as she listened to him recite the details without breaking a sweat. She couldn't help but be amazed at how inhuman this man could be sometimes.

"And it'll be a full moon a few days from now," she whispered.

"Do you suspect something, Master?"

"I've read about an ancient alchemist named Bertas. He conducted some dangerous research, particularly ones that involve human experiments."

Reinhart nodded.

"Very interesting," he said. "I'd love to see it myself one day."

His eyes gleamed with interest. Valeta wondered where he would even see something like that. However, his enthusiasm made her feel unsettled.

"I'm scared to find out what you'll do with it..." she said.

"I don't know what you take me for."

She sighed. "Anyway, I found some interesting data in his research. He's turned people into chimeras while they were still alive."

"Chimeras?"

Reinhart's eyes widened at the unexpected word, not bothering to hide his surprise. Creating chimeras was one of the taboo practices of the Magicians' Tower. Human experimentation itself was forbidden, but creating new life forms with magic was completely banned by the twelve Magicians of the Beginning. It had never occurred to him that something similar could be achieved with alchemy.

Valeta nodded in confirmation. "They're monsters that were forcibly created, you could say. Or maybe even mutants? Chimeras aren't naturally occurring mutations, but are rather created through external forces or experiments."

"Forcibly created monsters..." He paused. "Very interesting. Not bad."

The magician nodded, lazily blinking his impassive eyes a couple of times as a smile tugged at the corners of his lips. At the word “chimera,” he had a good guess as to what it was that Valeta was implying. *She’s saying the man’s a chimera?*

Even with all of his stored knowledge, he’d never heard of a chimera that had an ego. In order to create a chimera, one needed to have an assortment of living organisms and genetic samples ready to destroy and combine into a new creature.

When Reinhart looked up, he could see that Valeta’s lips were moving again. He pulled himself out of his own thoughts and directed his attention toward her.

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### Chapter 102

"For example, imagine if I took roses, carnivorous plants, dragonflies, and sunflowers, disassembled them, and rebuilt them using a symbol."

"Would it also be considered alive?"

Valeta merely shrugged at Reinhart's sharp inquiry. "It depends. According to my research, it's alive, so I guess we'll have to consider it as such too."

"I was asking if it could be *alive* enough to cause problems, Master."

Valeta thought for a moment before she shook her head. "I doubt they're sentient beings capable of rational thought... but I think they were breathing for sure."

"It's possible to instill breath using magic."

"Really?"

"Of course," Reinhart said. "Magic like that exists, even though it's considered taboo."

Valeta sat down at the same fountain they were at the other day and set the snowta on the ground.

"Go run around," she said, shooing the animal away with a wave of her hand. She kept her eyes fixed on the snowta as it flounced away before she went on with her story. "Anyway, once finished, you'd end up with a carnivorous plant that has wings like a dragonfly, thorns all over its body, and the ability to photosynthesize under the face of the sun."

"That's fascinating, but still a plant, master," Reinhart said coolly. He wasn't trying to cut her off, instead, he wanted her to elaborate.

Valeta had always been an inquisitive person and sought warmth from beasts rather than people. And what she couldn't get from animals, she fulfilled by pouring over books instead. From time to time, Reinhart would read by her side. They had shared many books together that way.

"I know, but these things can grow."

"Chimeras can grow?" Reinhart's red eyes glittered with excitement.

"That's what was written in the paper," she replied. "The man was deranged, but his thesis is one of the most logical, well-written papers I've ever read."

It was a little surprising. Valeta thought she'd be uneasy reading a work by someone she believed was a cruel lunatic, drunk on his own power. Bertas' methods were inhumane, but they all stood to reason.

She continued. "It's like a child growing up and maturing as they learn... The carnivorous plant, which only knew how to eat flies, slowly developed as it learned the taste of dragonflies and, eventually, animals."

"What did you say he experimented with?" Reinhart asked as he took a seat beside her.

She tilted her head to the side as she listened to the sound of trickling water. The snowta had bounced off into the distance and was making its way back, skirting between people's legs.

"One of his successful experiments was a cat and a dog. And another was a mix between a frog, a rat, and a cricket. The third was the experiment I mentioned earlier," Valeta said as she petted the snowta on the head. It felt strange that she was here, seeing the snowta pant with its tongue lolling out of its mouth. In the end, she lifted it into her lap. "But it seems like it's impossible for two completely different beings to co-exist. For example... deep-sea fish and lions, or birds and horses."

“Birds and horses... That sounds like Pegasus, doesn’t it?”

Valeta couldn’t shake the feeling of how unusual it was to be having this conversation with the sun shining down on their backs. Reinhart didn’t look at all threatening and was looking at her with gentle eyes. She often thought about what had changed in their relationship after leaving behind the delicate balance they had shared during their time at Delight Manor.

“Let’s say you’re right. It should be impossible to bring back something that has already been destroyed. If that’s truly what’s behind all of this, then how did it come back to life?” Reinhart questioned.

“Mm, that I don’t know. That’s why I want to try... making a chimera.”

“Master... I can’t recommend that. It’s dangerous.”

Valeta stretched lightly and stood up. If she were afraid of a little danger, she never would’ve left the sky room in the first place. “I want to live in peace, so I’m going to get rid of anything that stands in the way of that.”

Irritation colored Valeta’s violet eyes. She wouldn’t have been caught up in all this if it hadn’t been for the emperor. The thought was gut-wrenching.

Seeing the determination in her eyes, Reinhart kneeled and kissed the back of her hand. “If that is what you wish...”

His curved eyes looked like they would be full of emotion, but they weren’t. They seem kind, yet cruel. His feelings were both easy to read and indecipherable.

“You can do anything,” he said. “Just do whatever you want. You don’t have to look back.”

If Valeta wanted to venture forth, then Reinhart had every intention of being the knight who would protect her until the very end.

Not that he thought of her as weak. Not that she even needed it.

It was simply that he had made up his mind to protect her. Even if there were setbacks, she would manage on her own. And sometimes, in the deep recesses of his heart, he wanted to ruin that... Just a little.

"I was planning on doing that anyway. I already barely escaped once, and I don't want to get pulled around again," Valeta said, emotionless.

Watching her shrug, Reinhart burst into laughter. "Of course."

She gave him a quick glance and sighed as she started walking. He quietly trailed after her as she headed for the market.

\* \* \*

"What the hell have you done, Miloyd?!"

"I'm sorry, Father. I-I... I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Do you have any idea what you've done?!"

*Crash.*

A teacup flew past Miloyd's head and shattered into pieces when it hit the wall behind him. He held his breath for a long moment, as if at a loss for words.

"But Father..."

"This is why you can't defeat that head of the Magicians' Tower! If you want her, then control her! Lock her up so she can't get away! You can't get anything without obsession!"

Miloyd couldn't say a word in the face of the emperor's wrath. He had never seen his father this angry before. Seeing the rage drip from his father's eyes, Miloyd found that there was nothing he could say. "I respect Valeta. I don't want

to force her to..."

"Then give up. You'll never be able to have her anyway. I'm removing you from this case. You're to remain in the castle for the time being."

"How come, Father?" Miloyd suddenly raised his voice at his father's frosty declaration.

The emperor's painfully cold gaze was fixed on his son. He brought his fist down on the table with a bang. "You don't know what kind of power that girl has, and you let her get away!"

"I know that we need her powers to save the people suffering from the roste—"

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to catch something that has already escaped once! Especially something as smart as her?"

The crown prince was stunned. He wasn't used to the way his father seemed to be talking about a person as if they were an inanimate object that had no soul of its own. His breath hitched as his father clicked his tongue and slowly sank into his chair.

"We need that child to settle the issue with the roste once and for all."

"I'll do whatever I can to resolve it," Miloyd said after a beat of silence, his eyes full of determination.

The emperor sighed and shook his head. "You know nothing about alchemy, so there's nothing you can do to help. Just do as I say. Stay in the castle and resume your imperial studies."

"Father...!"

"You won't be able to learn anything with that dull head of yours. You've known that girl for so long, and you still don't have even a piece of her heart."

At the emperor's frosty response, Miloyd went stiff. Valeta had said the same thing. The comment pierced his heart, just like her offer to be his friend if he were a good emperor had.

"I don't care if you two remain good friends. Anyway, I'm not going to change my mind. Take the prince to the castle!"

"Is my sincere love for her not enough, Father...?"

"Has that gotten you anywhere? Have you won even a small part of her heart? If you can't have her, stop trying to win her over. Why not make it so that she'll never forget you instead?"

The emperor dismissed the prince, who had lowered his head, with a wave of his hand. The knights approached Miloyd and gently escorted him out of the office.

At the gentle gesture of the emperor's right hand, Guilian, who had been waiting behind the emperor, approached and knelt at his feet. The alchemist lowered his gaze, and the emperor slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"If it won't cooperate, then there's nothing we can do. We'll have to use *that*. It'll be unfortunate for Miloyd, but it's the only way we can keep it intact. You bring it back this time, Guilian."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Take Largris with you and chase after it. I'll let him know." The emperor reached out and slowly brushed a thumb across the alchemist's eyepatch. "Unless you want to lose another eye, you must succeed."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Go fetch Largris."

"I shall."

The emperor dismissed Guilian as he leaned back in his chair.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 103

After Guilian left, the emperor slowly rapped his fingers on his chin, closed his eyes, and waited. It wasn't long before he felt a presence in the room. Feeling pleased, he spoke with his eyes still closed.

"I thought all magic was sealed off within the bounds of the castle."

"I didn't realize that applied to me as well," another man said.

The emperor slowly opened his eyes as the carefree voice replied back. He straightened up, smiling. The guest went to sit on the sofa despite not having received permission to do so.

"What do you want? I don't really want to talk."

"You'd really say that to your one and only friend, Larg?" the emperor said.

"I'm not your friend. That Larg is long dead. Ever since you..." Largris slowly dropped his head. He had short, grayish hair, and his light gray eyes burning with anger. He ran a hand through his hair and shrugged off his robe. His face twisted in agony. "Ever since you killed Eliza and made it look like an accident, I..."

"Yet whenever I ask for help, you still do it," the emperor replied.

"Because you won't tell me where her body is!"

Gritting his teeth, Largris reached over the table and grabbed the emperor by his collar. It was a rude and presumptuous gesture, but the emperor's face brightened as if the whole display amused him. Seeing the enthusiasm on the other man's face, even with a hand around his collar, Largris slowly released his grip.

"There's something I want, and I want you to chase it down," the emperor said.

"You mean Count Delight's daughter?" Largris asked.

"So you already know... Who told you?"

The emperor's voice was cold, steely. Largris swallowed his breath. As the emperor scrutinized the magician, attempting to figure out his true intentions, Largris leaned back on the sofa and rubbed his face.

"If you want to talk, then get me a glass of whisky," he said.

"You're talking to me right now...?" the emperor asked as he pointed a finger at himself.

Largris narrowed his brows, his face suggesting that it was obvious. The corners of the emperor's mouth twitched.

"I'm the guest, Ky. You're the host."

"You and Eliza were the only people to treat me this way..."

The emperor shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly as he rose from his seat and pulled out two glasses and a bottle of whisky from the bar.

At some point, Largris had brought out his wand. With a flourish, Largris directed ice cubes the size of fists to land in each of the cups. He poured the whisky into his glass, the scent of which was strong enough to make one's nose twitch, and tossed it back. The emperor had to fill his own glass, but he didn't have any complaints.

"So, who told you?"

"I simply heard it by chance. There are a lot of rumors about the count's daughter."

"Hmm."

"Also, don't you remember you telling me to bring me back that cursed necklace when the manor was destroyed?"

Largris spoke without formality. The dark circles under his eyes and his droopy lips made him look exhausted. The emperor knew very well that his guest had taken to the bottle, according to reports.

"So when will you let us go?" Largris asked. "Please... Return her to me."

"Eliza's not just yours, Larg. I can't split her corpse in half for you," the emperor said apathetically.

Largris could feel himself growing livid at the emperor's shameless retort. He downed the rest of his drink and reached for the bottle again. "Ky, my son is dead. Eliza is dead. I have nothing else in my life. I don't know why you're doing this to me."

"You see, Larg..."

"You're the one person I want out of my life," he said with a cold, crooked smile on his weary face. He had a belligerent personality to match with the deep, dark circles under his cool features.

"What a cruel thing to say. I have feelings too."

"I honestly thought of you as a friend... I liked you the moment we first met, the kind version of you," Largris murmured before he knocked back his drink again. He didn't bat an eyelash as the burning liquid traveled down his throat, engraving a warm trail through his body.

The emperor took a leisurely sip. He shook his head in disagreement. "I tried to be kind. I was planning on being kind until the very end. You and Eliza were the ones who ruined that."

For a moment, Largris had no words. He took another swig. The emperor hadn't even finished his first glass yet, but as Largris continued to work his way through the bottle, he opened his tight-lipped mouth.

"Ky... We were simply in love," Largris said slowly and as gently as possible, as if he was trying to persuade the emperor, as if he were talking to a child.

The emperor tilted his head, listening attentively.

"Our relationship wouldn't have changed even after we got married and had a child. We would have always been friends."

"But I would have been pushed to the side. First, it'd be you and Eliza, then your children, and then all the other relationships you would've fostered," the emperor replied, swirling his glass as he rested his arm against the sofa.

He watched the ice swirl around in his glass for a moment before he drank. The whisky burned his throat as it went down. He swallowed, lifted his head, and looked at Largris again.

"You know what, Largris? Cracks grow easily once they're formed. Breaking it only takes an instant."

"So... Instead of watching it break, you broke it yourself? Then..."

Largris rubbed his face with both hands. No matter how much he thought about it, he simply didn't understand. He didn't know where it had all gone wrong. Sometimes, he regretted that they had met at all.

"I simply did it myself because I wouldn't be able to cope with it coming apart so abruptly. Thanks to that, you're in my arms, and Eliza's in my hands," the emperor said, extremely satisfied.

Largris despaired as he looked at the emperor. He resembled a predator, satiated after consuming its prey. The more he looked at the changed man, the

more the past, with all its glory, kept haunting him. He didn't know if he could face it with all his sanity intact.

"We can't be the same trio we used to be. You two are the bad ones, abandoning me and creating a world for yourselves. You're the ones who stabbed me in the back."

"You're the one who hurt Eliza, Kynos! You did something terrible!"

"You need to get your facts straight. You're the one who ruined her first," the emperor said as his smile deepened.

Largris was silent for a long moment. They were in love and had wanted to get married, but being young and immature, their early union had resulted in a child, delaying their marriage. However, the fact that they would get married had never been in question. Largris was about to explain that he hadn't ruined her, but he squeezed his eyes shut when he saw the emperor open his mouth again.

"What difference does it make if I sullied something that had already been sullied? Oh, but I don't think what I've done with Eliza is bad. I was simply borrowing your words."

"What is wrong with you? Where in the world is your common sense?!" Largris exclaimed.

"Who knows? Perhaps I left it in the womb," the emperor snickered.

Largris looked like he was about to explode. He pressed a hand to his throbbing head. This migraine was driving him crazy.

"Oh, Largris. Larg. This is what happens when you get too greedy. Eliza had your child, so it's only fair that she have mine too."

"But my child... It didn't live long," Largris said hopelessly.

"And I still think that's a shame."

Feeling weighed down by the emperor's sudden sincerity, Largris poured himself another drink. After watching him down drink after drink, the emperor took the bottle from Largris and turned it over. The amber liquid seeped into the rug.

Largris gaped at the emperor. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"I heard that you've been drinking a lot these days. It's not good for you, Larg."

"I'm just drinking because I can't get any sleep."

The emperor placed his glass down with his left hand, grabbed Largris by his collar with his right, and pulled him so that he was pressed against the table.

Largris swayed unsteadily as he narrowed his eyes. "You..."

"You don't look healthy either. Have you been eating?"

"Piss off. From the start, you..."

Largris avoided his gaze. He broke the emperor's grip and rose from his seat. Both he and the emperor knew that he had no choice but to follow orders if he wanted Eliza's body safe in his arms again.

"Bring back that child safely, and I'll let you see Eliza again," the emperor said as he tilted back his glass once more.

Largris' gray eyes widened as he turned to look at the emperor. He leaned over the table and stared directly into his eyes.

"Do I have your word?"

It had been so long since Largris looked him in the eyes, the emperor thought with a grin, nodding. And he was telling the truth—so as long as the job got

done.

"I keep my promises, Larg."

"I see. And what do you plan to do with that child?"

"There's a medicine I need her to make. One that's impossible for Guilian," the emperor replied honestly, shrugging his shoulders.

Largris' eyes widened as he sat back with his arms crossed. Wasn't Guilian an incredibly accomplished alchemist? "Is she that gifted...?"

"She's just as brilliant as Eliza, though not as interesting," the emperor said as he thought of Valeta. An emotionally numb girl such as her wasn't fun at all. And her provoking behavior was still very juvenile.

"That's rather surprising coming from you."

"Oh, come to think of it... I heard that the dead are coming back to life all over the country. Do you know anything about that, Largris?"

"What? Coming back to life?" Largris's eyes widened.

The emperor briefly went silent. Quietly, he studied the magician's expression and the look in his eyes for a long while before putting on his usual good-natured smile and display of nodding. "It's fine if you don't. Find the girl and come back. Then the three of us will be together again."

"Together again?"

"I'll make it happen. I leave it to you."

Largris nodded reluctantly. He moved to turn away but paused. After some hesitation, he asked, "You're not going to kill her... Are you?"

"If I said I was, would you keep her from me?"

Largris gave no answer, and he had no need to. His silence was answer enough. The emperor's smile deepened. The man had already committed so many crimes, so he had no reason to refuse the emperor now. Largris clenched his fists, and the emperor smiled darkly as he lowered his voice a notch. "You'll still bring her back, won't you, Larg?"

His smile was sinister.

"For our precious Eliza," he added.

Despite the emperor's goading whisper, Largris said nothing and turned.

"Ky," he said finally.

"What is it, Larg?"

"Don't make me kill you."

The emperor remained silent. Largris vanished in a magic circle that emitted no light. As soon as the magician disappeared, the emperor slowly leaned back into the sofa.

*Clink.*

The ice cube remnants jangled against each other as they melted into the whisky. Although he acted like that, Largris also longed for those precious days when the three of them had still been together. That was why he couldn't leave, turn him down, or kill him.

"Soon," the emperor said as he sat in the empty room, smiling.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 104

\* \* \*

“Is this enough, Master?”

“Yeah.”

“Plants, ants, and... centipedes, huh?”

*Flinch!*

Reinhart took a furtive step back as he observed Valeta.

“Master, you have... psychotic tastes,” he said with difficulty. His stomach was in knots as he watched the centipede desperately wave its many legs while stuck on its back.

Valeta glanced at the magician. “I didn’t know you were scared of centipedes.”

“I’m not scared of them, Master.”

“Then what is it?”

“Repulsion?”

Valeta looked back down again. The way the centipede was wiggling its legs as if making a run for its life certainly was gross. However, she was used to centipedes as they were frequently used as ingredients in potions. *Though this is my first time seeing one alive.* She usually used dead ones or dried ones that had been crushed into a powder. Either way, it wasn’t a pleasant sight.

*Grr!*

The snowta glared at the ants trapped in a glass bottle and rolled it around with

its paws, acting as if it had met some formidable foe.

*They're going to die at this rate.* Valeta drew a large circle on a sheaf of paper she had bought earlier. Then, she carefully began to draw the formulas for disassembling, rebuilding, and establishing, in that order. The symbol itself was slightly different from the one she'd found in the book. Ancient alchemy circles were particularly convoluted and required more than a simple command to activate.

Instead, the ancient arts required a sacrifice, an offering from the caster—life for life, and blood for blood. That, or enough magical power to handle the exchange. *Bertas, the original author of The Beginnings of Alchemy died early,* Valeta thought.

The alchemist had died a mere ten years after he'd started making a name for himself. *The Beginnings of Alchemy* was his one and only legacy. It wasn't hard to imagine the kinds of sacrifices he'd had to make for his research. If the practice of creating chimeras was taboo, then he had certainly broken it countless times.

First, starting with blood, the offerings had probably grown in scale as the experiments progressed. Valeta could easily guess how it went.

"I wonder if this will work."

The basics were rooted in alchemy, but she would have to add a formula for stability, another to make the glass bottle disappear, and another for specifying what the main medium would be. The centipede would be the main medium.

Valeta used her hunting knife to prick her finger and draw blood. She rubbed the blood on both index fingers and slowly placed her hands over the alchemy circle. Reinhart put a hand on her shoulder, ready to whisk her away if anything went wrong. Valeta took a deep breath.

"Activate."

An ancient magic circle appeared in her left eye the second she spoke in the ancient language. The glass bottle that was sitting on top of the circle shattered, and everything else started disintegrating. Something extraordinary had begun. Valeta stood there, completely speechless, as she watched the peculiar sight unfold before her eyes.

Purple light enveloped her sight. As it faded, she saw something wandering around on the paper. The centipede still had the same number of legs, but its body was portioned into three distinct sections, like an ant. On its face, there were little plant-like whiskers, which squirmed like tentacles, and the sharp jaws of an ant. Translucent wings sprouted out from the centipede's back as if it were a strange butterfly that had come to life from the fables.

"Huh...?"

Valeta stood there trying to grasp the situation as the centipede rose into the air using its fluttering wings. She flinched. Her breath hitched as she shuffled away from it. *This isn't what I...*

She quickly backed away as the centipede followed her. It was the creepiest thing she had ever seen. She changed her course and hurried to Reinhart. However, the centipede continued to chase after her.

"Hey..."

Valeta latched onto Reinhart's robes. Normal centipedes were fine, but centipedes with wings were not. She was fine with roaches, but not ones that could fly. But a flying creature with this many legs was just...

"Hey, hey! Stop!"

"Hmm, I thought you said you weren't scared of these," Reinhart said with a grin.

*This son of a b\*tch...* She deliberately clung to the magician's back. The centipede

started flying straight in Reinhart's direction, and he narrowed his eyes.

"Hey! Do something!" she shrieked.

"Do something? Do what?"

"Just do something about it!"

"Want me to burn it?"

"No! Don't kill it!"

"You're so demanding, Master."

Despite his teasing protestation, Reinhart chuckled and obediently snapped his fingers. This was the first time she had voluntarily touched him, but it was also the first time he had seen such a terrified look on her face.

Tiny needles of ice flew and pierced the centipede's head and abdomen.

Nonetheless, it was still alive, its body squirming madly without rest. Reinhart heard a little *eep* come from behind him.

With another chuckle, snapped his fingers again, and the centipede was pinned to a flat board like a specimen.

"Oh my god... That's crazy. Ugh, so gross..."

"You said you weren't scared of centipedes."

"Unless they have wings and tentacles..." Valeta replied. She rubbed her shoulders, her face looking slightly haunted. She had selected the wrong combination. Experimenting with the first things she could get her hands on had led to this... "There was nothing in there about queen ants..."

"You must be very lucky, Master."

“Ah...”

The tenacious centipede, with all of its wriggly legs, seemed to have no intention of dying anytime soon. Valeta observed it from a distance for a long time.

“How are you feeling? Are you okay?” Reinhart asked.

“I’m a little tired...”

It felt like the energy had been sucked out of her. She usually only felt this exhausted after making two or three top-tier potions. If she did this three or four more times, she’d collapse.

“So this is a chimera?”

“Technically... Yes.”

“Can you turn it back?” Reinhart asked.

“I’m going to try now.” Valeta drew another circle on a sheet of paper, her eyes drooping with exhaustion.

Reinhart leaned against a tree as he watched her draw the same formula but in reverse order. “Why are you so desperate, Master?”

“It’s for my own peace.”

“We can go to another country if you want peace. Just you and me in a place where no one knows us.”

As Valeta listened to his low voice, her pen slowed to a halt. She was silent for a moment but resumed writing the next formula as she spoke.

“You need to stay here. You’re the head of the Magicians’ Tower.”

“I don’t care, as long as it’s for you.”

“If something goes wrong, I’ll go by myself.”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to throw me off, Master.” He laughed, sounding like usual self. He acted like he wasn’t hurt, even though he was.

Valeta slowly closed her eyes and then opened them again. As she blinked, the borders between dark and light seemed indistinct.

“We live in different times.”

A strong chill emanated from the presence behind her. To avoid turning around, Valeta pretended to busy herself with the complicated formulas. This alchemy formula written in the ancient language took up an entire piece of paper—it was apparently three times more complicated than the first one she’d drawn.

“You need to stay at the tower. You know that,” she said to the magician.

“What do you mean...?”

Valeta put her pen down, no longer able to focus on the circle. She frowned at the centipede, still writhing around where it was pinned, then turned around to face Reinhart. “Magicians live three to four times longer than ordinary humans. Alchemists also tend to have a longer life expectancy, but it’s still shorter than yours. Stop being so obsessed with me. You’ll only get hurt.”

“This whole time, you’ve...”

“No, you’re wrong. I’ve always been scared of you. I’m still scared of you. I’m just trying to be realistic.”

It was time for Reinhart to face reality. Everything would work out, she knew. Whether it would take a few months or a few years, Reinhart would have this victory and Valeta her freedom.

"Caspelios will be at the tower if you stay there, along with Kurt and Silon. I also read in a book the other day that snowtas live for a long time too."

There was a beat of silence before he replied, "What does that have to do with me?"

Reinhart's easygoing voice was now icy, all formality long gone. Valeta calmly met his scarlet eyes.

"Once this is all over, I'm going to settle somewhere far away from here."

"Where?"

"Somewhere without you," she said evenly.

The reason why she had refused to give Reinhart her heart for the longest time was partly because she was scared that he would take her whole world away and partly because she feared she'd die like the original Valeta. There was no way this hadn't crossed his mind.

The lifespan of magicians had been mentioned several times in the novel. Even Terion, the main character of the novel, had magician's blood running through his veins. She vaguely recalled reading about how Terion and the female protagonist managed to find a way to live together for a long time, but... *I don't remember how.*

She calmly looked up at Reinhart's cold expression and tilted her head.

"Do you know just how cruel you're being...?" he asked.

"I know."

"You hate me that much?"

Valeta didn't respond. She hated to admit it, but she didn't hate him. Scared of

him? Yes, but she'd never once misconstrued it as hate. If she truly didn't like him, she would've done everything to get rid of him.

Reinhart's face hardened as he sighed during the ensuing silence, his thoughts unreadable.

"I don't hate you," she said after a long moment. She turned around, picked up her pen, and resumed working on the symbol.

Reinhart's eyes widened. He slowly turned toward her in disbelief at what he'd just heard, but all he could see was the back of her head. "What did you...?"

Valeta sighed at the sound of his dazed voice. It occurred to her that she might have a weakness for him. "I may have been scared of you, but never once have I hated you. Did I ever say I did? I just tried to chase you out because I thought there'd be trouble."

"I thought you didn't want me to wait on you because you hated me..."

"Let me be clear. I said that I didn't like slaves," Valeta said firmly. She wouldn't have pushed him away if the situation hadn't called for it.

"So... you don't hate me?"

At some point, Reinhart had sidled up to Valeta and was crouching by her side. His demeanor had grown soft, his cold aura nowhere to be found.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 105

*What is this guy thinking?* Valeta frowned as she glanced at Reinhart.

After finishing the last formula, she pushed the piece of plywood with the still-squirming centipede into the circle. She wordlessly made another cut on her palm, drawing blood. Then, she took the same position as before and spoke.

“Activate.”

The moment the ancient word left her lips, the alchemy circle began to absorb the blood that was pooling in her hand.

“What is this...?” Valeta said, surprised. She tried to remove her hands from the circle, but they wouldn’t budge. She was stuck there.

Meanwhile, blood continued to stream steadily into the alchemy circle, trickling along the edges of the circle. It became bloodier and bloodier as it took from her.

“Master...?”

“I can’t pull my hands away.”

As soon as he heard those words, Reinhart hurried over and grabbed her wrists. He pulled, but her hands wouldn’t move.

Valeta’s face twisted. As Reinhart clicked his tongue and snapped his fingers, the circle, stained with her blood, finished forming...

At that moment she stiffened, feeling as though something else was trying to leave her body. A shiver ran down her spine. She twitched. Fortunately, her fingertips were momentarily freed from their shackles. Her eyes widened as she felt the change.

Move! she thought. As soon as Valeta retracted her hand, Reinhart examined it, his expression tense. The small wound she had inflicted on herself earlier had been about the size of a finger. Now, it was larger and spanned the total length of her palm.

Reinhart's face hardened as he rushed to tear the sleeves of his robes so that he might wrap the fabric around her wound. Snapping his fingers, he then halted as if he remembered something. In an instant, the wound began to heal itself as if it had never been there to begin with.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh, uh... Th-thanks," Valeta stammered.

She turned her gaze back to the alchemy circle. And even though she was expecting it, the horrible sight of it caught her off guard. She reflexively inched back a step before rising to her feet.

"Come here, Master."

"What is that...?"

Three indescribable lumps of melted black were writhing about. It was a strange sight to behold—they resembled lumps of black clay squashed together. They seemed to be alive, but their forms weren't at all what Valeta had imagined. Their bodies looked like they were rotting, and the stench of something burning assaulted her nose.

Yes... The lumps resembled a burnt cookie that had crumbled into black, charred pieces.

"Ugh..." Valeta covered her mouth and took another step back.

Reinhart came up from behind and pulled her in close, wrapping his arms around her waist. The alchemy circle stained with her blood vanished now that

it had been properly activated.

"I've never seen you fail before, Master. Should I get rid of it?"

"I didn't fail..."

The formula was properly made. It was just...

Valeta grimaced. She remembered the horrifying feeling of something trying to leave her body. Dropping her head, her breath hitched and shivers ran down her spine.

"What I gave wasn't enough, I think."

There was no telling what it would've taken from her if she hadn't pulled away.

Reinhart's face darkened, mirroring her own. He slowly looked around, his gaze turning from Valeta to the three black squirming lumps. "What do you mean, what you gave? Like, the price of the formula?"

"While the circle was activating, I felt a chance where I could pull my hand away. At that moment, there was this feeling like something terrible was going to happen."

She couldn't imagine what would've happened had she not managed to wrench her hand away. She felt like something invisible would have opened up its maw and swallowed her whole.

"The price of life, maybe?" Reinhart suggested.

"Probably. I think the creator paid with his own life."

The magician tilted his head, fingers grabbing his chin.

*Who knows what he sacrificed his life for?* Valeta let out a deep sigh.

"I don't think it's a good idea to continue this," Reinhart said to her."

"It sounds like the price of playing with life is to give up your own."

She slowly blinked. With a small sigh, she pulled out a small pocketbook, scribbled something on a piece of paper, and dropped it on the three black lumps.

"Ignite."

Unlike before, she uttered the command in the imperial language instead of the ancient language. An ancient magic circle appeared in her eye, and the paper burst into flames. A small fire, the size of her palm, also appeared on the paper beneath the strange organisms and began to burn. As the flames began to spread, the lumps of clay-like figures, which had been steadily wriggling up until now, began to shake uncontrollably. Valeta grimaced as she watched the things silently writhe in agony.

Gross. The fact those blobs could still feel pain meant that they were still alive. Her stomach churned as she imagined what it felt like to be burned to death. In contrast, Reinhart stared at the burning spectacle with curiosity. The whole scene would have seemed very strange to an outsider.

"It's possible to turn a chimera back into its original components," Valeta said.

"Can you even really call those things chimeras?"

"I want to try again, once I figure out how much of my life it'll take from me..."

Though she had no certainty of it, taking into account all that the author had documented, she didn't think that it would take her life. Plus, she had chosen small organisms on purpose.

"No," Reinhart said.

"What?"

"No. Don't do anything useless. I'll do whatever it takes to protect you, even if it means turning the whole empire upside down."

"You know that would be even more useless, right? I can protect myself."

At her firm refusal, Reinhart shrugged and said nothing. She glanced at him and frowned. She felt dizzy—it was as if the energy was sucked out of her.

"Do you really think that pale man is the culprit?" he asked.

"I think it's possible. Nothing's impossible if someone makes a magic circle at the cost of their own life."

"Well, the injuries certainly seem like the work of a beast, but is it really necessary to turn a human into a beast to do that?"

Valeta couldn't deny that it was inefficient. She fell silent at Reinhart's question. He was right. There was no need to do that. If their hypothesis were correct in assuming this was the fifth village, then that man would have transformed from a human to a beast and then back to a man at least four times now.

"I don't know... We'll have to see for ourselves," Valeta said, frowning at the ashes.

"It seems like you're able to use other alchemy now. Making things like fire and such."

"It's just chemistry," she replied.

"Can you make ice like that duke did?"

"As long as I know the formula, yes. It's actually a lot easier than I thought. I didn't know I could use alchemy to attack people. I can't believe how ignorant I

was."

She was stupid for not realizing how powerful alchemy actually was. Having been taught only a fraction of what it was capable of, she'd taken it for granted. *This is why they say early brainwashing is dangerous.* She'd even started to take the memories of her previous life for granted too. Of course, alchemy was more complicated and troublesome compared to magic, but it wasn't any less dangerous. *There's a reason why I have to write down formulas in advance.*

Alchemy circles were difficult to produce on the spot. In addition, an alchemy circle could only be used once. However, she did hear that there was a new type of ink that allowed users to use a circle more than once. The ink had been developed by alchemists, but she had no idea where to buy it. These were just rumors, of course.

She wondered if that was the kind of ink that Carlon used. Or perhaps the circle he used was one he had prepared beforehand in case he ever encountered a situation that called for it.

"That's a shame. I thought that was my job," Reinhart said with a shake of his head.

Valeta scoffed as she watched him make an exaggerated show of drooping his shoulders.

"Shall we return to the inn? You must be tired," he said.

"How did you know...?" she replied.

"You tend to frown when you're tired. You also have a habit of rubbing this area with your thumb too." Reinhart tapped his temple with his finger.

Valeta turned to look at his smiling face. Come to think of it, they had been together for a long time, but she was still surprised that he had noticed. *I didn't*

*even know it was a habit.*

Rather than making an excuse, Valeta simply nodded. “I don’t have any energy. I feel like I’ve made multiple top-tier potions.”

She could probably still walk around, but her body felt heavy, like wet cotton. She didn’t want to move if she didn’t have to.

“Your hand looks healed. How’s the dizziness?” he asked.

Valeta released a small chuckle as Reinhart looked up at her from below, his waist bent. He looked like a puppy begging for food. His eyes widened at the sight of her laughing.

“I like it...” he whispered.

“Like what?”

“The sound of your laugh. I wish you would laugh more.”

Valeta glowered at him as she scoffed, finding his remarks completely out of the blue. Reinhart blinked slowly as she turned around. She bent down and picked up the snowta, which had fallen asleep under the shade of a tree at some point.

Meow? The snowta made a sleepy noise. She gently patted the sleeping creature’s back.

“Let’s go back.”

“Yes, let’s.”

As Valeta turned around, Reinhart, looking at the snowta in her arms, strode to her side.

“Master.”

“What is it?”

“Can I hold your hand?”

“My hands are full...”

Reinhart fell silent for a moment. He looked down at the snowta and nodded.

“So it seems,” he said.

For some strange reason, his retreat left her feeling mildly irritated. Sighing softly, Valeta shifted the snowta over to her right arm, then held out her other hand to Reinhart.

“Here.”

“Master, why are you being so sweet all of a sudden?”

“Have you lost it? How is this sweet?”

“You know, you’ve been strange lately. You’re taking care of weird animals, you started calling other people by their names... and now you’re being sweet to me.”

What was up with him? Had he forgotten the meaning of the word “sweet” after taking too many hits to the back of his head?

Frowning, Valeta glanced at the magician and shrugged. “If you don’t want to, then forget it.”

Reinhart quickly grabbed her hand as she tried to pull back. The warmth of his hand seeped into her cold fingertips. Valeta sighed as she noticed the broad grin on his face.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 106

“Why are you so picky?”

It was a strange feeling, walking through the market hand in hand. Valeta had rarely ever held anybody’s hand before and thus found it all the more unnerving.

She closed her eyes and then opened them up again as she felt the warmth from Reinhart’s palm. Every so often, she would suddenly think about the older Reinhart, the one from her dreams, and a frown would creep up onto her face.

“Master.”

“I told you to stop calling me that.”

“Valeta.”

Those three syllables rolled off Reinhart’s tongue like liquid candy, sending shivers down her spine. It felt like someone was running their fingers straight down her back. Maybe allowing him to call her ‘master’ wasn’t so bad after all.

“What is it...?” Valeta attempted to keep her tone nonchalant.

The magician stopped in his tracks. “I want that.”

He pointed one long finger toward what looked to be a colorful candy store. Not just candy, but a store that sold all sorts of knickknacks and other sundries. A large glass jar filled with round, colorful sweets sat among the items.

“Candy...?”

“Yes. Buy it for me.”

"You have tons of money. Why are you leeching off me?"

"I'll give you money."

Suddenly, he was right in front of her, his eyes curving. Reinhart leaned forward slightly, leaving her momentarily speechless. But this was no threat—he was trying to be cute. *Why can't he just buy it himself?* Was there a reason why she had to buy it instead?

Still lost in thought, Valeta headed toward the shop. She figured he would be insufferable if she didn't do what he wanted. It was better to give in and get it over with. Staring at the rusty sign swinging in the breeze, Valeta sighed. The colorful sweets caught her eye as she stepped foot into the shabby store. The ones Reinhart wanted filled a large, wide-mouth glass jar, which was sealed shut with a cork, to the brim.

"Some of these, please."

Paying for the candy, she then handed it to Reinhart.

"Happy now?" she asked. "What's gotten into you today?"

"I love it when you treat me like this," he murmured as the corners of his mouth turned upward.

Reinhart looked down at the candy in his hand for a long moment, looking as though he had received an unexpected present. Then squeezing Valeta's hand, he said, "You don't know how badly I wanted this."

"But you hate sweets."

"Me? What makes you think that?" His eyes widened.

Valeta started walking back to the inn as she answered, "I've seen you stealing candy from my desk before. You'd put it in your mouth and immediately spit it

back out."

"You did? Well, there's only one type of candy I like."

One taste, and he'd been obsessed. He hadn't realized that candy could taste so sweet or bring him so much joy. But it was hard to deny when he'd gone back to steal a second piece.

"Go to bed. I'll put you to sleep."

She sighed. "If I go to sleep now, I don't think I'll be able to wake up."

"I'll wake you up," he said as they walked to their room.

Once inside, Reinhart helped Valeta out of her robe, draped it over a nearby chair, and set the snowta down on the floor.

"Oh... Right. I forgot to buy food for it," the girl said.

"I'll go buy some. Just go to sleep," Reinhart replied as he laid Valeta down on the bed. He remained there, stroking her cheek for a while.

Valeta glanced at him and nodded. Darkness consumed her the moment she closed her eyes. She heard some rustling, as if someone was tidying things up, before she heard nothing but silence. Then, feeling a finger on her forehead, she did not fight back, allowing sleep to overcome her.

As soon as he felt Valeta's breath even out, Reinhart turned away. He carefully turned the doorknob and left the room. Locking the door with a key didn't seem like enough, so he cast a spell on the door, making it invisible to passersby. It was only then that he felt comfortable enough to step away.

The magician pulled up his hood and casually strolled back to the market. He walked at a leisurely pace, but his stare was intense. The marketplace bustled with people. Although it was a large village, it was still smaller than a city or the

capital, so it didn't take long for him to circle the entire market.

The problem was that there were no traces of magic or alchemy. It was frustrating, given all the extra legwork he was doing.

Reinhart furrowed his brow. With a sigh, he moved to a more secluded location and tapped his foot on the ground. Immediately, a magic circle appeared beneath his feet and his surroundings shifted.

Standing right under the island in the sky, he evoked his magic once again. Now on the island, he headed straight toward the library. Perhaps it was because it was in the middle of the day, but the library was teeming with people.

*They sure are eager to learn,* Reinhart thought with a pout as he surveyed the library. It felt like he was missing something, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He pulled out a book with a lot of dog-eared pages and sat in a corner, resting his chin in his hands.

*Roste, murders, living dead...*

Among the slain corpses, some were missing body parts. Plus, the number of limbs didn't match the number of dead bodies, and the limbs seemed to have been severed rather than torn apart.

*And those are the only ones that came back to life.* So to summarize—bodies with torn limbs? Stayed dead. Bodies with clean-cut limbs? Did not stay dead. What if... the ones with the neatly severed limbs were the ones afflicted with the roste? *What if it wasn't just a massacre? What if the village was attacked and afflicted with the roste?*

The questions circled in his mind, and doubt clouded his thoughts. Reinhart tilted his head and blinked. The massacre might have been enough to overshadow the issue of the roste, especially since the bodies of those plagued with it were mixed in with the bodies of the slain. This was more or less

consistent with what Valeta had said about the rezir possibly belonging to the bodies of those who'd perished from the disease.

*On second thought...* He'd only *heard* rumors about how those afflicted with the roste were losing body parts. He had never seen it for himself. It'd be much easier to understand if he could find out where the phenomenon was happening.

*Where could it be?* He knew that it was still an ongoing problem. Reinhart languidly looked down and drummed his fingers on top of the desk.

"Oh, I went to a socoro village not that long ago, and I saw the oddest thing."

A nearby voice broke his thoughts. Reinhart tilted his head toward the voice and blinked.

"What do you mean?" another voice said.

"A socoro with both of their eyes gouged out was just walking around! I mean, that whole village was strange..."

Reinhart's lips slid into a smile as he listened in on their unsolicited conversation. Pulling his hood lower over his face, his eyes curving, he approached the small group.

"Mind if I join in?" he asked.

The magicians' eyes widened, startled by the sudden interruption of his sweet voice. The newcomer had joined so naturally that they would've taken him to be one of their friends if it wasn't for that inhuman voice.

"Huh...? O-oh, sure."

"Thanks," Reinhart replied, his voice dripping with honey. His red eyes were downcast as he took his place by their side. "So? What was weird about the

village?"

"Uh... I guess I would describe it like there was death in the air? Something about that village seemed dreary and uninviting. It felt like I was walking through a cemetery."

The magician shivered as he recalled the scene. Reinhart rubbed his chin with his long finger. After a moment's silence, he suddenly spoke up.

"Which village was it?"

"Ah, it's a small village in the northwest. Some kind of beast started running for me the moment it saw me. I only went there because I needed to buy something, but I never got what I needed in the end."

Reinhart quietly listened to the man, his hand on his chin. The three magicians were talking animatedly with each other, even without his contribution.

"Plus... It was strange how all of the people there had missing limbs."

"Well, isn't that the socoros' specialty, rejecting anything that's not like them? Are you sure it's not a village full of oddballs? Socoros always do things like that. They don't give you the time of day if you're even slightly different," one of the magicians said, his voice thick with disgust.

Reinhart gave a light snort as the corners of his eyes drooped lazily.

"You're not wrong, but it seemed like those socoros had been starving for a long time. A lot of them looked emaciated. I thought they were going to eat me. Just thinking of it is giving me goosebumps again. Anyway, I'm not going back to the northwest."

"Yeah, best not. Don't go."

"Right. What's so great about a socoro village? There's no need for you to go

back."

Reinhart stood up, certain of his next destination. Lightly, he placed a hand on his neck and narrowed his eyes. The three people stopped talking and looked at him.

"Leaving already?" one asked.

"Yeah, I've got some things to take care of," Reinhart replied, his voice flat.

The three magicians nodded. Reinhart had spoken so casually that none of the three had noticed anything out of the ordinary.

"Oh, right," another said. "Have you seen the head of the tower recently?"

"No."

Reinhart shook his head without any hesitation.

It would have been ridiculous to say that he had, even though, technically, he was always looking at parts of himself, at the very least.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 107

“It’s been a while since his lordship left, right?”

“Did he really give up being the head?”

“Perhaps, but... he’s still our lord. It would be nice if he could focus more on the tower instead of that socoro.”

Reinhart paused at the downcast voices. He didn’t understand why they were so upset, but hearing other people talk about him left him with the oddest feeling.

“I heard that he’s stronger than the previous head.”

“Oh, I was there when Gray got his head blown off. The head of the Magicians’ Tower is brutal, but his powers really are amazing.” The voice trailed off into silence.

Reinhart stood stiffly, his jaw set. He knew he should turn away, but his feet wouldn’t budge. Nothing good would come out of this if he stayed.

“Hey... Can’t we just let one socoro stay in the tower? Honestly, what difference would a single socoro make?”

“I actually looked into this. Apparently, that socoro helped him during difficult times.”

“Really?”

As soon as Valeta was mentioned, Reinhart found it impossible to move. If there was a chance that they’d become a threat to her, he had no choice but to kill them on the spot. He would let no harm come to her. Tendons stood out on his

pale skin as he clenched his fists.

"I heard that the head repaired the Magicians' Tower and the island right before he left. I think that's why the island in the sky is flying higher than before."

Reinhart had felt obligated to do it, believing that it would only be more trouble if the island fell. It wasn't for any noble reason. His head cocked to the side.

"Still, I think he went too far in destroying those socoro villages."

"Ah, I actually asked Kurt about that earlier. He got mad at me, saying that his lordship didn't do it."

"Really? If he wasn't the one who did it, he should've told us instead of disappearing like that."

The whining voices, full of complaints and gripes, slowed to mere whispers. Reinhart swallowed a laugh as he looked at the three. What in the world was he doing here?

"He's always been a quiet person, yeah? Rarely talks about himself. He's never given us any orders and said nothing about the current situation."

"Wait, hang on! Do you think he left to solve that problem on his own?"

The magician's voice rose in astonishment, echoing throughout the library. Unsurprisingly, the three gossiping men received glares from their fellow patrons. The one who had raised his voice quickly bowed, apologizing to the other library-goers until the tension was broken.

"That's the feeling I got last time... He didn't look like he was in a good mood."

"Maybe we shouldn't have said anything..."

"But all we wanted was for him to settle in the tower."

"Can't we tell him that the socoro can stay with him if he comes back?" one of the three asked in a depressed voice, slumping over the table. He turned to look at Reinhart, one cheek still on the table. "What do you think? Do you think his lordship is going to return?"

"Perhaps not."

"Why not?"

"The tower's been functioning just fine without a head. Why do we need one at all? I think he left knowing that."

"Wow... You're heartless. You haven't been around that long, have you?"

Reinhart said nothing. He simply stared at the man who spoke.

The man, sensing a change in Reinhart's silence, immediately straightened up.  
"It's different than that."

"Different?"

"The lord is our lighthouse, our guiding star. At the same time, he's our last bastion."

At the grand statements, Reinhart's eyes widened under his hood, shining ruby, and remained that way for a moment before returning back to normal. He spoke up, his voice stiff. "A bit of an exaggeration, don't you think?"

"As long as he is alive, we are not afraid, no matter what happens to the Magicians' Tower and the island in the sky. We will defend him until the very end because we know that he'll survive and rebuild our country."

Reinhart fell silent. He had no idea that his role was so important. If he was being honest, he'd never even given it a thought, never considered what the head of the Magicians' Tower meant to his fellow magicians.

*“Give it another thought. You belong at the tower.”*

*“You need to stay here. You’re the head of the Magicians’ Tower.”*

*“We live in different times.”*

Recalling their earlier conversation, he wondered... *Is this what she meant?* He rubbed his thumb across his wrinkled brow as he imagined Valeta fast asleep back at the inn. He froze, realizing that he was picking up her habit.

“Don’t you have your beloved Balteer?” Reinhart asked, his voice emotionless. The magicians had been trying to kindly explain everything to him, as if he were a newcomer. He narrowed his eyes, annoyance beginning to creep into his expression.

“Did you call, my lord?”

Just as he was about to disappear, he heard a voice from behind. Reinhart frowned. The fun was over. He had come to clear his head, but he’d probably leave with a headache. Instead of answering, Reinhart merely tapped the floor, summoning a magic circle.

“Leaving already?” Balteer asked. “When will you be back again?”

“Never.”

“‘My lord?’ Wait, you mean the *head*?!”

The magicians who had been patronizing him abruptly leaped up from their seats and bowed deeply. As Reinhart furrowed his brows, the rest of the magicians in the library also rose and bowed.

“I’m leaving.”

“You’re free to return when you need to clear your head. I’ll take care of things while you’re gone.”

Reinhart said nothing at Balteer’s words. Silence descended on the library after he disappeared. Everyone blinked, unable to say a word.

“Oh, my god. We talked to the head.”

“I guess we haven’t been completely abandoned yet.”

“How did this happen...?”

Balteer broke out into a low chuckle as the magicians began to gather and whisper to each other.

\* \* \*

A full moon hung bright in the night sky, and its light, pale in comparison to the sun, cast an eerie mood upon the night. The whole village was quiet, its occupants fast asleep. The only thing that pierced the silence was the cries of nocturnal animals.

“Are you tired?”

“No.”

She wasn’t tired, but she didn’t feel great either. The unpleasant feeling in the air only added to her discomfort. Valeta let out a low sigh as she cradled the sleepy snowta in her arms.

Reinhart narrowed his eyes as he moved to sit beside her. Suddenly, he straightened his hunched back at the magic that brushed against his skin. Valeta turned to face him, her eyes not missing his unusual behavior.

"What's wrong?"

"Stay here for a moment. I think someone's coming."

Reinhart turned his gaze to the entrance of the village. Valeta's brow furrowed. Being left alone in the dark wasn't exactly her cup of tea. *But it should be okay since the moon's out.* She nodded, indicating her silent approval, and Reinhart slowly floated into the air.

He rose higher and higher into the sky until, in the blink of an eye, he disappeared from sight. Valeta leaned against the chimney of the roof she was on.

"I'm sorry... but this will be the last time. We'll both be free after this."

Her ears perked up at the sound of a quiet voice. Carefully, Valeta sat up and looked around, turning her head this way and that. Someone had exited the inn and was ceaselessly murmuring to a person they were carrying in their arms.

*Janice...?* And the person in her arms was Desilian. Still clinging to the roof, Valeta saw the two of them disappear into the distance.

*How do I get down from here?* She had no way of getting down from the roof since Reinhart was the one who had brought them up here.

Luckily, Janice couldn't get far while carrying Desilian. With both hands firmly on the roof, Valeta watched Janice as she picked up a rock and drew something on the ground with a piece of paper in her left hand. Valeta surmised that the paper she had in her hand was a circle of some type.

A symbol...? She spotted it inside the circle. Though she couldn't see it very well

from so far away, she could tell it was different from a magic circle.

When she was done, Janice pulled something from her bag and carefully emptied the contents of it over the symbol. Under the moonlit night, it looked to be a dark liquid. Valeta squinted as she leaned in closer to get a good look. Her eyes widened when she caught a whiff of the sickening stench.

*Blood?*

She couldn't tell what color it was in the dark, but her expression darkened at what had to be the sight of blood. A moment later, Janice moved Desilian, who looked to be in a deep sleep, onto the circle. Then, squeezing her eyes, she began to move back.

One, two, three steps. The blood-stained circle began to fade the moment she took her final step, and something dark began to engulf Desilian's body. Even from afar, Valeta could tell what kind of circle it was. The lack of light could only mean that it was ancient alchemy.

*Crack.*

Valeta blinked as she heard the sound of bone breaking somewhere. Being in a blind spot, it was difficult for her to get a good look, though, it didn't really matter since she was also quite a distance from them.

After taking a quick look around, the girl, spotting a ladder, used it to descend from the roof. Ducking behind a building, Valeta kept her eyes fixed on Desilian's body, which had begun to shake violently.

She cautiously peeked around the corner to see what was happening. Immediately, she froze.

“Aaaaaahh!”

Desilian screamed in agony as he writhed in pain.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 108

It seemed like each of his bones and joints were twisting and ripping, each vertebrate on his spine breaking apart. By the end of it, a shapeless, mollusk-looking creature remained.

*What the...* It was impossible to call it human anymore. In fact, it more closely resembled the black lumps from her failure earlier that day. Valeta raised a hand to cover her nose and mouth as a nauseating stench assaulted her nose. Then, the blob began to rearrange itself, bit by bit, back into the shape of a human again.

*Chimera, my ass. This is no chimera!* What she saw before her was no different than a puzzle reassembling itself.

Thick veins protruded from the skin of Desilian's body as his muscles bulged, and sharp, wolf-like fangs sprouted from his body. He began to grow in length, ripping his clothes apart. He landed on his arms and legs as his nails elongated into beastly claws, as if he was able to walk on all fours now. However, his body had no fur, and he still had his human face. This was no ordinary creature.

Valeta's breath hitched at the horrifying sight. A person had just transformed into a beast before her eyes. Its pale skin looked red, no doubt stained from the bulging veins that had ruptured. It wasn't a beast, really. It was closer to a monster. A monster that someone had purposefully created. It was as if all his bones were removed, his flesh crushed together into clay, and that "clay" was then reused to create this new organism.

Still wearing Desilian's face, the monster's head drooped as though unconscious.

Grrr...

When it opened its eyes, it was clear that nothing human was left on the inside. Its bloodshot eyes protruded like those of a fish, the red pupils lifeless.

*What was the price?* All she saw was the blood on the circle. What kind of blood would be valuable enough... to use in an alchemy circle?

*Alchemist blood...* Valeta's eyes widened. Janice wasn't an alchemist. In other words, someone else had to be behind this. *Guilian...?*

But was his blood really enough? As thoughts raced through Valeta's mind, she kept her eyes fixed on the scene, never letting her guard down. Drool trickled down the hungry monster's mouth. Its long, sharp claws, which dug into the ground, resembled a mole's. Its fangs were long like a mammoth's tusks, and its body was sleek and lithe like a panther's. The monster that was once Desilian kicked off the ground and leaped high into the air.

Then... it collided with the inn.

*Bang!*

There was a loud crash and a cloud of dust.

“Ahhhh!”

Screams began to fill the air as the village descended into chaos. Valeta turned around, the quivering snowta still in her arms. Reuniting with Reinhart seemed like the best thing to do.

*Bang!*

Her eyes widened. This time, the sound hadn't come from Desilian's direction. No, it had come from the direction that Reinhart had flown off in.

After a moment's deliberation, Valeta called out, "Gene."

The wind elemental appeared in a small tornado. She looked at Gene, pleased now that he had learned to appear without flourish, and walked toward him.

*"What do you want now, you heartless human?"*

"I may be in danger, so I summoned you just in case. Hide in here and protect me when I call you. It doesn't matter if they're dead or alive, but you can't come out under any circumstance until I call you."

*"You're so demanding,"* the hawk grumbled.

Still, Gene did as asked and ducked inside her robes. His presence felt like a gentle breeze on the back of her neck, cooling her feverish head.

*"What happened?"*

"I don't know. My head hurts so much I don't know anything anymore. All I know is that we're trying to catch the culprit."

*"The culprit? What, did you pick up a new job?"*

"No, it's just hard finding some peace... With the roste and... Huh? What is that? A magic circle?"

As she spoke, a large magic circle started to materialize under her feet. Her eyes widened.

"Ah... Ahhh!"

Valeta whipped around at the sound of a woman's screams. Janice, who had been perfectly fine a moment ago, sat slumped on the ground, wailing. Her eyes were now two black voids, as if they had been gouged out.

"Why... It's too soon..." She was mumbling despairingly as blood started running from the empty sockets and down her cheeks like tears. "This... will be... the end..."

As Janice wriggled on the floor like a maggot, Valeta reflexively took a step back. Her eyes shook.

"S-save me!"

"Ahhh!"

As if Janice's cries were the catalyst, horrific screams started erupting from all around. Valeta quickly turned away as one of her eyes began to throb with a horrible pain. She could see part of the giant magic circle under her feet. She tried rubbing it away with her foot, but it remained intact.

*I need to get away from this circle.* But she didn't know how big it was.

What she did know was that it was at least big enough to encompass the entire village. She could see now what Reinhart had been talking about when he said that whole villages could fit inside the circle. She turned and started running.

It appeared that the roste phenomenon was caused by magic, not alchemy. And it was most certainly not an everyday sort of magic. *But it almost feels like alchemy too...*

She'd seen the way Reinhart used magic and had developed a sense for it. So she knew this was no ordinary magic. Beneath the massive energy of magic, it felt like there was a hint of alchemy underneath.

*What happened to Reinhart?* There was no way he hadn't felt that surge of magic. The fact that he wasn't here meant that something had happened to him. If he were going to kill the culprit, he would've done so with his own hands and not through something as complicated as this.

“Ugh...”

Valeta pressed a hand to her eye, which throbbed as though someone were constantly punching it. She clenched her teeth, groaning in agony. It was like someone was slowly digging their fingers into her eye and attempting to pluck it out, one nerve at a time.

*It will be all right...* Luckily, it wasn't the eye that contained the ancient circle. Even if she lost an eye, a potion would be able to fix it. Valeta gritted her teeth, looking at the road in front of her. She still had a long way to go.

Keeping her hand pressed to her eye, she started making a run for it. Her thoughts flashed back to Janice's empty eyes. Eliza's dark socket too.

Cold sweat started running down her back.

*Huff, huff...*

Her breath was quickly dwindling and, glancing back to see that she'd only passed by a few houses, she was just beginning to realize how terrible her stamina was. True, she never worked out, had to run, or even had the chance to build her stamina, but the reality was still sobering.

Valeta paused, breathing heavily.

“S-save... me...”

Someone started crawling out of their house—a man with a missing leg. A trail of blood followed him as he moved, no doubt caused by the sudden disappearance of his leg. The man's eyes were lidded, his leg cleanly cut off from the thigh down. He must have crawled out of his house, desperate to live.

Valeta took a step back. The cries came nonstop from every direction. She applied more pressure to her eye. The pain had been tolerable at first, but now it was too painful to even stand, much less move. It was so unbearable that it

felt like her eye would pop out if she took even a single step more.

*Maybe it's already too late.* She was once again grateful that it wasn't the eye containing her power. She would need a top-tier potion to bring back this eye if it fell out.

*Do I have the ingredients for it...?* she thought, wincing in pain

*"You foolish girl! Why are you so frustrating? Do you simply need to escape from this circle?"*

"Ngh..."

"Hey!"

"Can't... get caught..."

Valeta collapsed on the ground, still clutching her eye. Her vision was growing hazy. She didn't know if she should take solace in the fact that her other eye still felt fine.

In a flash, Gene put Valeta on his back and soared into the sky. With a few flaps of his wings, they were far away from the village.

Once they left the magic circle's radius, the excruciating pain that seemed to cut through every single nerve dissipated. Valeta slowly lowered her trembling hand. Once a distance away, Gene set her down.

Fully removing her hand from her eye, Valeta saw blood. Her face paled. She blinked a couple of times and hurriedly covered her other eye with her hand.

Thankfully, though not very well, she could still see out of her injured eye. It was blurry, as if tinged with blood. But she could still make out objects. She slowly lowered her hand again, done with her examination.

"Let's go back to the entrance. Come back inside my robe. And... Thanks for

your help."

*"Things would become a lot less interesting if you died."*

As she listened to Gene's twittering, Valeta carefully stowed the snowta inside her bag.

"Stay quiet now, you hear?" she said.

Meow...

She gave the creature a couple of pats on the head before staggering back to the village. The main entrance wasn't far off, and within five minutes, Valeta could see a group of people gathered near it.

"Let me go before I rip you all the pieces!"

A vortex crackling with dark magic raged around Reinhart. He stood, looking as though he was frozen in place, in front of two mysterious robed figures. One of them was a hooded man with gray eyes, while the other was a man in a rather familiar-looking robe.

There was a magic circle under Reinhart's feet.

A magician? Valeta thought as she narrowed her eyes.

"Amazing," one of the men said. "You truly are the head of the Magicians' Tower."

"Valeta's still in there..."

It was mesmerizing the way Reinhart's voice strained as his face contorted. She'd never seen him show that much emotion before. There was a storm of magic swirling around him, but he couldn't use it.

Why?

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 109

Valeta watched from a distance as the air between the men seemed to shift.

"Wait... Who?" the man standing opposite asked, his eyes narrowed.

The other man standing beside him in brown robes looked upset. "This... is quite a predicament."

Valeta's eyes narrowed as the familiar voice reached her ears. *Guilian?* What the hell was he doing here? She pressed a hand to her throbbing eye and swallowed a breath.

"I can't stop the magic once it's been activated. Is Valeta the Delight girl that Kynos wants?"

"Yes, but it shouldn't be a problem if she loses a limb or two."

How dare they talk about other people's body parts like that? Wretched bastards. Valeta wanted to kick their asses into the gutter. All the while she'd felt like dying... Nobody could understand the pain of getting their eyes gouged out unless they experienced it themselves.

"How dare... you... to... my Valeta..." Reinhart muttered disjointedly through gritted teeth, his arms outstretched, as he listened to the two men. Each of the words he spat out dripped with murderous intent. The storm of dark magic swirling around him grew even larger.

Guilian and the other man's eyes widened in surprise, their relaxed attitude forgotten. Even Valeta, who was standing a distance away, was speechless. In her eyes, the tornado looked just like a small typhoon with Reinhart in the eye

of the storm.

"If something's happened to her... you'll have wished for death once I'm through with you," Reinhart declared, slowly raising his head.

Still diagonally situated from the group, Valeta's eyes widened upon hearing his savage tone. His crimson eyes flashed with madness. Rage dripped off of him.

Guilian and the nameless man were frozen in place.

*Is this man truly human...? No, clearly not.*

The other man was speechless as he looked down at the seal being torn apart. This ancient circle was meant to drain life force and couldn't even be compared to the average magic circle. It wasn't something one could easily break, even if they were the head of the Magicians' Tower. But the seal was being shattered right before his eyes. It felt like an omniscient and omnipotent god was momentarily possessing Reinhart. He couldn't move an inch in the face of this terrifying, murderous aura and hatred.

"I'll rip you from limb to limb while you're still breathing. Until the very moment I pierce your beating heart, I won't let you die or even lose consciousness." Reinhart's bloodthirsty voice was sharp-edged. "I will hunt down every single person you hold dear and kill them in the most painful way in front of your eyes..."

"Hey, hey! What are you doing?"

Valeta jumped in, fearing that Reinhart would do something embarrassing if she continued to stand back and watch. Although he had no issues with his dark history, he wasn't exactly self-aware enough to see that he was about to add to it now. The murderous aura halted at her call as if suddenly paralyzed. The magic storm that had been brewing vanished into thin air.

"Va... Valeta?"

"Yeah. And you... You're not supposed to say things like that, you know?" She didn't want either of them to blush when they looked back on this moment in the future.

Reinhart studied her for a moment before his eyes widened. "M-master... What happened to your eye?"

"My eye? Why? Does it look weird?"

"It looks like the eye of a beaten bunny rabbit."

Why did he have to say it like that?

"I feel like my vision has deteriorated a little. It's a little blurry, but I stopped it from being pulled out completely. I still have some of my vision. Thankfully, a potion should be able to fix this."

The frown deepened on Reinhart's face as Valeta calmly explained the remedy for her current condition. He slowly, laboriously took a step in her direction as if something incredibly heavy was weighing him down. Sweat rolled down his face.

*What's wrong with him?* Valeta stood there, giving him a once-over. Upon closer inspection, she saw a magic circle under his feet. If she had to take a guess, that was probably what was restraining him.

"Huh... So you escaped on your own?"

A voice drifted over from behind Reinhart. As the man took another step forward, Valeta glanced at him again. The magic circle under his feet was nearly broken.

*Is he under a spell or something?* Reinhart's large hand cupped her cheek. It was

plain for all to see the damage done to her eye; all the veins had burst, turning her eye completely red. Not only that, it looked like her injured eye was having trouble focusing.

He gnashed his teeth together. "How..."

"I was waiting for you in the village when the roste outbreak happened."

"I thought I felt magic coming from inside, but... that was magic? Not alchemy?" Reinhart asked, glancing back at the village.

At some point, the screams coming from within had fallen silent. Recalling the tragedy that had just occurred, Valeta turned her head away from the town.

"Yeah, it was magic, but the magic itself was kind of strange."

"Strange?"

"Strange because I felt traces of both magic and alchemy. I can't tell though if the alchemy was from Desilian's transformation or something else."

She had thought the roste a precursor to the rezir, but her own experience dealing with the roste had, so far, been bizarre. Alchemists couldn't use magic. And magicians couldn't use alchemy. It was impossible to use both alchemy and magic at once.

If the roste was created through magic, was the rezir created by magic too? Was there such magic that could raise the dead? Then what could explain the faint trace of alchemy that she'd felt? If alchemy and magic were occurring at the same time, then the culprit behind the roste and the culprit behind the rezir were not the same person.

Desilian was behind the attacks on the village. If his transformation and the appearance of these two men weren't coincidences, then it was clear that the emperor was involved. And since Guilian was here, the transformation had most

likely been his doing, which meant that the emperor was definitely behind the attacks.

Janice knew about the roste, and Valeta was sure that she was working for the emperor, so both the destruction of these villages and the roste were connected to the emperor. But what about the rezir? If the culprit behind the roste and the rezir were different people, then who was the person using alchemy to bring these people back from the dead?

*Does Guilian have the ability to bring corpses back to life?* The same man who thought it incredible that someone had the power to make two top-tier potions a day?

On top of that, she felt like she had used the energy equivalent of making five top-tier potions when she'd reproduced Bertas's experiment, and she still had failed. *Though I believe that's because the price wasn't enough...* Either way, it wasn't likely that Guilian had the power to manage it. And if he didn't have the power... the price wouldn't have mattered to begin with. She felt like her head was about to split apart.

In other words, if the rezir outbreak wasn't Guilian's doing, that only meant that some other alchemist was involved.

"Hello, Miss Valeta."

Valeta's breath hitched as her thoughts were interrupted by a voice that came from behind. *I didn't sense him...*

Reinhart frowned. He couldn't detect any traces of magic. His ruby eyes flickered with surprise for a moment before it quickly vanished. Suddenly coming to his senses, he grabbed Valeta by the waist and tried to pull her into his embrace. Simultaneously, the stranger brought his wand up to the base of her neck.

The light gray gem on his wand pulsated.

"My name is Largris."

Valeta's eyes widened. "Lar... Largris?" she stammered. She tried to turn around to catch a glimpse of the man, but he pressed the wand even harder against her neck.

"Shh. It'll only hurt more if you move."

"The letter..."

Largris looked her over as she let out a whisper that was as light as a breeze. His dark hand gripped the wand tightly. The corners of his lips turned up into a smile. There's something mischievous about him.

"Kynos has been looking for you. Come with me, why don't you?"

"What if I don't want to...?"

"Then I'll have to take you by force."

His childish voice held no malice. It sounded so innocent. If he was the same age as the emperor and Eliza, then he must've been in his forties. Valeta didn't know how he could look so young.

*Is that just a magician thing?* In fact, Balteer looked far younger than his years too. Reinhart's fingers twitched as he listened.

"Go ahead and try. I'm more than willing to chop off one or two of the little lady's limbs if that's what it takes."

Largris' threat stopped Reinhart in his tracks. Still smiling, he reached into his pocket, pulled something out, and handed it to Reinhart.

A black leather choker. *What is with these people and their obsession with*

*chokers?* Valeta frowned. Was it a choker or a dog collar?

"You know how to put one on, don't you?" Largris asked, smiling, and gestured around his neck. Reinhart observed the inside of the choker and obediently placed it around his own neck.

Valeta's face twisted. "Are you crazy? Why don't you just run?"

"Where would I go without you, Master?"

*Clack.*

Reinhart inhaled sharply at the audible click, the sound of something locking into place. *My... magic.* This was no ordinary seal. His magic was completely blocked. He lifted his head to stare at the other man, unable to help but feel the emptiness in his body.

"I made it a little differently than usual," Largris said. "I don't know if you'll like it."

"Oh... I love it." To the point where it made him want to jump out a window, but Reinhart chose to omit that last part.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 110

“And I better put this on you again.”

Valeta frowned as she looked down at the choker, the one she thought had been destroyed by Reinhart. She looked between Reinhart and Largris, who was still holding the wand to her throat, and took the choker into her hand, unhappily.

*I'm glad I called Gene.*

Largris only lowered his wand once she put the choker on around her neck. “Good. Now, Guilian says that there's something you need to do inside the village. Let's head on in.”

He gestured toward the entrance of the village with his wand. But with the horrors of the attack still fresh on her mind, Valeta let out a slow breath and looked away.

“It's all right, Master,” Reinhart said, his voice now back to normal, as he took her hand.

He blinked leisurely. The corners of his mouth curved into a gentle smile. He was acting as though this whole situation was just a fun game for him.

Largris grinned at them mischievously as he watched the scene unfolding before him. “Well, you seem to get along. Are you two lovers?”

“Are you insane...?” Valeta asked, astonished.

Reinhart smiled at her shocked response. “Our relationship isn't that superficial.”

“Hmm...” Largris regarded Reinhart with interest.

"Don't forget. If you have to die one day, I'll be the one to kill you, master."

Largris frowned as he stepped foot into the village. He felt like he was looking at a young Kynos. But his expression quickly relaxed. He seemed like the type to be very good at hiding his emotions.

"Did you do this?" Valeta asked.

"You mean, the head of the tower?" Largris replied with wide eyes and a smirk in his voice.

Her face hardened, his intentions clear to her. They weren't planning on hiding this at all. Reinhart's smile deepened.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Valeta retorted. "He was with you the whole time, tied up."

"Yes, if you choose to believe the truth. But is the truth that important?"

Her breath paused. There was a bite to his words. And though his voice held a playful and innocent quality, it was clear that he wasn't one to pick his words carelessly. Silent for a moment, Valeta then decided to pose another question.

"How can you turn a person into a beast with alchemy? Actually, wait. That's easy," she muttered. Largris' eyes widened briefly. "I suppose asking how you turn that beast back into a human is the better question."

"Your junior has a question, Guilian," Largris said with a shrug, lightly deflecting the question off to the other alchemist.

By this time, the four were already inside the village, and Valeta still had a wand pointed at her. She slowly turned to look at Guilian.

"What the hell do you get out of risking your life to turn people into clay?"

Guilian smiled at the chill in her voice. "Come to think of it, you've also read Bertas' paper, haven't you? Were you able to find out which circle I used?" He dutifully replied, albeit a little tiredly. However, it was more of a half-question than a definitive answer.

"It's primarily one vital shape-changing formula... You can take a human body apart, turn it into something like clay, and reassemble it into a new form," Valeta replied, then covered her mouth with her hand.

She'd watched a human body melt and reform right before her eyes. She felt a little sick. The price for transforming a human into a monster was not much at all. Probably no more than then the blood of an alchemist, or something equivalent. Just like when she'd experimented with insects. However, turning the monster back into a human, or at least back into its original form, would require a much larger price. Perhaps the price of life.

"How many human lives have you sacrificed to create these monsters that you can use for your own disposal?"

Guilian wordlessly glanced at Valeta. The man with the eyepatch didn't look to be doing very well. Sweat was dripping down his face, as if he were exhausted.

She stared at the silent man for a long while before redirecting her gaze to Largris. "Did you trigger the roste in every town?"

"I did. Undetectable, wasn't I?" Largris replied, breezily. Since he was a magician, it wouldn't have been difficult to teleport from place to place.

"But this happened once before, twenty years ago. You weren't here then."

Largris chuckled at Valeta's observation. He snorted, looking at her with mild amusement. "I didn't create the magic of the roste."

"Then..."

"The position of the head of the Magicians' Tower has been vacant for some time, no? What do you think the magicians of the imperial castle did during that time?" Largris replied offhandedly as turned around and started walking backward. His voice was still mischievous, but it had a hard edge to it.

Reinhart narrowed his eyes.

"Kynos has always been smart, cunning, and good at manipulating people. Finding and latching on to their weaknesses comes easier to him than breathing."

"Are you saying that a magician at the imperial palace did it while the seat of the Magicians' Tower head was vacant?" Reinhart asked, smiling. His broad grin indicated just how upset he was by the whole thing.

"That's right."

"Grr..."

"Guhhh..."

At that moment, a guttural sound rang out from around them. Reinhart stopped where he was upon hearing the uneasy sound and grabbed Valeta by the wrist. His eyes narrowed. "Don't go."

"Why not?"

Instead of replying, he gestured ahead with his chin.

Valeta turned to see what he was looking at and froze. Guilian took a step back. Valeta was also about to take a step back when she noticed that Largris was standing firmly in place. He had the smallest hint of a smile on his face. But it only lasted for a split second. In the blink of an eye, it vanished, and he took a step back as if also shocked.

She blinked a couple of times, her brows furrowing in confusion. *Was it just my imagination?* She frowned and rubbed her forehead with her hand.

Valeta looked around. They were deep in the village now, and all around them were people who were either dead or maimed. Most of them were on the ground, clutching at their separated body parts. Of course, the dead were among them too.

Yes, they were dead... Or at least, they were until recently. The problem was that the dead were rising, their bones and muscles grotesquely twisting in unnatural directions.

Usually, people would stand up using their legs or by using the floor as support. But these corpses did not. They attempted to stand using their torsos first and flailed their legs and arms oddly about as they did so.

Valeta quickly reached into her bag to grab a pen and paper but gasped. *I can't use alchemy...*

The snowta took advantage of the opening and poked its head out.

Meow?

Valeta blinked stupidly at the creature as it tilted its head, lacking complete awareness. She could feel her tense body growing weak. After giving the snowta a couple of pats on the head, she closed the bag again, not wanting to expose it to danger.

She let out a breath.

"Stand behind me, Master."

"Do you know how to use a sword?" she asked.

Reinhart beamed as he looked at the pickaxes and knives strewn around them.

Valeta stared at him for a moment, mesmerized by his smile.

"Not at all."

His response was rather bleak compared to his radiant smile.

"Maybe you should develop some muscles..."

"I never felt the need to since I had strength spells."

"Well, do you feel the need now?" she asked sharply.

"Mm, maybe a little," Reinhart said, grinning.

Then he grabbed her wrist. Corpses surrounded them on all sides. Valeta watched as Guilian pulled out a bundle of paper. He ripped out a page. *Oh, I didn't know you could do that...* Valeta was beginning to regret not asking Carlon about these things. Of course, it'd still be useless even if she had.

"Grrr..."

"Gaaaahhh!"

With their arms outstretched, the corpses began to lunge for Largris and Guilian, who were standing on the frontline. Reinhart tightened his grip on Valeta's hand and turned around.

"Let's hide somewhere until they finish taking care of this."

"We're... running away?"

"Yes. There's nothing we can do right now," he replied, looking rather unbothered. She was rather surprised that he wasn't on a rampage, fed up with the entire situation.

"What?" he asked. Perhaps he could sense what she was thinking.

"You're just calmer than I thought you'd be."

"Hm... Did you think I'd lose my temper because I was annoyed? Or just stand there out of stubborn pride?"

"Not the latter... but definitely a little bit of the former," she said.

"I do find the whole situation rather annoying, but I hate seeing you in danger more. And I've fought those things before. They're quite a hassle to deal with," Reinhart said with a smile as he turned toward the inn.

Everywhere they went, they could hear the sound of people being eaten alive.

*Crunch.*

*Crack.*

Valeta's eyes darted about as she heard people's cries and the tearing of raw flesh. She knew it was impossible to save them, but the smell of blood and the sounds of screaming and rabid feasting everywhere were hard to bear.

"Master, do you know where the ladder to the roof is?"

"Ah... It's back here."

Reinhart's voice pulled Valeta out of her thoughts, and she turned to lead the way. When they reached the back of the inn, they discovered that the ladder was still there.

"There it is!"

A harsh but vaguely familiar voice came from behind Valeta as she started climbing the ladder. "Ahh... Ahh....?"

"Valeta! Climb!"

“Janice...?”

She made eye contact with Janice the moment Reinhart cried out. Valeta tried to climb the ladder, but the other woman was already lashing out with a sword. *It's too late.*

Although Reinhart told her to climb, Valeta stepped back and let go of the ladder. She felt something firm against her back.

*Shunk.*

It was a sound similar to that of livestock getting killed. The scent of blood filled the air.

“Ngh...” Valeta quickly looked up at the sound coming from above her. A sword had pierced through the magician’s shoulder.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 111

“Ahh...? Grr...”

“Are you okay, Master?” Reinhart’s face was white as a sheet, but he was still smiling.

Valeta quickly tilted her head back upon hearing his nonchalant tone. She gritted her teeth, reaching up for the sword embedded in his shoulder.

“Don’t,” he protested. “Shut up. Why are you asking *me* that?”

She gripped the sword as tightly as she could, feeling the sharp pain of the blade digging into her flesh, her blood trickling down the metal. Reinhart’s pale face crumpled into a grimace.

“I said don’t, Master.”

“Are you trying to give me orders?”

Her violet eyes flashed in the darkness. Reinhart held his breath for a moment, then frowned down at her.

Still clinging to the blade, Valeta began to carefully pull the sword from his shoulder. Although her face remained impassive despite clinging to the sword with her bare hands, Reinhart’s own expression twisted in pain.

“It hurts, master...”

“Bear with it. I could’ve dodged. Why did you throw yourself in front of me?”

“I don’t know. My body just moved on its own.”

Valeta had nothing to say to Reinhart's calm assertion. She frequently found herself speechless in the face of his brutal honesty. She pursed her lips for a moment, then turned her attention to Janice, who was making strange noises.

"Why is that corpse holding a sword in the first place?"

"Hah... Maybe it's the master of all the other walking corpses."

*What a genius thing to say,* Valeta thought sarcastically, side-eying Reinhart.

"Stop talking nonsense. Can you still move?"

Valeta was able to remove the sword from his shoulder, but his robe was now drenched in blood. Janice, her empty eye sockets dripping gore down her cheeks, was lingering in front of the ladder and blocking access to it.

"Maybe we should head in that direction?"

"Look at this, Master."

Reinhart swept his foot along the ground several times, nodding down at it, indicating where he wanted her to look. There was a faded magic circle on the ground. It was unique, unlike anything either of them had ever seen before. *This is...*

Magic circles were essentially always used lines, dots, and the ancient language. Channeling power into the circle was the basis of magic. In contrast, alchemy circles were made using circles and symbols. An alchemist would then channel power through alchemy ingredients placed within the center. The fundamental difference between magic and alchemy was whether a price was paid or not.

Alchemists would only get back as much as they put in. However, magic wasn't bound by the same rules. Magic was creating something from nothing.

"What is it? Is it magic or alchemy?" Valeta asked as she crouched down. She

carefully brushed more of the dirt away with her fingertips, expression distinctly not pleased.

Leaning over Valeta, Reinhart shrugged. "Hard to say. I've never seen anything like this before."

"It looks like a combination of both magic and alchemy." Reinhart tilted his head. The smirk he wore on his face grew wider. "If it's an alchemy circle, does that mean the village people's body parts were the price paid to activate it?"

Valeta's eyes widened at Reinhart's blunt question. "Perhaps... If it were magic, it would have to be just a simple spell meant to kill," she said.

Logically, it could be either magic or alchemy—both made sense. Still crouched on the ground, Valeta inspected the strange circle closely. Meanwhile, standing still and sniffing at the air to try and make up for her missing sight, Janice suddenly began to swing her sword around wildly once more.

"Step back, Master."

"Oh... All right."

Valeta allowed Reinhart to tug her back using the grip he had on her shoulder.

"Do you think you can run?" he asked.

"What about you? I can't run for long. I've already reached the limits of my stamina tonight."

Reinhart furrowed his brows. Then his lips parted in a bright smile as he took hold of Valeta's hand, and tucked her away behind him.

"You've always been so weak, Master."

"You think I had time to exercise while I was locked up all these years? I

probably wouldn't have been allowed even if I did have the time. He liked it when I didn't rebel."

Reinhart's eyebrow twitched. He sighed a short gust of air, keeping a close eye on Janice's approach as she swung her sword around at random.

Janice froze hearing his sigh. Unable to make heads or tails of her surroundings, her sightless gaze swung in their direction. They froze.

"This is your fault..."

"Sorry, Master."

"Graaa...!"

Janice lunged at them, sword still in hand. Valeta and Reinhart both turned to run. There was a loud booming sound and a bolt of lightning streaked out of the sky. They froze.

The bolt had struck Janice directly, and when the light cleared she was laid out on the ground, twitching every so often. She wasn't dead just yet. Picking up the sudden smell of cooked meat was a distinctly strange sensation.

"Are you okay?"

"Kurt...?"

"Are either of you hurt?"

Valeta's eyes widened upon seeing Kurt and Silon stepping into view. Instead of responding, she turned to look at Reinhart whose eyes were just as wide. It was clear that he hadn't been expecting them either.

"Let's return to the Tower for now."

"Don't bother. I can sort this out on my..."

"Please stop being so stubborn!" Kurt shouted, clenching his fists.

Reinhart's eyes narrowed with displeasure. His thin smile showed how uncomfortable he was with accepting help.

Valeta squeezed his hand.

"You are our lord and the Head of the Tower. We... We are your tools. Please make use of us."

"I told you I wasn't Head of anything anymore," Reinhart said. "You can take care of yourselves from now on."

"We're here to help."

"I don't need your help." Reinhart allowed his injured, bloodied arm to hang at his side and wrapped his free arm around Valeta's waist. "All I need is my Master."

"Aren't both of you wearing collars sealing your powers?"

"We'll figure it out on our own," Reinhart stated once more, sounding bored of the conversation. However, his eyes narrowed as he watched the twitching Janice attempting to climb to her feet. "Master, why don't we go over there..."

Valeta sighed as she reached up and gently smacked Reinhart on the forehead. His eyes widened. Surprised, he looked down at her.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked, unimpressed.

"Huh?"

"Why are you being so hostile? They said they're here to help."

She stopped, refusing to continue walking. Reinhart regarded her with shock, Kurt and Silon wearing similar expressions. Reinhart seemed the most stunned

of the three of them. His red irises were fully dilated, brow crinkled in discomfort.

"Why would we turn to people who can't help us? We can do this on our own."

"How do you know whether they're capable of helping us or not?" she asked.

"And are you sure we can do this on our own?"

They were not currently in a position to pick and choose. Their hands were tied, and she could hear the sound of clanking iron chains approaching them. She didn't like the idea of accepting help, but now was not the time to be stubborn. The lightning bolt had attracted the attention of the rezir lingering nearby.

"We've been fine by ourselves until now. Why are you taking their side all of a sudden?" Reinhart sulked.

"I'm not taking their side. What do you think is going to happen to us if we fail to get out of here?"

Reinhart just shrugged in answer to Valeta's question. His expression was bored, his stance relaxed, as if he didn't care about how serious their situation was. At least, that's the impression Valeta got from his easy smile.

"I told you that I'd take care of you. First, I'll give you a painless death, and then I'll kill myself."

The brutal confession fell from his lips as easily as if he were commenting on the weather. The scariest part was that she had no doubt he would carry out his plan if the worst should happen. Whether or not her death was painless wasn't what was concerning her at this point in time. Valeta had no idea how to impress upon Reinhart just how twisted this way of thinking was.

"Let me be clear. The reason I'm doing this is because I want a peaceful life, not a peaceful death."

She had to draw a line in the sand. If Valeta had any desire to die, she would have chosen death much sooner, rather than stubbornly continuing to cling to her horrible life. The reason she was still alive was because she had chosen not to die.

Reinhart's face darkened, Valeta's words seeming to have hit a nerve in him. He took a single step closer to her, his fists clenched. He must have lost a lot of blood by now, as his lips were beginning to turn blue. The ground beneath him was saturated with his blood.

"So you're saying that we should accept these bastards' help?" Reinhart snapped caustically, his voice heated as he jerked his head at the two magicians. He wasn't getting worked up, so much as he wasn't feeling well.

Valeta frowned.

"Reinhart."

The magician's cold gaze became soft hearing her quietly calling his name. His eyes instinctively found hers.

"I'm the only person you trusted in that damned manor..." she said.

"You're making it sound like you weren't exactly the same."

Valeta huffed a short sigh hearing Reinhart's bitter scoff. She knew that he was only grumbling because he was in pain. She also understood wanting nobody to come between them. However, they didn't have that luxury as they watched Janice squirming before them.

"Your voice saved me all those times I was sitting alone in the darkness."

Reinhart's mouth fell open slightly at this rare display of sincerity from Valeta. She looked down at the ground for a moment, then back up to meet his red eyes.

She could see her own violet eyes reflected in his.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 112

"Reinhart, we can't live in our own little world, just the two of us, forever," Valeta said as she avoided making eye contact.

He had smashed the birdcage they were trapped in on the day of the Delight Massacre. The small, stuffy cage they had been locked in was gone. It was a prison she'd thought she would never escape from. He had destroyed the world that had existed with just the two of them.

When her little world, consisting of only the manor had collapsed, an impossibly wide horizon had appeared before her. She was able to stand under a blue sky and go as far as she wanted.

"Why not?" Reinhart asked sullenly. The lazy curve to his eyes held an edge to it. The corners of them were drawn up and sharp, a representation of how he was feeling. "Don't you dare say that you'll abandon me ever again. Valeta, you're mine. If the time comes for you to die, it will be by my hand."

"We're going to die right now if you don't stop talking sh\*t," Valeta said as she brought a hand to her forehead from sheer exasperation. She didn't understand what he was so insecure about. He had the ability to chase her down no matter where she went.

She never really understood him, but it was even less so these days. *Is this how people normally express their interest in someone else?* It didn't seem like Reinhart would ever directly admit that this was the case, though. He glanced over at her petulantly, resembling a child.

"I don't like it, Master. What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"You're the one who broke the birdcage. It's time to face reality. We can't

survive out here on our own.”

“This is just an unusual situation.”

“If there’s something we don’t know, we have to refer to a book or learn from a veteran. This situation is beyond our ability to handle by ourselves.”

Reinhart said nothing more as Valeta scolded him.

*Crash!*

Another bolt of lightning struck. It looked like Silon was behind it. The rezir started to crowd around the group.

“So? What do you want to do, Master?” Reinhart asked, ignoring the danger pressing closer around them.

“My legs hurt, and I’m out of energy. I want to sleep.”

Reinhart stared at her, unspeaking.

“Let’s go home,” she said.

He regarded her with wide, stunned eyes, squeezing her hand clasped in his a little tighter. Valeta looked down at their joined hands for a second before looking up again. *I didn’t realize we were still holding hands.* It was just like him to not let go.

Reinhart said nothing, instead shooting Kurt a quick glance. The gem on the tip of his staff was glowing. He had finished his incantation and was ready to use his magic. He was waiting for Reinhart’s command.

“Is the tower home, Master?”

This question made Valeta pause for a moment, realizing what she had just said.

"As long as you're there, maybe. I thought you said the sky room was ours," Valeta said bluntly, her brow furrowed.

"Yeah, you're right," Reinhart said quietly. He let out a quiet sigh between his teeth, then shrugged. Pursing his lips, he locked eyes with Valeta. "Silon. Let's go to the Magicians' Tower—"

Before he could finish speaking, Reinhart staggered.

"Damn..."

He started to fall, almost as if in slow motion, his low voice trailing off like he was having trouble speaking. His head slumped forward, sweat beading on his forehead from fever.

"Hey..."

Valeta tugged at Reinhart's hand. It was ice cold. Her eyes widened as she realized something was very wrong. Reinhart always ran warmer than her. However, now he was cold to the touch, much colder than even Valeta normally was. Reinhart's expression was strange as he watched her grow pale.

"Master... You know how to use duplication alchemy, right?"

His voice carried a note of laughter but was beginning to grow faint. Valeta reached for him, trying to catch Reinhart as he slowly crumpled.

"Ah..."

His voice grew fainter still. Valeta tried to prop Reinhart's weight against her side. However, she knew she didn't have the strength to support the man who was a head taller than her.

"...I'm sorry, Master," Reinhart said as his eyes slid closed.

Valeta's stared at him, her vision swimming. She could feel herself beginning to collapse under his weight, her expression growing stiff and cold as she felt Reinhart slipping from her hold. She sank to her knees and pressed a hand against his forehead. It was hot to the touch.

"My lord!"

Valeta sat on the ground clutching Reinhart to herself in an attempt to not drop him and ducked her head. Her eyes grew narrow and cold as she examined Reinhart's pale face and the blood still trickling from his wound. *People never get tired of this, do they?*

She knew intimately that all humans were greedy. How could she not know when she'd experienced it firsthand? It didn't matter to her what fights people got into, what deeds they dirtied their hands with. She didn't care as long as she wasn't involved. That's what she had always tried to do. it's what she'd been doing. So why...

*We didn't do anything wrong, so why are they after us?* If it was a sin merely to be born with these powers, then they'd have to make the most of what they'd been given.

However, the reason Reinhart had just been playing around was because he was holding himself back.

"Miss Valeta, I think it would be best if we returned to the Magicians' Tower."

"We won't be of any help because we don't specialize in healing magic."

Valeta's lips slowly parted as she watched Kurt and Silon approach Reinhart and try to help steady his body.

"Gene..."

“What now, human?” Gene, who had been hiding in the hood of her robe as requested, made himself known.

“Destroy all the moving corpses,” she ordered.

Silon and Kurt’s eyes widened hearing her give this command. Her usually indifferent voice was now cold as ice.

“Are you talking about those things?” Gene waved his wing at Janice, who was still moving despite being struck by lightning twice.

Valeta gave the corpse a passing glance before she rose to her feet.

“Yes.”

“Finally, a task that I’m worthy of. They don’t seem like they’ll die easily...”

“What are you worried about? You have the power of the wind. Just tear them to shreds,” she replied, her tone deceptively light, almost like a breeze.

Looking mighty satisfied, Gene grew to his usual size, no longer as big as a sparrow.

“Miss... Valeta?”

“Yes?” Valeta replied to Silon in her usual, neutral voice. Her violet eyes were equally as calm. Silon wordlessly stammered, before he finally just shook his head.

Valeta gently brushed her hand over the wound in Reinhart’s shoulder where she’d pulled out the sword. The bleeding had slopped to a stop for a moment, but it was beginning to gush blood again. She looked so utterly detached, it was like she was a different person entirely.

“Is this enough blood?”

*“Of course. It’s a deal.”*

She flexed her hand once before extending it. A gentle breeze whispered against her palm, collecting a globule of blood around the size of a fist.

Gene opened his mouth, consuming the blood and then taking off.

“Make sure you keep out of sight.”

Gene gave Valeta a look before flying straight into the sky. He flew so fast that it was hard to keep track of him, and then he disappeared into a dark cloud.

“You’re free to go when you’re done, Gene.”

*“What about you?”*

She couldn’t see him anymore, but his voice still rang clear in her mind.

“I’ll call you next time I have need of you.”

*“You’re a tricky partner.”*

However, Gene said no more on the matter. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Valeta turned her attention back to her companions and found Kurt holding Reinhart up. She approached them.

“Let’s go to the Magicians’ Tower.”

“Yes.”

Silon raised his magic staff, muttering a few words and causing a magic circle to appear beneath his feet. Largris and Guilian hadn’t made their way to them, which no doubt meant that something had delayed them.

Whoosh.

A breeze swept between them, sending chills down their spines. The corners of Valeta's lips quirked into a smile as she realized what Gene was doing. Far off in the distance, she could see a small, black tornado forming. The tornado grew bigger and bigger as it approached the village, swallowing everything in its path.

"That's..."

Kurt and Silon gaped at the incoming tornado. The village's many open doors began to sway in the wind. Perhaps because they weren't oiled properly, the squeaking hinges were grating on the ears.

*Crack.*

*Crunch.*

The wind began to blow the roofs clean off many buildings, and trees started snapping like they were made of nothing but paper. As the tornado began to consume the village, Valeta took another step toward Silon and Kurt.

"Aren't we going?"

"Y-yes. Let's depart."

Silon glanced at Valeta. Even though a large tornado was threatening to swallow them alive, the woman was perfectly composed.

"Teleport."

Silon used the magic he had readied, and instantly their surroundings changed. Before she'd even processed what was happening, they were standing under the island in the sky.

The gusts of wind did not follow them.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 113

Silon activated his magic once more, teleporting them up this time. Only after they'd arrived on the island in the sky did Valeta begin to relax, her tense limbs uncoiling. She inspected Reinhart. He was breathing heavily and, unsurprisingly, he was still bleeding. His fingers felt colder than ever before. Valeta's face hardened when she noticed.

"Caspelios!"

After staring at Reinhart with hard eyes for a long time, Valeta called out to the tower's guardian loudly, a rare occurrence. Caspelios appeared before her instantly. However, he wasn't alone. More magicians began appearing, no doubt attracted by the commotion.

"A socoro?"

"What's wrong with the Head?"

"Did something happen?"

"Isn't she that socoro?"

Valeta's expression turned grim as she heard the commotion behind her. She gave Reinhart another glance before leaving his side to approach Caspelios.

"Move him to his room. Also, can you get this off?" Valeta asked as she tugged on Caspelios' wrist.

He regarded her hand with shock, surprised she was touching him without any reservations. He leaned down to carefully inspect the choker around Valeta's neck.

"If there is a seal on it, then I'll have to confirm which circle is being used," he said. "However, I won't be able to do much if it's an alchemy seal. Take my hand."

His voice was as grating as it always was. Valeta took Reinhart's hand in hers and squeezed Caspelios' scarred hand with the other. He flinched. He'd expected that Valeta would place a finger on his hand instead of holding it properly. He regarded her with an odd expression once more, then tapped the floor with the magic staff he always carried. A magic circle appeared, and their surroundings melted away, only to be replaced again.

"Put him down here."

"On the floor...?"

"The floor will have to do for now."

Kurt looked reluctant but set the man down on the floor as Valeta requested nevertheless. Then, Valeta climbed on top of Reinhart.

"M-Miss Valeta?" Silon said, visibly puzzled.

Valeta straddled Reinhart's thighs without hesitation and began to rip his robes open.

"M-Miss Valeta, we can..."

"I got it. Oh, do any of you know any restoration magic? If not, do you have any potions that can stop the bleeding?" she barked, not pausing as she continued to rip off Reinhart's clothes.

Then, as if remembering something, Valeta suddenly reached for her bag. She carefully pulled the sleeping snowta out, setting it on the floor. Then, she rummaged around in her bag and pulled out a carefully wrapped dagger. Without hesitation, she used the dagger to cut Reinhart free of his remaining

clothes. The three magicians frowned, taken aback by her boldness.

Valeta paused for a moment. "Didn't you hear me the first time? I asked if you have anything that can be used to treat him."

Her gaze was cold as she directed a glare at them. Their breathing hitched as they caught sight of Valeta's typically languid violet eyes, chilled with a cold rage. A dangerous aura emanated from her, not unlike the storm roused by the wind elemental she'd summoned.

*Is this really the same person?* It felt as though they were looking at Reinhart, a man capable of cracking open skulls with a smile on his face.

Silon was the first to break free of his daze. "I think we have a few potions downstairs. However, they're not as effective as an alchemist's potion."

"As long as it stops the bleeding."

"Then I'll be right back."

Valeta looked away, satisfied with the answer. She tugged Reinhart's shirt free from his body. Red blood caked his pale skin. The gaping wound was swollen and hot to the touch. Blood continued to spill from the wound. She was surprised he'd managed to last this long.

"Crazy bastard," she cursed, annoyed that they'd wasted so much time just standing around arguing between themselves. She always knew he was crazy, but this time he'd crossed the line.

"Would it be better to move him to the bed?"

"Do you want to get blood all over the bed? We'll treat him before we move him," Valeta said as she ripped Reinhart's robe into strips.

"Why are you ripping that?"

"To use as a bandage."

Kurt's expression grew puzzled. "Let me know if you need anything. I can go get it."

"Oh, right. I can do that," Valeta mumbled as if she had just realized that was an option available to her.

"I'll leave it to you, then."

Kurt disappeared for a moment before reappearing with an armful of bandages and medical tools. Caspelios followed with cloth and a basin of warm water.

"It's normal that one would ask those around them for help, but Miss Valeta, you and our lord always try to solve your problems by yourself."

Valeta sighed as she cleaned the blood from Reinhart's wound. She didn't understand how she'd ended up caring for this punk. But she had to admit that she felt like her heart had stopped for a moment when he'd been stabbed.

"It just became habitual. It's not easy to break free of such an old habit. I know it might be frustrating, but please don't hold it against us," Valeta said as she continued to wipe away the worst of the blood. She could see the angry red swell of his wound now that the blood was gone. Caspelios stood silent as a stone statue.

"These wounds look very old," Kurt said as he looked down at Reinhart, who was breathing heavily.

Valeta glanced over his body. Most of the wounds had healed, but there were still a few scars here and there.

"He was abused a lot at the manor..." she trailed off as she grimaced. "They tried not to leave any lasting marks as he was supposed to be sold as a prize eventually, but there were days when he was beaten black and blue."

"And he put up with that?"

"He tried to."

Reinhart was punished if she was locked up for doing something wrong. Since he was Valeta's personal slave, he was made to endure anything Valeta had to. Sometimes they took things too far. For the most part, punishments were doled out by the other attendants. But Reinhart had a lot of enemies.

The male attendants in particular harbored hostility toward him.

"Here are the potions, Miss Valeta. The manager was able to make a few, and these are the best ones..."

Valeta took the purple potion Silon held out to her. She had never seen a magician's potion before. She lifted the potion up and inspected it closely.

*It's unrefined,* Valeta thought, clicking her tongue. The magician's potion was between a low and mid-grade potion in quality. It was different in color and regenerative properties. She opened the cork, sniffed the contents, and poured the potion over Reinhart's shoulder.

"Aren't you supposed to drink half?"

"It's of such terrible quality that it will barely stop the bleeding."

"I'm sure it seems that way compared to alchemist-made potions," Silon replied awkwardly to Valeta's cold unimpressed response.

It was a relief that the bleeding had stopped. She rose to her feet and faced Caspelios. "Can you break this?"

"I don't know much about alchemy."

"It doesn't have to be perfect. Reinhart was able to get rid of it."

"There's no way of measuring just how powerful the lord is. His magic is not something we can hope to emulate."

Valeta clicked her tongue. Alchemy was certainly different from magic. She thought for a moment. *If this is the same seal as the one Eliza showed me...*

If she had more time to think about it, it wouldn't have taken her that long to make a seal capable of breaking the one around her neck. She wished that there was a faster way, but life rarely went the way she wanted it to.

She sighed. "Let's move him to the bed now that the bleeding has stopped."

The snowta stretched and then toddled over to Valeta's feet.

*Meow!*

Valeta looked down at the small cry and smiled faintly. She gave the soft creature a few gentle pats. "I'm sorry. I'm always forgetting about you."

She wanted nothing more than to rest, but couldn't until the situation was dealt with.

"Miss Valeta, I'm sorry to ask you this now, but we have a lot of questions to ask about what happened earlier—"

"We need to break this seal first," Valeta said, cutting off Silon. She produced a pen and paper from her bag and started drawing a circle after seating herself on the floor. She carefully drew the alchemy seals from memory. "I think it looked like this."

Valeta racked her brain. She regretted not taking a closer look at the seal at the time. Every once in a while, a frustrated groan would escape her lips as her pen paused over the page. All eyes were on her. After a long moment, she blinked as she held up the mostly reproduced seal.

"Aha," she exclaimed quietly, taking out another piece of paper and writing on it. This time, her pen moved faster, and in less than an hour, she'd produced an unlocking seal while still seated on the floor.

Kurt, Silon, and Caspelios, who rarely showed emotions on his face, couldn't help but marvel over Valeta's skills. She scribbled and erased a few more lines. Then, she held the piece of paper out for the three men to see.

"Can you engrave this on the choker?"

"Yes, that shouldn't be too difficult."

Silon waved his magic wand while chanting softly. The seal lifted off of the paper and fastened itself to her choker.

Valeta flinched, feeling the alchemy circle squirming against her neck. *Like a sticker?* What a handy form of magic. As soon as the seal was attached to her choker, she bent down to collect the dagger that had rolled away and made a small cut on her finger.

Perhaps her good sense had returned to her, but she was beginning to think it was a bad idea to reopen old wounds. *Janice was able to do alchemy with just blood.* In other words, an alchemist's blood contained some amount of magic. Alchemy always required a price and an alchemist's power.

*If I'm right, then...* Valeta gazed blankly at the blood pooling on the tip of her finger before pressing it against the center of the seal.

*Click.*

She heard the seal unlock as her blood seeped into it. She felt as if she could breathe freely again as soon as the choker fell free from her neck. Sweat had begun to gather under the leather, making her very uncomfortable.

Valeta gently ran her fingers over her neck. Her eyes narrowed when she felt

intense stares burning a hole in her. She turned to look at the three men.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked.

"It's nothing."

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 114

"I'm sorry, but where was this medicine made? Do you have any more medicinal herbs around here? I'm going to have to make my own potions."

"On the eighty-second floor? That floor is reserved for growing and researching herbs and plants, along with potion crafting and maintenance."

"The eighty-second floor?"

This sounded vaguely familiar. Valeta searched her memories and chuckled when she remembered why. She'd come across that floor when she'd tried to escape the Tower using the stairs. She remembered the small garden located inside the Tower, as well as the breeze that had carried the scent of dirt.

"By any chance, is there a child about this size there? He has light green hair and eyes."

"Hm... I don't think..." Silon's voice sounded strange. "I wouldn't call him a child, but there is someone who matches that description there."

"Ah, then I'd like to go to the eighty-second floor, Caspelios," Valeta said, holding her hand out to Caspelios easily.

His fingers twitched, but he gently took her hand in his own. As if he had been waiting for her to call on him, their surroundings changed instantly.

"Oh, this is different."

It felt like it had been a while since she was last in this place. Technically, it hadn't been all that long, but it felt like a lot of time had passed because she had been running all over the place. The door opened when she stepped closer,

revealing a field.

The eighty-second floor was the same as she remembered it. She could smell the crisp breeze carrying the scent of herbs and plants. Looking around at the lush surroundings, she took a step into the room.

"What do you want? Do you need more potions?"

"Hey, kid. It's been a while."

"Aren't you that rude socoro?"

"Is that how you think of me?" Valeta laughed off the hostile remark as if she was well used to it.

The boy's green eyes narrowed. He looked so young that she didn't feel particularly threatened by his hostile glare. She looked up at the blue sky and white clouds, a smile coming to her lips.

The child huffed, turning away from her.

"Viren," Caspelios called, voice carrying a hint of warning as he stepped forward.

Viren looked up. He was so small that he only came to the watchman's waist.

Viren? The name didn't match his appearance. If she had only heard his name, she would have assumed he was much older than he looked.

"Oh, are you the lord's famous socoro?" Viren said in response to Caspelios' warning glance.

"The lord's socoro?"

"You weren't aware? I mean, you don't know?"

"Don't know what?" Valeta blinked. She felt as though she was about to hear

something she didn't want to hear.

Viren cleared his throat, awkward under Valeta's inquisitive stare, before jutting his chin out stubbornly. "So, what brings the lord's socoro here?"

"Oh, there are some things that I need."

"Things? Like what?"

"Um, remedium, floss, and ligor that has just taken root, and dandelion flowers? If possible, ones that haven't fully bloomed yet."

"A socoro like you is going to make some potions? There are poisonous ingredients mixed in there, you daft socoro," Valeta scoffed at Viren's dismissive tone, taking another step into the room.

"I'm going to make a potion. I'm an alchemist."

"How dare you come in here! Since when was the Head's socoro an alchemist? I never heard anything about this!"

"Since I was born. Also, my name's Valeta. I am *not* that guy's socoro," she said as she walked around, carefully inspecting the field.

There was a wider variety of herbs than she expected there to be. It seems they had grown everything from seeds. There were no bugs and access to warm sunlight, water, and nutrients, so there was no reason why they wouldn't grow.

"Oh, here it is. I'm going to take this, kid."

"I already sent up potions," he grumbled.

Valeta chuckled quietly. Unfortunately, they hadn't been enough to heal Reinhart. This was her first time seeing a magic potion, and it was interesting but not unique or surprising.

"The bleeding stopped, thanks to you."

Viren's eyes hardened. Although Valeta didn't say anything else, he didn't miss what she was implying.

"Are you saying that I wasn't of any help?"

His attitude changed abruptly, the air growing tense. His furious gaze was overflowing with hurt pride and annoyance. Valeta hummed quietly when she saw the anger in his light green eyes.

"I'm not good at this sort of thing..." Valeta muttered as she bowed her head. However, if she didn't fix the misunderstanding, she would end up on the Tower's blacklist.

*I shouldn't avoid getting on this guy's bad side.* She knew she had to win some brownie points with the inhabitants of the Tower. That way, she wouldn't be met with too much resistance if she decided to stay here or visit every once in a while.

"I'm not very good with words, so I'm sorry if I offended you. His condition wasn't good, but he's stabilized now, thanks to you. Thank you for your help." Valeta patted Viren on the head similar to how she stroked Reinhart's hair.

Viren's eyes widened.

"Ha..."

He breathed in noisily and tilted his head back as Valeta stood.

"Oh. I'm going to use this, too," she said, plucking another herb from the ground.

"Why are you trying to save the lord?"

"What's up with that tone?"

"Oh..." Viren's eyes widened in surprise before he gritted his teeth. He couldn't believe he was getting pushed around by such a young socoro. His green eyes flashed in anger. "No! I heard that the Head imprisoned you! So, why are you trying to save him?"

He spoke with the petulance of a child, but Valeta didn't comment on it.

"I thought I didn't care whether he lived or died, but when he almost died, I felt..." she trailed off.

Angry.

Yes, it had put her in a foul mood. She felt a surge of anger once more just thinking about it. It was frustrating, but she didn't understand her own feelings. It surprised her. However, she realized she had only begun to feel that way after they'd reached the Magicians' Tower.

Her mind went blank the moment Reinhart had collapsed in her arms. She hadn't been able to think clearly. She didn't even know how she had managed to give Gene orders.

*That was stupid of me.* The imperial family might know about her elemental powers by now. She should've kept that card hidden for as long as possible.

She swallowed another sigh.

"Then you don't hate him?" Viren asked with a tilt of his head.

The boy looked very cute doing so. Valeta said nothing. Instead, she crouched and started collecting more herbs. When she didn't respond, Viren began to hover over her, observing what she was doing.

After she had finished collecting the necessary herbs and plants, she stood, brushing the fertile soil from her hands. "I haven't really defined my relationship with him yet. Even if I had an answer, you wouldn't have been the first person

I'd tell."

"What? Haven't you known each other for over ten years?"

Valeta gave Viren a look as she pulled a pen and some paper from her bag. By now, she could draw the alchemy symbol with her eyes closed, since she had spent so long practicing it. She stuffed the herbs inside a potion bottle and placed them on the circle.

"Extract."

An ancient circle appeared in the center of one of her violet eyes. She still couldn't get used to the strangeness of something leaving her body and the cool sensation in her eye no matter how many times she used her skills.

"You're really an alchemist..."

"Did you think I was lying?"

"Can... Can I take a look at your potion? Just once, please!" Viren begged as he clung to Valeta's arm, eyes sparkling with excitement. He snorted like an excited bull, his light green eyes flashing.

"Okay, but make sure you don't break it," Valeta said as she slowly extricated herself from his grasp.

Viren nodded enthusiastically and she carefully handed the potion, the pink contents sloshing around inside, over to him.

"This is... a high-quality potion," he whispered.

"It's a top-tier potion."

"What?"

"It's a top-tier potion," Valeta said again.

Of course, a high-quality potion would have done the job, but she made a top-tier one, just in case. Luckily, Viren had all the necessary ingredients.

*Actually, I didn't get as many ligor roots as I wanted, but...* Ligor roots were primarily used to make paralyzing potions, but it was hard to obtain fresh ones. She never thought she'd be able to find them here.

"A top-tier potion? You must be really talented!" Viren exclaimed, sending spit flying everywhere in his enthusiasm. However, his hands were careful as he turned the potion over in his hands.

"Is this your first time seeing one?" she asked.

"I've never seen a potion in the flesh before because those greedy socoro swine are always hogging them," Viren said without taking his eyes off the potion.

"Miss Valeta, we should..." Caspelios, who had been standing to the side waiting, began to hurry toward her.

Disappointment washed over Viren's as he returned the potion to her. Valeta's eyes narrowed. *They say he's older than he looks.* It wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on him. He seemed interested in maintaining a good relationship with her since she could use alchemy.

After thinking for a moment, Valeta smiled, the corner of her eyes lifting. "I can make another for you later."

"Really?!"

"Yes. It's not that hard."

"You mean it?!"

Valeta nodded at the boy who was now clutching at her robes.

He grinned. "Okay! You'd better! If you need more herbs, feel free to come anytime!"

"Oh, um... Okay."

"Have a good day! Take care! Make sure you stick by the gatekeeper. Okay?"

"Got it," Viren said.

Valeta took a couple of steps back in the face of the boy's verbal barrage. Caspelios quietly held out his hand, and she took it without hesitation.

A faint smile appeared on Caspelios' lips, which quickly disappeared.

Again, their surroundings changed.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 115

Valeta stood still for a moment, blinking away the familiar dizziness.

"You're back!"

"Yes," she responded, heading straight to the bed.

Reinhart's complexion was pale, and his wounds were still open. His breathing was hot and ragged. Cold sweat rolled down his face. Even the bleeding they had managed to stop had begun again.

*I can see why the emperor doesn't even bother with a magician's potions.* No matter how hard they tried to reproduce an alchemist's potion, it just wasn't the same. However, magician-made potions had managed to fall short of even her low expectations. She had no magical expertise, so she had no idea how the potions were made...

*I feel like I could refine this a little more, but...* That the potions were purple meant that they weren't very pure. Potions that were well-refined were transparent and pink.

Valeta popped off the cork and carefully poured half the content over Reinhart's injured shoulder. The wound began to close up immediately. New skin began to grow and stitch itself together as the mangled bones repaired themselves, restoring his shoulder.

"Hey. You ready to wake up?"

Valeta gently shook Reinhart's uninjured shoulder. As expected, there was no response. Judging by the sweat on his brow, the only thing that had healed was the wound on his shoulder.

In order to treat his fever and internal wounds, he would have to drink the potion. However, if she just poured the liquid in, it would just drip out of his mouth. She turned to look behind her. The three men in the room were huddled together like puppies waiting for their master to give an order.

Valeta placed the half-empty bottle on the table before she turned to them.

“You can go now. I’ll take care of it from here.”

“But Miss Valeta—” Silon began, his brows furrowed.

“All that’s left is for him to drink the potion. I can handle the rest from here. We can talk tomorrow.”

“You might need our help,” Kurt said.

“If I need help, I’ll call Caspelios,” Valeta said, dismissing Kurt.

The two magicians nodded, unable to argue any further. Kurt and Silon gave Caspelios a quick glance before vanishing from the room.

“And you?” she asked.

“I will stay here.” Caspelios rasped.

“But I ordered you to go.”

“The Head of the Magicians’ Tower is the only person who can order me.” His guttural voice, ruined beyond recognition, made for a horrifying sound, like that of metal scraping against glass.

Valeta let out a low sigh. Caspelios took a step forward as if to punctuate his words. She frowned, her eyes narrowing at him.

“Ugh. Haven’t you ever heard of privacy?” Valeta muttered.

Why couldn't he understand that she didn't want him to see what she was about to do? She had no reason to stab Reinhart in the heart after she went through all the effort of saving him. It wasn't like she was even planning to flee from the tower...

*I already did that.* Come to think of it, she *had* summoned Gene and escaped from the Tower once before. There's no way he couldn't have seen Reinhart's devastation at her departure. In the end, she gave up on trying to kick Caspelios out.

*I'll make sure he pays the price for this humiliation once he wakes up.* However, she didn't know what she'd ask of him because there was nothing that she really wanted. Valeta sat on the edge of the bed with a heavy sigh, grabbed the potion from the table, and brought it to her lips.

Tilting the contents back into her mouth, she leaned over Reinhart and pressed her lips against his. She did all this without any hesitation. She heard Caspelios' breath hitch as if he was surprised.

With one hand, Valeta tilted Reinhart's chin up slightly before sliding her tongue between his lips, allowing the liquid to pour into his mouth. She prodded at the base of his tongue with her own several times, forcing him to swallow. She repeated this same process a few more times until the bottle was empty.

"Aren't you afraid of him?" Caspelios asked, his voice raspy as ever.

"I am. Never once have I not been scared of him."

"Then how..." He wanted to ask how she could treat him so casually and take care of him, but the words were stuck in his throat. Saying anything more would have been crossing the line.

Valeta blinked very slowly before letting out a low, breathy laugh. "I'm not afraid of him because he's powerful..." she said in a self-deprecating voice,

remembering how she used to feel about it. “If that same standard applies to me, then there’s no place for me in this world either. So, until he strangles me himself, I’m going to keep acting the way I do.”

Reinhart tried not to show his cruelty. He tried to prevent Valeta from seeing anything as cruel as what had happened at Delight Manor. In her opinion, he was trying his best.

“See? His complexion is looking a lot better now, right? I don’t plan on hurting him, so you can leave now. I want to get some rest, too.”

“I don’t understand either you or the lord.”

Valeta crossed her arms and tilted her head at Caspelios. “Hm. Well, frankly I don’t understand how you’ve been single-handedly maintaining this Tower for hundreds of years.”

“You don’t need to understand.”

She smiled. “I will say the same thing then. You don’t have to understand me.”

She waved her hand casually, and Caspelios stepped back without a word. He seemed less standoffish than he used to be, even going as far as bowing slightly as if acknowledging her in his own way. Then, he vanished. Valeta felt the man’s warmth return under her hand as she closed her eyes, resting them for a long moment, then opened them again.

“How long are you going to pretend to be asleep?” she asked with a tilt of her head.

“How did you know?” his slightly sleepy voice said in response. Reinhart’s red eyes shone brightly up at her.

Valeta let out a deep sigh. “Ever since your breathing changed.”

She'd noticed when his ragged breathing had evened out. However, she wasn't entirely sure he was awake because there was a chance that he had just been recovering thanks to the potion.

"I didn't expect you to be so bold."

"I had no choice. What if you didn't get better?" she asked sharply.

"I would've got better if you left me alone."

"It'd be a waste to throw away the rest of the potion."

Reinhart's voice was bright in comparison to Valeta's blunt responses. He reached out, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her into his embrace. Her back hit his chest. He kissed the nape of her neck.

"Master."

"What?"

In one swift motion, Reinhart pushed Valeta onto the bed, climbing on top of her. It seemed that the medicine hadn't been entirely effective. He still looked pale from all the blood he'd lost.

"I don't think the potion's been fully absorbed yet," Reinhart crooned, his eyes soft.

For a moment, Valeta was captivated by his gentle gaze. She blinked when she noticed he was speaking.

"Let's pick up where we left off," he whispered as he clasped her right hand in his left, pressing his lips against hers.

Flustered, Valeta tried to close her mouth. Reinhart huffed and bit her lower lip in punishment.

“Ah!”

Her mouth opened as she groaned in pain. Reinhart slid his tongue into her mouth as if he had just been waiting for his chance. His tongue probed at hers, sliding between Valeta’s plump lips. Without warning, it invaded her mouth, enticing her rigid tongue to tangle with his one swift move. Trembling, she clung to his shoulder with her free hand. He squeezed her fingers even tighter.

The sound of his uneven breathing tickled her ears. She couldn’t close her mouth, which had been roughly forced open. As Valeta tried to squirm away, Reinhart prodded at hers with the tip of his tongue.

“Hah...”

He shuddered when he heard her moan and began licking her, dipping his tongue deeper into her mouth. Valeta’s face burned with embarrassment when the sounds of their kissing reached her ears.

She opened her eyes but quickly squeezed them closed again when she met Reinhart’s gaze, his eyes burning with desire. His tongue swiped at hers, coaxing hers to gently tangle with his. Valeta squeezed her eyes shut at the tingling sensation spreading throughout her entire body. Noticing that she was struggling to breathe, Reinhart leaned back slightly, leaving a slight gap between them.

“Your lips are warm, Master.”

His eyes curved with his smile.

His voice met Valeta’s ears, sounding sweeter than usual. Her slim hand clutched at Reinhart’s shoulder, the tendons clearly visible.

“Are you trying to eat my tongue or something?” she asked.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 116

“Stop...”

“I would love to melt you down and drink you up,” Reinhart said sweetly, ignoring her objection as he captured Valeta’s lips with his own again.

She made a muffled squeaking noise, trembling, eyes wide as Reinhart’s tongue pressed into her mouth again. He explored her mouth, lapping at her. The man paused for a moment to let her breathe before descending on her again like a snake slowly constricting around its prey.

Reinhart then slid his knee between her thighs. His red eyes were overflowing with his desire for her. They parted, leaving a gap only wide enough for a single sheet of paper to pass through before their lips met again.

The warmth of their breaths mingled like they were breathing each other in.

“You...” Reinhart kissed along the line of her shoulder.

He bared his teeth and bit at her skin, as though he was marking his territory, smiling like a predator looming over its cornered prey. He trailed kisses down her shoulders, his teeth grazing her collarbone before dipping further down into her cleavage.

Valeta flinched, dragging in a ragged breath before she reached up with her free hand to cover Reinhart’s mouth. She had been clutching his shoulder so hard that she’d left a mark on his fair skin. Although she was the one to remove his clothes, the outline of her hand, branded red on him, embarrassed her.

“Do you have any idea how much I want to just eat you up?”

He peered down at the flushed-red woman, breathing heavily beneath him. He wanted to devour her whole. He wanted to put Valeta in his mouth and roll her around, savoring her as she melted on his tongue. Taking a bite out of her sounded delicious to him, too. He gave her inner thigh a firm squeeze before letting go. If he pushed her now, she'd never look at him again.

"Master, if we go a little further..."

"I'll kill you."

"Okay," Reinhart immediately backed off in the face of Valeta's chilly reaction. He brought her gently into his arms, burying his nose in the crook of her neck and taking a deep breath. "Being with you like this feels like a dream."

She huffed. "You need to stop."

"I only do it to you."

"Yeah, stop doing it to me!" Valeta growled at Reinhart, who peered at her through his lashes, eyes downcast. She trembled as he stole glances at her, the man strongly resembling a kicked puppy. She knew she had said something hurtful, but...

"Did you really hate it?"

Valeta said nothing.

She didn't hate it, which was the most annoying part to her. Where the hell did he learn to kiss like that? His kisses alone had caused her to grind her hips against him. If they had gone any further, she knew she would've ended up clinging desperately to him. She was even more annoyed by how thoroughly she'd lost her head for a moment there.

"I'm glad I was your first."

Valeta had nothing to say to this.

"Master...?"

She kept quiet. Instead, she tried valiantly to maintain eye contact with Reinhart. Strictly speaking, he wasn't her first kiss. Though, the Reinhart in her dreams was technically the same man, so in a way, he *was* her first kiss.

*How in the world am I supposed to explain this?* A Reinhart from the future had pressed his lips against her, but she couldn't tell him that.

Reinhart's eyes narrowed the longer she was silent, and an icy fury began to radiate from him. "Which bastard was it?"

"What?" she asked, studiously playing at ignorance.

"Which bastard was it that stole your first kiss? It wasn't me, it was someone else, right?" Reinhart demanded to know.

His eyes were ablaze. He glared at Valeta fiercely, his voice angry and full of indignation. She stammered wordlessly, then she slowly pressed her lips together. The insane bastard had a crazed look in his eyes.

"There wasn't anyone else," she finally said firmly.

"You're lying."

"I'm not. There wasn't another. You were my first."

Why was it up to her to convince him anyway? Valeta sighed deeply. She pressed a hand to Reinhart's forehead, deeply tired.

"I'm serious. You were my first."

That other guy also happened to be Reinhart, so he was her first. She didn't know why she had to explain herself with regard to her first kiss.

“Really?”

“Really,” Valeta confirmed, her brows furrowed.

Reinhart grumbled and nuzzled into the crook of her neck again. She enjoyed the warmth of being tightly cradled in his arms, feeling the tension slowly leaving her body.

“So, was it a chimera that attacked the village?” he asked.

“No, it wasn’t. That thing I made also wasn’t a chimera. I wasn’t able to create one.”

What she’d made wasn’t a chimera—that was to say it wasn’t a genetically modified creature. It was something more cruel and ghastly than that. When Valeta had tried to return it to its original form, it had still attempted to suck away at her life.

It should have been impossible to restore a human to anything resembling its original state, let alone to a perfectly normal human at that. The monster that attacked wasn’t a new organism, but rather...

“It was just a simple transformation formula. They rebuilt him like he was made of clay.”

“Like clay?”

“Yeah, they separated him into pieces like I did with the insects and molded him back into a different shape. It’s not a chimera, but...”

Valeta slowly covered her eyes with her arm. It wasn’t a chimera, it was a meticulous reconstruction. Perhaps that’s what they did in reverse to restore the monster to its original form. They just probably had to use a slightly altered method.

She had tried to separate the three creatures back into their original appearances. But they... must have broken the original parts down and reconstructed them. Doing this using alchemy was well within a human's capabilities.

"Hmm, what exactly is the difference, Master?"

"Chimeras are made by genetically modifying existing organisms. The experiment I conducted was trying to combine three organisms into one."

In order to make sure the three organisms were capable of being blended together, she had created a meticulous formula that designated one of the organisms as the base. Valeta used the same principle when making the reverting formula. She drew the circle perfectly so that not a single soul or leg would be lost.

"But that... that guy wasn't combined with another creature. The Desilian guy. He was just a normal human being." Valeta licked her suddenly dry lips. She felt a sharp sting as her tongue brushed over the slightly swollen area. "Actually, the symbol that Janice drew wasn't all that different from a standard transformation formula. The one that I wrote was completely different. Honestly, hers was one that anyone could copy... It's quick and easy."

No different than a 3-minute meal, it was the alchemical equivalent of ripping open a frozen meal and popping it in the microwave. The thought made her uneasy because, in other words, these circles were easy enough to make even without an alchemist.

"Chimeras are genetically modified monstrosities wherein all the souls caught in the circle are combined into one. It's heresy. But essentially what I'm saying is you can't use just one type of gene to make a chimera."

"That makes sense. You need more than one to change things."

Noticing Valeta's trembling fingers, Reinhart laid down, bringing her with him. He rested her head on his shoulder and began stroking her hair. Her breathing was ragged.

"But Desilian has one soul and one body. So..." Valeta had to take a deep breath. She couldn't even speak as the terrible realization hit her. The knowledge was something she didn't want to have in her head. But when she thought about the circle and the village, she couldn't come up with any other answer.

"Desilian wasn't a chimera. His body was just destroyed with a hammer and turned into clay, which they put together again by adding skin and bones," Valeta explained in a miserable voice. "Over and over again..."

It was something that had been done to him without him even realizing. The boy wasn't healthy because he couldn't be restored to his original body. He had lost something in the process of turning into clay and then human again. Maybe he lost a lung or part of his heart. Perhaps even some other unseen organ. Feeling Reinhart patting her on the back, Valeta lifted her head.

"What?"

"I admire how you were able to figure that out. So you just left the corpses behind?"

"I asked Gene to kill everything."

"Mm, that woman too?" Reinhart asked in a low voice right next to her ear.

Valeta blinked. She remembered Janice whispering her apologies to Desilian as she laid him down on the circle.

"Yeah."

"Good. How admirable of you, Master."

Valeta couldn't help but smile at the thought of Desilian, who had trusted her so easily and happily joked around with her. She hadn't realized the truth at the time.

"We need to go back to the village."

"Let's get some sleep first, master." Reinhart gently kissed her forehead. Her eyelids slowly began to droop.

"That magic you use is always..."

Valeta could feel herself falling into a deep sleep. She struggled to finish her sentence, but in the next moment, she was sound asleep. Reinhart's eyes widened as he lay down next to her. The corners of his lips quirked up as if he were a little embarrassed.

"I didn't use any magic this time, Master," he whispered as he fingered the choker that was still locked around his neck.

There was no way he could have used magic while wearing it. Reinhart chuckled quietly. He stroked her hair for a little while before getting out of bed and moving over to the glass wall.

With his eyes closed, he slowly concentrated his magic, moving it to the tips of his fingers. Electricity crackled through his fingers, igniting the tips with flames. The magic was trying to burst free from his hand but was meeting resistance. Reinhart locked eyes with his own steely reflection in the window and snorted.

"Tch..."

It wouldn't be hard to break free of the restraint if he had time. It would just be slightly dangerous and troublesome. He gathered more magic into his body. His body strained under the pressure of trying to force his magic through what felt like a plugged hole.

He coughed, tasting blood in the back of his mouth as if his internal organs were twisting around inside him. He gritted his teeth and continued to focus on drawing his magic out. The magic he'd managed to accumulate in his body crackled as it started to trickle out. He began to force the magic into his body again.

"Haa..."

Feeling it pooling inside him once more, Reinhart blinked lazily and tilted his head back. He snapped his fingers. He closed then opened his eyes once more. The first thing he saw was his own emotionless red eyes reflected in the glass.

"How fun."

In an instant, he'd already healed his damaged organs as he walked, good as new before he'd even reached the bed. Valeta was by now deep in slumber, as he scooped her into his arms. He wanted to fall asleep drowning in her distinct, refreshing smell. He buried his face in her nape and slowly closed his eyes.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 117

\* \* \*

"Do you know what that is, Largris? I can't believe those corpses came back to life..." Guilian muttered, stunned.

Actually, the moving corpses weren't the only thing that surprised him. After the corpses had reanimated, a large tornado had swept through the village, carrying them all away. And shortly after that, body parts had begun to rain down from the sky.

"Hm..." Largris merely smiled in the face of it all. He wore his smile like a mask, skillfully hiding his true expression and feelings. Largris had been that way since the first time Guilian had met him. He was the type of person who often smiled and rarely got mad. He had been like that ever since he'd been with Eliza.

"Who knows, Guilian? That one looks like it's still alive. Shouldn't we restore it?"

Largris pointed his wand at the organism rolling around on the ground. The creature was missing its front legs and didn't look human, but it also didn't look like any beast they had seen before. There was a strange aura surrounding it. The beast almost felt like Eliza, even though this was the first time he had seen it up close.

"Oh, we don't have to do that," Guilian said.

“We don’t?”

“This is the last time we’ll need it, so I have orders to dispose of it.”

“Is that so?”

Largris’ gaze slowly dropped to the ground. He looked at the village where scattered furniture was the only proof that people had once lived there. The monster was the sole survivor. *Come to think of it, they have the same hair color.* The creature’s hair color was almost identical to Eliza’s. He stared at the monster’s head for a while before sighing.

“Grrr...”

Even though it didn’t have any front legs, it snuffled around as though it was looking for something. If it was trying to sleep, there was no way of knowing.

Largris tilted his head. “Turn him back. I’m curious to see what it looks like.”

“I used too much energy fighting off the roste,” Guilian protested.

“Come on. I know you can do it,” Largris said as he gestured at the creature with his chin. Guilian frowned, but eventually let out a short sigh before trudging toward the monster. As he watched Guilian draw a circle on the ground with his wooden staff, Largris tugged a letter free of his sleeve.

*“Someone precious to me asked that I deliver this letter to you.”*

“To me?”

*“Yes. They wanted me to tell you that there is someone that you absolutely must meet.”*

He had thought the whole thing rather funny. However, he was speechless when he opened the letter. It was a white sheet of paper with nothing written on it. He had been about to point out that the paper was blank when Kynos had suddenly

summoned him.

*I was going to ask if they'd accidentally delivered the wrong letter... But the man who delivered the letter was too important for it to have been a joke. Given his title as a duke, he could only assume that the letter was mistakenly delivered... until he heard what the girl whispered.*

***"The letter..."***

Her voice had been quiet but clear. That he'd so suddenly received a blank letter out of nowhere couldn't have been a coincidence. *Everyone's always saying that she's a brilliant alchemist, right?*

Ruling out the idea that the duke could have misdelivered the letter only meant that the letter was indeed for him. That also means there was probably a specific way that he was meant to read this letter. Largris slowly closed his eyes.

Although it didn't feel all that long ago, he could picture a faded memory behind his eyelids.

*"Larg! Kyn! Alchemy is so amazing. You can mix formulas together to combine different effects and things. Anything's possible if you're able to combine circles and formulas in a harmonious way. Look! Like this!"*

***"It's just two sheets of paper."***

*"You made something weird again, didn't you, Eliza?"*

Eliza had always been a bright and lovely girl. She was smart and curious, so she enjoyed making and experimenting with weird and wonderful things. This had been just another one of her bizarre experiments.

***"Larg, you dump this in water. And Kyn, you scorch this a little!"***

She always tried to treat the two of them the same. Who knows? Perhaps she had picked up on Kynos' creepy obsession and the strange look in his eyes

whenever he looked at her before Largris had.

*“You always make the most interesting things, Eliza.”*

*“And you always say the same exact thing. Now, enough nagging. Go ahead and singe the paper. Oh, but don’t burn the whole thing.”*

Kynos occasionally picked on Eliza for her curiosity, but she always responded in the same blunt, unbothered manner. It was a common sight—the way she treated Kynos as if he was a bug she was shooing away. He couldn’t remember how they had become friends with the emperor.

Kynos, who had become emperor at a very young age, and he and Eliza, who had settled in the empire later, were an odd trio. Eliza had always had a strong sense of justice and couldn’t turn a blind eye to injustice. She refused to stand back and watch whenever she witnessed bullying at the banquets they would attend. Of course, there were times when she couldn’t control her anger and directed it where it shouldn’t have been directed.

Their first meeting was when Eliza had found fault with how the emperor conducted his banquets. It was always Largris’ job to clean up after her, so he had asked to meet with the emperor privately.

Kynos, who’d looked displeased upon their first meeting, was a lot more amicable at their second. That second meeting turned into a third, which turned into a fourth, and before they knew it, they had become friends. It was like slowly becoming soaking wet from a light drizzle.

That’s how they had been. Everything had felt so natural that they ended up spending a lot of time with Kynos as both friends and vassals.

*“I’ve... met a lot of people, but you two are the only people I feel truly comfortable around. I want to be together*

*forever. Just the three of us."*

Occasionally, Kynos would say things like that. Largris and Eliza had taken his words as a sign that Kynos just liked them a lot, and had shrugged it off.

*"Ugh, what a cheesy thing to say. Why do you always want to talk about such serious things? Fine, fine. I'll be friends with you even when we're wrinkled and old with one foot in the grave."*

*"What's wrong with you, Larg? Did you have to put it that way? Don't listen to him, Kyn. As long as we're friends, we'll be happy until the day we die."*

Kynos would quietly smile at Largris' mild teasing and Eliza's sweet words.

*"That sounds perfect."*

They'd had no way of knowing that they would have never responded to him that way, had they known how twisted his heart was. Was there anything they could have done to prevent the catastrophe that was to come?

*"Largris."*

Guilian's voice brought him back to reality. Shaking off his dreary thoughts, he slowly opened his eyes. Clearly tired, Guilian pointed at the alchemy circle. Largris waved his wand, moving the monster to the center of the circle.

"Go ahead," he said with a smile. He was entirely unconcerned that Guilian looked exhausted and was slowly withering. Largris pulled the letter from its envelope again and lit the tip of his wand on fire. His eyes widened as he carefully waved the flame over the letter, seeing words begin to appear on the page. He slowly moved the flame over the paper, and words manifested in a

color that resembled soot.

At that moment, the sound of crunching bone echoed throughout the empty village.

“Gaaaahhh!”

Largris slowly turned his attention to the agonized screams. Guilian was sprawled out on the floor breathing heavily, clutching at his wooden staff.

*He's reached his limit.* This was only natural, given that he had activated two large alchemy circles in one day. His ability couldn't be compared to Eliza's.

Largris shot the alchemist an icy stare before turning his attention to the now human-shaped young man. He was missing an arm, perhaps from the roste, and was clearly dazed. He didn't pass out, but he looked like he had no thoughts in his head.

Largris eyed him strangely. “Why isn't he moving?”

“He might be broken,” Guilian gasped. “I wasn't able to completely revert him back to his human form without overstraining myself.”

“I thought he was a chimera,” Largris said, his voice tinged with suspicion. He'd always assumed that Guilian was trying to make chimeras by experimenting with other creatures, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

“I simply experimented with other creatures because the chances of failing are rather high with humans,” Guilian explained as if reading Largris' mind.

Largris nodded in understanding.

“I don't have the skills for that, and merely sacrificing one or two human lives isn't enough to make a chimera. I'm in no way capable of making a real chimera.”

“So you just deconstructed him and put him back together, huh?”

"Yes. Up until this point, we'd only lost a couple of organs, but it looks like the roste has taken one of his limbs. He seems to have lost any ability to reason, so we won't be needing him again," Guilian said calmly, as if he were talking about nothing more than a broken toy.

Largris crouched down in front of the young man and studied his appearance thoughtfully. "You found this kid somewhere and experimented on him, right?"

"Yes."

"I realize now that I've never taken a close look at this kid's face before. He always had his head down whenever I saw him in the basement..." Largris mumbled as he stroked his chin.

The kid had been locked in a dungeon-like basement laboratory since he was a child. He remembered that Guilian had found him somewhere when he was very young and had brought him in to be used as a test specimen. Kynos had been very interested in what Guilian was doing with the child, so Largris hadn't been able to do anything about it.

"What's this kid's name?"

Guilian slowly lifted his head. His one good eye glanced down to the ground for a moment before he looked up again.

"Guilian?"

"...lian," he said after a long pause.

"Lian? That's cruel, naming him after you..."

"It's Desilian."

As soon as the name left Guilian's mouth, an icy, ringing silence descended. The atmosphere between them was equally cold as standing before the emperor

often was. Guilian forced his stiff neck up, his eyes meeting the dark-skinned man's gaze.

"What did you just say?"

Largris was furious. The smile he usually wore was absent from his face.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 118

Even as his blood ran cold, Guilian couldn't find it in himself to move. His lips quivered slightly.

*It won't be long now. He saw his life flashing before his eyes, convinced that his death was imminent. The end of his long experiment and the price he would have to pay for breaking the taboo was near. It had been roughly ten years. Maybe a little less than that. Human life was more resilient than one might think.* He let out a dejected sigh.

"What did you just say?"

Largris strode over to Guilian, grabbing him by the collar, and lifting him into the air. Even though they were the same age, Largris still looked like he was in his twenties. He looked exactly the same as when they had first met.

"His name is Desilian, Largris."

Largris' face twisted into an even fiercer scowl. "Desilian? F\*ck you! Desilian's dead, you bastard. How dare you f\*cking insult my child by giving this orphan his name?"

A string of curses flew out of his mouth. His face contorted with rage, unable to restrain his fury. Largris' usual casual smile and relaxed attitude were nowhere to be found.

"His name is Desilian," Guilian managed to rasp out. "That's what the emperor told me."

"What?" Largris muttered, stupefied. Why was he bringing the emperor into this? He sputtered wordlessly for a moment before scoffing. He released Guilian

and stumbled back.

K-Kynos...?

It was possible. It was Kynos they were talking about—he was more than capable of something so cruel. Largris clutched at his throat as if he couldn't breathe.

“Kynos did...?”

“Yes. His Majesty gave him to me. Told me to experiment on him and turn him into a monster. He said that he'd heard an interesting theory from Eliza about reassembling living organisms and told me to experiment.”

“Haa... No...”

Guilian's gaze slowly slid to the floor. He didn't know how much longer he had left to live, but thought it would be better to die at the hands of someone who still had a trace of compassion and mercy left, rather than the fiendish emperor.

“I tried to deny the emperor at first. He was far too young, and I didn't want to do it. But he wrapped his fingers around my neck and squeezed and plucked out my eye with his fingers.”

He had been trapped completely by those hands. There was no way he could disobey him.

“F\*ck. This can't be. My son... I-I watched him... I watched him die!”

Largris had never been able to hold his child in his arms again after he had been crushed under the debris of a burning building.

*Was it really an accident?* He was told that his son's death had been an accident. It had been arson. Unsurprisingly, the person responsible had been tortured to death. Kynos had interrogated him and killed the man himself.

There had been a lot of unfortunate coincidences. Around that time, Eliza fell pregnant with Kynos' child and was locked in his chambers, and Largris' magic wand disappeared. He had no idea what his son had been doing in the warehouse in the first place. He had just assumed that it was all an unfortunate coincidence.

"And so, I conducted my experiments." Largris looked up at Guilian, his eyes dilated. "I didn't want to throw away everything that Eliza had discovered. I didn't want to lose this eye either."

Guilian had no choice—he couldn't defy the emperor's orders. Kynos had a strange ability to make people obey him.

Largris' face paled. Then, his expression crumpled like a sheet of paper. He swiftly drew his arm back and punched Guilian in the face, sending him flying. Guilian tumbled to the ground. Largris jumped on top of him and began punching him over and over.

"You motherf\*cker...!"

*Pow!*

*Thwack!*

*Pow! Pow! Pow!*

After beating the alchemist to a bloody pulp, Largris gasped out a ragged breath. He looked down at Guilian, now almost unrecognizable through the blood, and stumbled to his feet.

"Haa..."

Largris wiped his bloodied hands on his robe, then reopened the letter with shaking hands. Using a technique Eliza had taught him all those years ago, he watched as words appeared on the paper. The handwriting was neat and tidy.

His eyes darted across the page as he read the letter, gasping as the words' meaning registered. He stormed back to Guilian and lifted him by his collar again.

"You..."

The only thing he could move was his single eye. Largris waved his wand, healing most of Guilian's wounds.

"What has Kynos ordered you to do? Tell me, right now," Largris demanded, tightening his grip on Guilian's collar.

"There's a form of alchemy that allows you to subjugate your victim's very soul. He wants to brand it onto Valeta Delight's body."

"I'll help you," Largris said, his light gray eyes turning stormy. He sighed, releasing a long gust of air, closing his eyes and then opening them again, a toothy smile on his lips.

"It'll be hard to hunt her down." Guilian said.

"She will return if we stay here. I'll catch her and the Head of the Magicians' Tower. You sort out the rest."

"I understand..."

Guilian could only nod in the face of Largris' command. He had no choice but to obey since Largris was higher ranking than him. Guilian carefully pulled out a high-quality potion and downed it. His injuries faded instantly. It even helped to relieve some of his fatigue.

He slowly picked himself up off the ground.

\* \* \*

“You’re really planning on returning to that village?”

“I’m worried about Desilian,” Valeta replied as she shrugged on her robe. She could do nothing if he was already dead, but she had decided it would be better that he knew the truth if he was still alive.

She had no idea what their relationship actually was, but Janice could have been manipulating him. *I’m sure she had her own reasons, but...* It couldn’t have felt good to play with someone’s life like that.

“Do you hate resting?”

“I need to meet with that Largris guy, too. I sent him a letter, but...”

Was it possible that he hadn’t opened the letter yet? Or that he hadn’t figured out how to read it? Either way, she didn’t have a good feeling about it. She had even gone so far as to ask Carlon Delphine to deliver it for her, despite him being a man of great status and therefore above playing delivery boy.

“I’ll go with you.”

Reinhart had no choice but to stick close to her. Valeta looked down at the snowta running around her feet on the floor.

“Now that I think about it, this little guy came out of it totally fine yesterday.”

“Fine?”

“He wasn’t injured at all in that mess.”

She was sure she was going to lose an eye, but the snowta had gotten off scot-free. At first, she thought that maybe animals just weren’t affected by the

roste... until she saw a dead rat.

"Oh... It's because snowtas are spiritual creatures," Reinhart explained. "They're supposed to be guardians that ward off evil spirits, so I guess this little guy actually lives up to their reputation."

"So it was able to endure all that because it's immune to evil?"

"If you think about it, the roste is technically black magic."

Valeta had nothing to say to this. She mulled over whether she should bring the snowta with them or not before eventually scooping it up in her arms. She slid the snowta into her bag. It promptly snapped up the treat she offered it. *It should be fine, right?*

She exhaled.

"Reinhart, can you promise me something?" Valeta asked, glancing over at Reinhart as she got ready.

His eyes widened, and he tilted his head curiously as if caught by surprise. "A promise?"

"When I say the word, I want you to just trust me."

"What are you talking about?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. His voice had somehow become even more pleasant to the ear. Valeta sighed, expecting this reaction from him. She needed to convince him to promise this, so he wouldn't get in her way.

"I mean exactly what I said. When I ask you to trust me, I want you to do so, no questions asked."

"I don't know what danger you plan to get yourself into, but..."

Valeta squeezed Reinhart's hand. He looked down at her. Even in the darkness, her dark violet eyes shone lovingly up at him.

"If you do, I'll do whatever you want me to," she said.

"Do you think I'm that kind of man?!" Reinhart abruptly snapped in response, gritting his teeth.

Maybe she'd been wrong to offer him that. Valeta leaned back, eyes darting this way and that. "I'll grant you one wish then."

Reinhart looked down at her, expression serious. "Master, what are you up to?"

"I don't know yet, but we have a long road ahead of us. I desperately want to find some kind of peace. All I want to do is live in the mountains and sell herbs."

He pursed his lips for a long moment before letting out a deep sigh. "I'm going to interfere if I think you might die."

"Don't."

She had no intention of dying and most likely wasn't going to. Luckily, it didn't seem like Gene's existence had been discovered yet. She shouldn't have any problems as long as that card stayed hidden.

"I told you, if you're going to die, it will only be by my hand."

"Just trust me. I promise not to die, so don't interfere," Valeta added.

His expression only grew more bewildered when she said her final word on the matter. In the end, Reinhart agreed to her request.

*Ugh, I'm exhausted. Trying to persuade him to do anything was the most tiresome thing in the world.*

Reinhart summoned a magic circle. As they stepped onto the circle, the world

gave a familiar lurch and their surroundings melted away.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 119

\* \* \*

"It reeks of blood," Reinhart commented.

"Yeah," Valeta replied as their feet touched down in the blood-soaked village of Aspel. The ground was dyed red, as though it had rained blood the night before.

Reinhart's eyes narrowed. "Did you do this, Master?"

"I gave the order," she admitted.

There was no way she hadn't foreseen this outcome. She was the one who had made this happen. The corners of his lips turned up in a smile. He was experiencing an unexplainable joy that sent shivers up and down his spine.

He wanted to press his lips against her lovely neck and leave his mark on her. So he did just that, reaching out and gently brushing away her hair, and grazing his teeth along her neck. He started sucking, causing Valeta to shudder and whirl around.

"That hurts!"

He smiled, proud of the swollen mark he had left behind. Reinhart was also deeply satisfied with the marks he had left all over her chest, collarbone, and shoulders.

"When will you agree to be mine, Valeta?"

"I can't believe you have the guts to ask me that in this situation."

"Mmm, it just makes me more excited."

The sight of Valeta standing on blood-soaked ground, surrounded by carnage with an indifferent look on her face made his stomach flutter. He felt the overwhelming desire to heap praise upon her.

"Ah, Miss Valeta and the head of the Tower. You're back sooner than I expected."

The ground shook like an earthquake had hit.

Valeta tried to take a step toward Reinhart. *What the...?* But her legs wouldn't budge. It wasn't just her legs. She couldn't move at all. It felt similar to the magic Reinhart had cast on her in the past. *This is what happened to him the other day.*

It was the reason he seemed to have struggled in the middle of that dark storm. She slowly took a deep breath, and even that was difficult.

"I'm sorry, but Miss Valeta is a jewel that I will be taking with me," Largris said.

"You better not touch Valeta unless you want to die," Reinhart warned.

"It would be best if you don't try to move. I haven't been this angry in a long time, so I'm expending quite a bit of my magic. Even you won't be able to break free of it so easily, Head of the Magicians' Tower."

Largris wasn't bluffing. Even Reinhart was struggling to breathe. He tried to raise a finger, but his body refused to move. It felt like someone had wrapped his whole body in chains.

"Let go of me!"

Reinhart clenched his teeth, but he couldn't break free from his bonds. All he had to do was break the magic circle, but this magic was twice as strong as the one cast on him yesterday. It was becoming increasingly difficult to breathe.

"Guilian, do your thing already. I need to get back."

"Yes."

Guilian, who had been standing to the side, approached Valeta with something in his hand. He was holding a piece of iron about the size of a fist. Valeta flinched at the sight of the red-hot iron. Even from a distance, she could feel the heat coming off it.

"Don't."

At the sound of Reinhart's icy voice, Valeta glanced at Largris. His eyes narrowed as he flicked his wand.

"Shall I show you just how fun this power is?"

Black magic shot from the tip of the magic stone on Largris' wand, squirming like a snake, and landed on the ground with a thump. The snake-like apparition coiled around Reinhart's ankle, slithering up his body to his neck, and then opened its mouth.

Sharp fangs flashed.

"I can take an entire day from you, using just a few minutes of mine," Largris said.

The black snake bit down on Reinhart's neck, hard. The head of the Magic Tower gritted his teeth. He gasped as he felt something coursing through his veins.

"You stay right there. We'll be taking Miss Valeta with us." Guilian took Valeta's immobile left arm in his hand, lifting it up.

"S-stop!" Reinhart cried as magic swirled around him, collecting into a massive sphere.

He fired the ball of magic straight at Guilian. However, Largris easily stepped in the projectile's path and waved his wand. Despite it being such a massive ball of magic, it wasn't powerful enough to get past Largris.

He formed a shield. Reinhart gritted his teeth and stood up, the snake still coiled around his neck.

"You really are incredible. A genius even, I would say." Guilian seized Valeta's left hand. She couldn't move as he turned her hand over, her palm facing down. He pressed the red-hot iron into her hand.

"Nnngh..."

The sound and smell of burning flesh had her groaning in pain, unable to even scream.

"Valeta!" Reinhart cried, horrified.

She bit the inside of her cheeks, hearing Reinhart's urgent cry, As she gasped for air, Guilian removed the iron to reveal a strange alchemy circle, now branded on her skin.

Reinhart's eyes flashed when he saw the gruesome sight.

"I will... kill you."

The ground beneath them began to shake. The skies began to tremble as the atmosphere changed. As Reinhart's fury grew, a chilly wind began to blow.

Largris was speechless. He couldn't conceal his surprise. It wasn't hard to understand what was happening. The man standing in front of him was the cause of all this. To make matters worse, the flying debris managed to damage his magic circle.

Valeta collapsed to the ground when the magic broke. She gasped, trying

desperately to suck in great lungfuls of air as her hand throbbed in horrific pain. She had thought she was well accustomed to pain, but this was on a new level.

"Rein... Reinhart... Keep... your promise..." she whispered, her left arm trembling uncontrollably.

He clenched his fists as he heard Valeta spit those words at him with sweat running down her pale face. He was thoroughly fed up with how headstrong she was. Absolutely sick and tired of it. Reinhart wanted nothing more than to kill them all. He wanted to kill everyone in their vicinity. There was a voice in his head urging him to do it.

He wanted to snap their necks and feed their bodies to wild animals. He had the power to kill everyone, so he and Valeta could live in a world where it was just the two of them, so why...? Why did she insist on clashing with these bastards?

"You're the Head of the Magicians' Tower."

"Don't say that ever again. I'll kill you, too."

"Go fulfill your role."

"Shut up, Valeta!" he shouted.

At that moment, his vision began spinning. He had no idea what sort of venom was spreading throughout his body. Was it even venom? The snake had bitten him on the nape of his neck, and he'd felt something seep into his body.

Valeta groaned.

Wearing an impassive expression, Guilian crouched down by her, drew blood from his hand, and smeared it over her burn.

"Activate."

Valeta watched as Guilian's blood seeped into the strange alchemy mark at his command. The last thing she saw was the glow of the circle activating before she fell unconscious.

"Let's go," Largris said as he gathered Valeta's limp body into his arms.

Reinhart fell to one knee, breathing heavily. His vision was growing hazy. However, he clearly saw the magic circle under Guilian and Largris' feet.

*"When I say the word, I just want you to trust me."*

*"I promise not to die, so don't interfere."*

Reinhart fell forward, recalling Valeta's words. He barely managed to hold back the storm that was his turbulent magic.

"Keep... your promise..."

The last thing he registered was Valeta's weak, desperate words before he surrendered to the darkness.

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# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 120

\* \* \*

Reinhart was dazed, his head lolling around. He was surrounded by a deep, impenetrable darkness. He took a deep breath. Clenching his fists, his mind swam in the all too vivid memory of what had just happened.

His nails dug into his palms, but he didn't feel the pain. Annoyed that he was unable to feel anything, he relaxed his grip. It wasn't hard to surmise that he was dreaming.

What was the difference between his numb reality and a dream where he couldn't feel anything? The answer to that question was whether Valeta was there or not. Both worlds were equally boring, but he vastly preferred the one with Valeta in it.

"I'm sorry, Father."

"Is that all you know how to say? Why do you keep doing it if you know it's wrong?! Have I ever ordered you to help those things?"

Reinhart's red pupils dilated as he recognized the voice cutting through the darkness. He turned in the direction the voice was coming from, and the darkness melted away to reveal an all too familiar scene.

A young Valeta was kneeling on the floor of the drawing room, before a man

sitting in an armchair. It was the same man that Reinhart had killed in his dreams over and over again and one that he wished he could revive just so he could kill him once more.

Valeta sat with her fists clenched in her lap, and her head bowed. She didn't cry, nor did she look upset. There wasn't even a hint of sadness on her face as the impassive girl tried her best to placate her angry father.

"I'm sorry, Father. I forgot what you said because I'm stupid," she said.

"I raised you! I made you! What you wear, what you eat, even the hair on your head, it all belongs to me! You are a *product* that belongs to me!"

Reinhart slowly turned his head. He found his younger self standing in the corner, unable to move. This version of himself had been absolutely powerless.

"Yes, Father. I belong to you. You made me and adorned me."

Although she didn't believe it herself, she bowed in a desperate attempt to please her father. There was nothing else she could do. She continued to bow desperately. Valeta had worked harder than anyone to survive.

Reinhart and Valeta were the weakest people in the manor, positioned at the bottom of the ladder. Not a single person felt sorry for the way she was treated like an object. Everybody knew how the count treated Valeta, so it was no surprise that they also disregarded her behind closed doors.

He silently watched the dream, a fragment of his younger self's helpless memories, play out with an impassive gaze.

"Why don't you ever listen to me?! If you like those creatures so much, why don't I kill them all in front of you?"

"I won't do it again, Father. I'm sorry," she whispered once more, continuing to murmur her endless apologies. There was nothing Reinhart could do.

*Drip, drip.*

He heard the sound of water dripping. Turning his head, he found the boy in the corner skillfully hiding the emotions on his face behind a false smile. Reinhart looked down. The boy's fists were clenched so tightly that they were white. Blood was dripping from his fingers. Once he realized that his hands were bloody, his younger self hurriedly moved to hide them behind his back.

Reinhart shifted his gaze back to the young Valeta.

*She must be thirteen or fourteen years old here.* She looked younger than her age due to her tiny frame. He didn't realize it back then, but it was obvious looking at her now. Having her meals restricted as punishment had led to this.

"I don't believe any of your apologies anymore. You there! Bring me all of those wretched creatures!"

"Father..."

For the first time, a shred of emotion appeared on Valeta's face. The stoic expression she had tried to maintain began to crack in the face of his incontestable power over her.

"Shut up, girl!"

"I was wrong, Father. I won't ever do it again."

Joy spread across Count Delight's face. Reinhart's stomach twisted seeing the way the count was looking down at his daughter. Reinhart snapped his fingers, but his magic didn't activate.

"Since you're so stupid in the head, we'll have to ingrain my rules in your body."

"Father, I was wrong. I—"

"Here they are, my lord."

Count Delight grabbed the animals in a single hand and tossed them to the ground. The young girl's eyes began to dart around. Her fingers twitched.

*Squeak! Mew!*

The kittens scrambled to take refuge with Valeta, who was still kneeling on the floor. Her breath hitched as they gathered around her, identifying her as their savior. A dagger clanged against the ground in front of Valeta, who was now struggling to breathe.

"Kill them."

"Father, I promise you, it will never happen again. I was wrong."

"You need to be corrected when you're wrong. Kill them."

"Father, please."

Her face twisted as she shook her head back and forth. The count forced Valeta's clenched fist open and pressed the dagger into her palm.

Then, he glanced at one of the attendants. They approached Valeta, grabbed the hand that was holding the dagger, and swung it downward.

"Father! I'm sor—"

In an instant, the room fell utterly silent.

The girl's face twisted when the stench of blood reached her nose. Count Delight crouched in front of her and lifted her face by her chin with one finger.

"If you ever disobey me again, I'll..." Count Delight started to say. He abruptly paused. "Tch. She's lost it."

He clicked his tongue and straightened when he saw his daughter's utterly vacant eyes. He waved a hand.

"Take her away. Lock her up for a week."

Reinhart laughed at himself as he watched the attendants drag away Valeta's limp body. A familiar feeling of helplessness surged through his body. One by one, she was stirring emotions within him, feelings that the former heads of the Magicians' Tower had never known during their lifetimes.

Darkness descended like a curtain, parting to reveal another scene.

"Can I help you, Master?"

Valeta said nothing. It was pitch black outside the windows, and the manor was utterly silent.

Reinhart leaned against the wall and looked down at his past self. It was strange watching his younger self speak in such a sweet voice with such a hard look on his face.

*Hiccup...*

The boy's mouth snapped shut when he heard the hushed sobs coming from within the room. He slid down the locked door, the same one he had been quietly leaning against for a week, and crouched on the floor.

"Do you want to run away with me, Master?"

Valeta said nothing.

Even though there was no response, his younger self sat there, waiting for one. Based on the occasional rustles he could hear, he knew she wasn't sleeping.

"I think we could have a fun life together. Together, we could raise different

kinds of animals, as many as you want.”

Again, silence.

He wanted to hear her say something—anything to indicate that she was still alive. He continued to talk, his words warm even though his expression was anything but. It wasn’t easy to incite a response from her.

“Master. If you could have one wish, what would it be? Like, if a god or a devil guaranteed you one wish.”

It was silent on the other side of the door. He couldn’t hear anything. Reinhart breathed in deeply. He felt like he knew where this was going. This was a moment that continued to haunt him to this very day.

“A home...”

“A home?”

“I wish I had a safe and normal home I could return to. A place where I could rest. A place where I could raise animals, like you said.”

His younger self didn’t know how to respond. If she had wanted money or fame or even marriage to a prince, Reinhart could have made that happen. He would have made the effort. But he couldn’t even wrap his head around her unexpected response. Her answer was beyond anything he had expected to hear. He could’ve guessed hundreds of different ones, none of which would be even close to what she’d said.

“If that is your one and only wish, I’ll make it happen. Even if I have to kill anyone who gets in my way,” he said after a long pause. *I’ll pave the way for you, so all you have to do is walk forward. I don’t mind taking the blame for all the blood I will have to spill. I want your path to be beautiful, free, and clear.* All he wished for in return was that she wouldn’t run away when she saw his true self.

"I'll be your god."

He vowed to become a being capable of granting her wish with a single snap of his fingers. He would do anything for her, all she needed to do was give her command. Even though it was quiet on the other side of the door, perhaps because she had fallen into a deep sleep, the young Reinhart hardened his resolve.

*I haven't been able to accomplish anything in my life.*

Valeta wanted to create her own path. She didn't cut any corners, or use any tools to make it easier. She didn't even see him as a tool at all.

Reinhart slowly closed his eyes as the dream collapsed around him.

The hellish nightmare was over.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 121

\* \* \*

Reinhart slowly opened his eyes. His whole body felt heavy as lead as he woke from a deep sleep, slowly registering the familiar ceiling above him as he sat up.

"You're finally awake, my lord," a scratchy voice said.

"What am I doing here?" Reinhart asked.

"Actually," Caspelios said after a pause, "the magicians decided they would take turns protecting you and Miss Valeta in hopes that it would persuade you to come back."

Reinhart raised his eyebrows. This was news to him.

Caspelios continued. "Kurt and Silon were the first team on duty."

Reinhart's expression went blank as he recalled the day Kurt and Silon seemingly randomly appeared in the village. Caspelios frowned. Seeing Reinhart without his trademark smile was unsettling.

*When was the last time I felt this powerless?* Reinhart thought. Clicking his tongue, he roughly ran a hand through his silver hair. He frowned as the long strands slipped between his fingers.

"So?"

"The second team on duty was another pair of magicians. They're the ones that

found you collapsed and brought you back to the Tower."

"I see." He scowled. *Black magic...*

He couldn't even do anything to fight back. Even if they had both been using black magic, there was no doubt in his mind who would've come out on top.

That magicians lived longer than average humans was not useful in this case. He couldn't just waltz into the imperial castle and kill everyone there. It wasn't because he hesitated in expending his own life force as a tool to perform black magic. The problem was that Valeta would hate it if he did so. He was scared to see her expression after he killed everyone.

*I thought I didn't care if she hated me,* Reinhart mused. He had always believed that she hated him. But after learning that she didn't, he felt the need to tread more carefully. He was about to get out of bed when he felt a twitch of magic. He looked to the foot of the bed.

"You're awake, my lord," Kurt greeted.

Reinhart ignored the magicians and swung his legs out of bed. Undeterred by his lord's dismissive attitude, Silon took a step closer.

"About Miss Valeta..."

Reinhart froze when he heard her name.

"We looked everywhere for her around the village because we thought she was with you, but we couldn't find her. Has she gone somewhere?" Silon asked.

Reinhart narrowed his eyes. His bare feet met with the rug, and he grabbed his robe, which had been draped over a chair.

Silon glanced furtively at the head of the Tower before speaking up again. "By chance, did something happen to Miss Valeta?"

Reinhart scowled at the magician's question. Valeta didn't like anyone getting involved in her business. She didn't like anyone coming near her and only allowed it when forced to do so.

"Don't worry about it. And Pell, I need to go into your room."

"I can't allow that," Caspelios said.

"Just try and stop me," Reinhart replied.

"My lord."

Reinhart's expression was still blank, face absent of the slight smile he always wore. He looked at Caspelios without any emotion. His eyes were completely empty. Reinhart grabbed Caspelios by the throat, hand darting out faster than a hawk snatching a fish from water. The strength of his grip nearly ripped the watchman's robes clear off his body.

A flicker of panic appeared in Caspelios' crimson eyes, but he didn't make a single sound.

"I'm not in the mood to deal with anything today. I'm already at my limit, so it's best if you don't test my patience," Reinhart said, lips barely moving, as he squeezed the watchman's neck tightly. His gaze shifted from Caspelios' strained expression to Silon and Kurt. "Unless you want to see all the magicians, the Tower, and everything you hold dear buried alive."

After a pregnant pause, Caspelios finally asked, "Did something happen?"

Reinhart didn't respond.

When he tried to turn away, Kurt stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

"We can help," he said.

"Did something happen to Miss Valeta?" Silon asked.

"No," Reinhart spat as he ran his fingers through his hair. It was becoming a habit. "And nothing's going to happen."

She had promised him that nothing would happen to her. If she died, he'd ensure that her soul was never free of him. He'd find a doll, stuff her soul in it, and keep her always by his side.

"You're the Head of the Magicians' Tower."

"Go fulfill your role."

Reinhart pressed his hand firmly against his pounding heart as he recalled the last conversation he'd had with Valeta.

"Master has something she needs to do at the imperial castle, so she allowed herself to be captured. When she says she's going to do something, she always does it. That means she has a plan."

Telling him to do his own thing meant that she had something she needed to do of her own. In other words, it was his job to figure out what was going on with the roste and the rezir while she was occupied with the imperial family.

*That should be enough.* Reinhart took a deep breath. He understood what Valeta wanted to say without her needing to say it. They didn't have to have a long conversation. But...

"This is the last time, Master," he whispered to himself.

He released his grip on Caspelios' throat, procuring a piece of candy out of thin air as he did so and popping it into his mouth. A smile appeared on his face as if it had never left. He was eating the same candy he had half-forced Valeta to buy for him.

If she let one more bastard touch her, he wasn't going to restrain himself any longer. Killing them all was the only solution he had at that point.

"You said you want to help me?"

"Yes," Kurt and Silon replied in unison as they both went down to one knee.

"There's a man who's using black magic. He needs to be taken care of," Reinhart said, turning to Caspelios with a big grin. "Is that reason good enough for you, presumptuous watchdog?"

His smile grew even wider as he stared down the stoic Caspelios.

\* \* \*

Although Valeta's mind was still hazy, she forced her heavy eyelids open. The back of her left hand throbbed with pain. Valeta pushed herself out of bed using her right hand, being careful not to overexert herself.

"Oh..."

She was thirsty. She slowly relaxed as she recognized the now familiar room. It wasn't familiar to her in a good way, but she was glad she hadn't awoken somewhere as terrible as she had feared. She looked down at the back of her left hand and saw a cold, wet towel lying on top of it. Valeta smelt something medicinal, but it wasn't a potion. She blinked.

"You're awake."

Valeta's eyes narrowed when she suddenly heard a man addressing her. The voice was familiar, but she wasn't sure she could trust him yet. She tried to keep her expression as neutral as possible as she asked, "Did you read my letter?"

"I said I was looking for a jewel. I thought that was what you wanted me to say."

"I didn't think you'd just drag me away like that."

"It's what Kynos wanted. Honestly, it didn't matter how I brought you back as long as I did."

The man was so frank that Valeta had nothing to say in response. She wasn't a child who just believed what any kind stranger had to say. Largris came closer, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. He said nothing for a long moment as if he was choosing his words carefully.

"You said you know where my Eliza is."

"I do."

"And to say I was looking for a jewel if I needed help?"

Valeta nodded, confirming that this was what she had written. She hadn't included all the details in her letter, just in case it had been intercepted.

This was also because she didn't completely trust the man. He probably wasn't the same man Eliza had fallen in love with. Largris had admitted to spreading the roste throughout the empire with a smile on his face. Everything that had happened to Reinhart was thanks to this man.

*It wouldn't have been hard for him because he's also a magician.* She didn't realize that it was possible for a magician of his caliber to exist at the same time as Reinhart. She wasn't at all prepared for this new twist.

*He was nothing more than a name in the book.* But as it turned out, fiction was different from reality. One simple name was more important than she'd thought.

*The others will deal with the roste...* Valeta thought as she studied the magician. She needed to focus on dealing with the emperor. She still didn't have the

slightest idea of what was going on in his mind. Valeta knew she could bring him down, as long as she could figure out what he wanted.

“Where is Eliza?”

Valeta didn’t reply. She scrutinized the magician slowly. “I was going to tell you, but...”

“But?” Largris asked. “It sounds like you’re not going to tell me anymore.”

His gray eyes narrowed into slits. Largris’ grave voice only added to the heavy atmosphere brewing between them. But Valeta didn’t react. In fact, the man’s behavior was no different from Reinhart’s.

If anything, Reinhart was scarier.

“Yes. I don’t see any point in telling you anymore. I don’t see any difference between you and the emperor.”

“What?”

“I don’t know if allowing you to meet Eliza again is right. She hasn’t conceded at all in all this time, but you? You’ve allowed yourself to stoop so low that you’ve become pitch blank.”

Largris’ eyes widened as he listened to Valeta speak. Then, as if he had lost all reason, he pressed his wand against her heart. His eyes narrowed viciously.

“It’s not your place to judge me. Know your place. You...”

“What are you doing, Larg?”

The magician’s shoulders started shaking as soon as he heard the voice coming from behind him. He looked at Valeta with dismay and lowered the wand pointing at her chest.

She sat up again and slowly turned her head. Even though she knew he had an unpleasant voice, Valeta couldn't help but make a face.

"We meet again, Valeta," said the emperor.

"I didn't think I would be dragged back like this," Valeta replied.

"I feel like you ran away last time because I didn't get to the point fast enough. So, let's get right to it."

"Even if you tell me the point, I'm still going to run away. I don't know what you want from me."

Kynos smiled. He seemed a little too happy despite her prickly response, which made her uneasy. She reflexively crouched when the emperor took a step closer to her.

"What do I want?" His golden eyes shone in the dim light of the room. She didn't know how his eyes could be so eerie, bright as a full moon as they were. She felt like a defenseless human stood before a beast. "First, I want your total obedience."

"That's insanity."

"Kneel before me. From now on, I'm your master."

Kynos' gaze flickered to the floor. About to scoff at the emperor's ridiculous command, Valeta's body began moving on its own.

"Huh?"

As her body shifted, Valeta's back tensed. It was as if she was a puppet being manipulated by invisible strings. Surprised, she tried to force her body back into its previous position, but it wouldn't obey. She could only watch helplessly as her line of sight sank lower and lower.

Valeta found herself kneeling in front of Kynos with her head bowed. She suddenly felt like she was a child kneeling at Count Delight's feet once more.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 122

As she was forced to look down, Valeta caught sight of her left hand. Her eyes widened. She understood suddenly that this was alchemy. Before she'd fallen unconscious, she'd seen the symbol activating. Keeping her expression impassive, she willed her immobile neck to move.

As cold sweat rolled down her temples, Valeta forced her head up from her downward gaze until she could see Kynos perched arrogantly on her bed.

"Get out, Larg," Kynos said casually, shooting a glance at Largris behind him.

For a moment, the magician remained silent and unmoving. Then, he shrugged and turned away, feigning nonchalance at his sudden eviction.

Kynos sighed, sounding troubled. "I hear you've been coming in and out of my room at will."

Valeta stared silently.

Kynos reached out and tickled her under her chin lightly. She was so surprised by his words that she didn't even register that he was treating her like a dog.

"Did you ask her to run away with you? Of course, I'm sure Eliza refused. She's terrified that something might happen to Largris," he said matter-of-factly.

"How could you... just disregard someone's free will and manipulate them like that?"

Kynos silently raised an eyebrow at Valeta's harsh question. After a moment's thought, he finally said, "The first thing I truly wanted was the throne. So I killed my parents, my siblings, and my subjects to get it. Then, I got bored."

"Bored?" Valeta repeated.

"But," the emperor continued, "I met Larg and Eliza. For the first time, I learned what it was like to have friends, and I wanted that, too. That's why I decided to take it for myself."

There was absolutely no remorse in his voice, which Valeta found horrifying. She grimaced.

"But I'm worried because their health isn't the best," he said.

He sounded troubled. The utterly sincere look of concern on the emperor's face immediately after he forced her to kneel at his feet sent chills down Valeta's spine. More concerning than anything, his feelings were genuine. He was truly worried about them. However, given his actions and the meaning behind his words, Valeta wasn't sure if *genuine* was a word that should ever be used to describe the emperor.

"Did you know?" he asked. "Eliza was a genius alchemist. She developed so many new alchemy symbols. I took one of those symbols and applied it myself," he said, indicating Valeta's left hand.

"Applied?" she repeated.

His words didn't make any sense. He made it sound like he had developed it and applied the symbol himself.

Kynos smiled widely as if he had noticed Valeta's shock. "Guilian was the first of my test subjects. I didn't think he would listen unless I gouged out one of his eyes. It worked better than I thought."

After doing it successfully once, doing so again had been easy.

"How do you know how to use..."

"I learned from Eliza." Kynos smiled as he recalled the past fondly. "She taught me how to make and write symbols."

Valeta's stomach twisted. He sounded so sincere. To her, the emperor seemed more evil than a demon. How could he look like he was fondly reminiscing after he had ruined Eliza and Largris' life?

"It's not like you can use them..." she said, forcing her tongue to move.

She couldn't shake free of feeling like a puppet on a string. Valeta felt drained just trying to keep her neck up as she knelt in front of the emperor like his loyal subject. She wasn't sure if it was a blessing or not, but at least moving her mouth wasn't as draining.

Kynos' eyes narrowed slightly upon hearing Valeta's hesitant words. She stiffened as he reached out and seized her by the chin. "Where are your manners? It's rather disrespectful of you to speak so informally. Aren't you the daughter of a count? Or did you forget everything House Delight taught you?"

"Oh..." she breathed.

As he looked down at her, his gaze, resembling a beast ready to pounce on its prey, reminded the girl strongly of her past. She knew how to deal with people like him.

*I have to please him.* Her top priority was to figure out what he wanted. The emperor had so many resources at his disposal that it was impossible to take him on alone.

"No..." she said after a long pause.

Kynos seemed pleased when she didn't argue any further. Satisfied by her obedience, he stroked her hair several times. "If you help me get what I want, I promise I'll never touch you or the Magicians' Tower ever again."

Valeta kept quiet. His words were sweet, but she didn't believe him for even a moment. He was the type of man who would stab someone in the back with a smile on his face. She wouldn't have been the first person to be fooled by him.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Simply put, I want to use an equivalent exchange to create a high-ranking restorative medicine."

"There's no such thing. Top-tier potions are the pinnacle of healing. You don't need to exchange anything for them."

"There is. Precisely speaking, the kind of medicine that can heal any wound, faster than the speed of light. It's a medicine that can resurrect you even if you were stabbed in the heart or your tongue cut out. Or even if you were to be decapitated."

Valeta's expression twisted with horror. It wasn't hard to understand what he was referring to or what he intended to use it for.

"That kind of cure doesn't exist."

The emperor chuckled upon seeing Valeta's reaction. Her face hardened. She'd had no idea he was working toward something like that.

"Eliza once worked on an interesting experiment in the past. It was a crop that continued to grow and grow no matter how many times you cut it. She was researching undying crops that would solve the issue of food shortages when our relationship turned sour."

Troubled, the emperor made a face.

Valeta regarded Kynos. Theoretically speaking, if plants had been able to regenerate indefinitely, then what the emperor was talking about could be possible.

"I've been in a bind ever since. I don't know what it was she saw in me, but she burned all of her research and even went so far as to gouge out her own eye."

Valeta's stomach twisted when she thought about what end Kynos must have wanted to twist Eliza's kindness toward. Had he been thinking about using it on people?

"But then you came along. I sent you all the books Eliza had used. I must say, you grew up quite well."

"You're the one who gave me all those books?"

Kynos smiled. "I gave you the ones that I thought were appropriate and assigned specific teachers to teach their contents."

"But it doesn't matter if you can make alchemy symbols or not. The only people capable of using alchemy are alchemists," Valeta insisted.

"An alchemist's blood is more than enough. Eliza can't use alchemy anymore, but her blood is a different story," Kynos said, his voice filled with pride.

The corners of Valeta's mouth twitched. She had thought Reinhart was crazy, but this man was utterly insane.

"Even so, how could you intentionally steal people's limbs by creating the roste and raise the dead back to life? That doesn't make any—"

"Silence," Kynos snapped, not bothering to hide his displeasure.

Valeta's lips pressed closed on their own before she could finish speaking; she couldn't even open her own mouth without his permission. She scoffed internally at the thought. *This is awful*, she thought as she clenched her left fist. Unable to move a single finger, there was nothing she could do as her irritation grew.

"You're right. I'm the one who spread the roste," the emperor admitted. "I needed to put the head of the Tower in his place. I wanted to get my hands on the Magicians' Tower, but it appears that magicians have more trust in their leader than I thought."

Clearly, he had severely underestimated Reinhart.

"But truthfully, I don't know why the dead are coming back to life. I thought you were behind it, but evidently not."

Valeta was shocked. Her eyes became as wide as saucers. It was just as she had suspected. The ones responsible for the roste and rezir were different people. She took a deep breath.

Kynos' beastly gaze fell on Valeta. "Your task is simple. All you have to do is obey me and make everything I ask you to."

Valeta glared at the emperor, obviously having something to say. Kynos gestured lazily. It was an insincere gesture.

"I don't know how to use that kind of alchemy," she spat.

"I made sure you were thoroughly educated. Put your little head to it. I'm sure you'll figure it out," Kynos said, patting her head as he rose from the bed.

Valeta gritted her teeth. The emperor took her by her arm and pulled her to her feet. Her immobile body moved instantly at the touch of his hand. She squeezed her fists more tightly.

Kynos went to the door and then turned, his golden eyes meeting Valeta's violet ones. "You don't have to think about anything anymore."

As his final words met her ears, Valeta's mind began to blur. Her vision grew hazy as if a thick fog had settled over her eyes. She could feel herself sinking into a deep pit like she was falling asleep. She attempted to bite the inside of

her cheek to keep herself conscious, but it was too late.

Before she could even finish her thought, her arms fell limp by her side. And before she knew it, she felt herself sinking into the floor, down into the darkness.

*Damn it. Things didn't quite go as planned.*

That was her last rational thought.

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## Chapter 123

Valeta's head dropped like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Kynos stroked his chin as he observed the girl, her shoulders slumped forward, arms dangling by her side.

"Hand," he ordered.

As soon as he held out his hand, the girl flinched. Then, ever so slowly, she placed her hand in his palm. She moved painfully slowly, but Kynos waited patiently.

It took her five minutes to place her hand in his. This only proved just how strong her willpower was and how her subconscious was aware of the abnormality of the situation. It was also significantly longer than it had taken Guilian, who had been under his control after roughly thirty seconds.

"Raise your head," Kynos ordered again. The girl clearly had heard him, but again, it took an excruciatingly long time for her to actually look up.

Again, it took more than five minutes. Kynos frowned.

"You're more stubborn than I expected," he said, stroking his chin in a troubled manner.

The more orders he gave, the more the subject would lose their intellect. The subject would start obeying commands without even realizing it. *It's a slow process, giving her these detailed commands.* He just had to break her in. Originally, he had planned to give her to Miloyd in a pure, unaltered condition, but it couldn't be helped now.

"Come to my office tomorrow morning at nine."

Valeta only stared. Although her eyes were dead and lifeless, just as he wanted them, there remained a hint of defiance. *She's not answering me.* He'd known Valeta wouldn't be easy, given all the times she had managed to escape from him, but this was going more poorly than he'd thought it would. He took her by the shoulders, sat her on the bed, and gave his final order.

"Just go about your day until then."

Kynos gave her one last look before he turned and left the room. The girl's empty gaze followed him out of the room. Then, she lowered her gaze to the floor.

Silence descended in the little room. She just sat on the bed like a broken doll. The utter lack of thoughts in Valeta's head was deeply unsettling. She knew something was wrong, but she couldn't figure out what it was. This situation she found herself in felt natural but unpleasant.

**Meow!**

The snowta, which had been hiding in her bag throughout all of this, crawled out of the girl's bag once it sensed that the emperor was gone. After it wormed its way out of her bag, it sat and mewed by Valeta's feet. She blinked. She thought she could recognize the tiny creature whimpering at her feet, but the fog in her mind was obscuring the answers from her.

*What am I doing here again?* Valeta thought. Her slowly drooping body was beginning to annoy her. She wanted to think, but she couldn't. It felt like she had just lost the ability to think.

**Meow! Meow!**

The snowta managed to claw its way up Valeta's legs and began to growl at her left hand. Valeta blinked when she heard the fierce little cries and looked down at the tiny creature.

“Grr...”

Then, the snowta opened its tiny mouth and bit the back of her branded hand. Pain shot through her arm and up to her head. Valeta was about to swing her arm when she stopped. It was as if a gust of wind had blown through her foggy mind, clearing it.

She frowned and looked down, the snowta still dangling from her hand.

“Snowta...?”

“Meow?”

The little creature’s response was muffled, its mouth stuffed full of her hand. Although the fog had cleared, she couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling that something was wrong. She felt like she wasn’t allowed to think, as though the act of thinking itself was a great sin. Valeta couldn’t help but sigh as she began to recall what had just happened, starting from the emperor’s command.

*How did I snap out of it?* Up until a moment ago, she had still been trapped by his order. Valeta blinked slowly a few times before looking down at the snowta again. It seemed the little white cotton ball had saved her.

*“Oh... It’s because snowtas are spiritual creatures. They’re supposed to be guardians that ward off evil spirits, so I guess this little guy actually lives up to their reputation.”*

**“So it was able to endure all that because it’s immune to evil?”**

*“If you think about it, the roste is technically black magic.”*

Valeta sighed as she recalled her conversation with Reinhart. It seemed that the snowta could help her fight off any spells that centered around human lives. She was grateful to have the little fluff ball. She hadn't realized that this would be her fate, especially after she'd told Reinhart that everything would be okay.

*Largris... He won't be any help to me.* Eliza would have been the most helpful person in this situation, but the emperor had clearly found out that they had been meeting. Seeing her again while she was under the emperor's command would be impossible. For the time being, she was unable to move around freely.

"I didn't know alchemy like this existed." Even if it wasn't black magic, it seemed like the snowta had some power against this ancient art. Valeta tilted her head back as she petted the snowta. "I don't know what to do."

The idea of being so thoroughly manipulated by someone sent shivers down her spine. It was a similar feeling to the time she'd visited the Nursery with Reinhart. The poison that had filled that place was the worst.

She could never have imagined that the emperor's plan was to turn Eliza into some sort of immortal monster. Despite her many suicide attempts, it was clear that the emperor was never going to let her experience eternal rest. And *Largris would go to the ends of the earth for Eliza.*

It seemed that the emperor wanted to become an immortal monster himself. That's how he intended for them to be together forever. If it was Eliza and Largris that the emperor wanted, he would have both of them in his grasp simply by never letting Eliza die.

Valeta sensed another presence and her eyes narrowed as her thoughts were interrupted. "Is it a magician thing to just appear without making your presence known?"

She couldn't possibly miss the stench of alcohol. Valeta had always been sensitive to the smell of Reinhart's blood, so it wasn't unusual for her to pick up

on strong odors such as blood and alcohol.

"Oh, you're back to normal. Is it because of the snowta?"

"You know what it is."

It wasn't a question.

Largris nodded. Instead, he took a step closer to Valeta. She remained silent as he emerged from the shadows.

"I do. And I still haven't heard your answer yet," he said.

"I don't have an answer for you," Valeta replied sharply. "To be more precise, that information became my shield the moment you threatened me."

"I don't want much. I have no intention of hurting you. I just want to live a normal life with my family and to die in peace."

"That's a selfish wish. I don't think you have the right to say that after you destroyed so many lives."

The magician's jaw clenched. He didn't have the energy to quarrel with this girl. The son he'd thought dead was alive. Largris had never imagined that he had been breathing this whole time right under his feet. He was alive and had been experimented on right before his eyes. He couldn't remain sober with that knowledge weighing down on him. Yet, even as he drank and drank, Largris' mind remained clear. It was painful to hold Desilian in his arms, out of his mind and unresponsive as he was.

"Did you ever meet him?"

"Yes. He was a good person."

Desilian had lived a sad life. He had to have lost parts of himself every time he

turned into a monster and back again.

"He was my son."

Valeta paused. "What?"

"Desilian was my son... The child I thought I had lost. The only child we were able to have."

They had thought he was dead. After being crushed in the burning debris, all that had been left of him was a skeleton. Both Largris and Eliza had held the bones in their arms and cried.

"Kynos... Kynos, he... tricked us. And then he casually continued to call my son by the name we had given him!"

Regret, rage, and despair filled the magician's light gray eyes. Valeta had no words as she listened to the story of such a horrible betrayal.

*I thought Desilian seemed similar to Eliza.* But she'd had no idea there was any possibility he was actually her son. Their hair and eye color had been exactly the same, even their aura and the lilt of their voices.

"I'm going to kill Kynos," Largris muttered. "I'm going to kill everything he holds dear."

"Hey..." Valeta said.

"I'm going to start with his son. Then, I'll bring ruin to his empire. I'm going to watch everything he holds dear collapse around him like a sand castle," Largris muttered, his voice filled with rage. He was going to snatch away everything that made up Kynos' life the very moment the despicable man let his guard down.

Largris smiled as tears rolled down his face.

"Is Miloyd really Eliza and the emperor's son?" Valeta asked.

"Yes. It wasn't that long after Desilian was born that Kynos..." Largris couldn't finish his sentence.

As Valeta watched the man's face contort with deep despair, she realized she couldn't even fathom all that he had been through.

"I thought he was my friend! But that bastard manipulated me until the very end!"

Largris had been aware of the emperor's perverse tendencies, but he'd tried not to say anything about it. He'd tried to rationalize it; he'd tried to talk him out of it; he'd never turned down his requests for help; he'd fully believed that Kynos would return Eliza to him one day.

"I will kill anyone and anything that carries his blood. I'll kill... I'll kill everything... I'll sacrifice it all to bring Eliza's soul back."

Eliza's soul? Valeta's expression shifted. "That's neither alchemy nor magic."

"I don't care. I'll do it even if I have to sell my soul to the devil."

Tears continued to stream down Largris' youthful, tanned face. Valeta looked away and tilted her head back slightly. It was a little cruel, but she knew the perfect way to kill the emperor... However, it would require meeting a lot of conditions to make it happen.

"Do you know what the emperor wants, Largris?"

"What he wants? He wants the three of us to be together again. Forever. But that's impossible."

Valeta gave a small head shake. "He wants me to craft a potion of immortality. He said that Eliza used to research plants that would grow back no matter how

many times you cut them down."

Largris' eyes widened. He nodded, looking as though he wanted to ask how she knew that, but Valeta turned her attention to the snowta, which was still nibbling at the back of her hand.

"What do you think about forcing the emperor into the dirt?" she asked.

"What...?"

"I just had an interesting idea."

However, her plan was based on the assumption that she'd be able to make the medicine he wanted. If she succeeded, she'd be able to put him in the ground, and if her assumptions were correct, chances were that there was another reason Eliza had ceased work on her research.

"Will you help me, Largris?"

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### Chapter 124

"If you help me, you might be able to help Eliza as well."

Valeta didn't tell him that Eliza wasn't doing well. She didn't know if she would be able to restore her missing eye, but at the very least, she could bring some life back to the woman again.

Largris paused.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his eyes widening. He crouched, putting himself at eye level with Valeta. They were now face-to-face.

*I knew it,* Valeta thought. He believed that Eliza was dead. She rubbed the back of her neck. Valeta didn't think it was a good idea to tell him Eliza's location. At least, not yet. Nothing good would come of allowing them to meet as it was.

*Also, there's no guarantee that he won't betray me, either.* She felt bad for Eliza, but she had to ensure her own safety.

Largris shook her by her shoulders. "Eliza... She's alive?"

"Yes, she is."

"But... I had her eye. The one with the ancient circle. She's dead. Kynos had me confirm..."

Valeta pressed her lips together. She didn't need to explain the details. After all, Largris' questions would be answered once they were reunited. It wouldn't do any of them any good if he got overly excited now.

"She's alive. But Eliza thinks that you're dead, too."

"She's... alive?" Largris repeated. "My Eliza is? Really? Where? Where is she!?" He shook Valeta's shoulders frantically.

"I'm sorry, but I had my own reasons for not wanting to die here. As you can see, I'll be serving as the imperial family's puppet for the time being. Please protect my body," Valeta said in a composed manner. She was glad she had the snowta attached to her hand. Otherwise, there was no telling what they might do to her while she was devoid of reason. "I'll... tell you more about Eliza later."

There was nothing that would stop Reinhart if she died or came back injured. He would kill everybody. He probably wouldn't even let her rest in peace. She'd be tied to him, even in death. The thought alone was exhausting.

Also... Valeta blinked as the image of future Reinhart standing alone in the sky room, looking over the world that had been given to him, entered her mind. *I don't want to see him like that.* She couldn't explain why, but she didn't want him to end up like that Reinhart. The image of a man possessing everything yet nothing all at once haunted her.

"So, please. Help me. I need to find out more about Eliza's regenerating crop research."

"Are you sure she's alive?"

"Yes, I'm sure, but she's not doing well."

"What do you mean?"

"I think she may have attempted suicide multiple times. But it seems that the emperor threatened her with your life..." Valeta trailed off.

Largris clenched his fist and started punching the wall beside him. She sighed as she watched.

"Promise me you'll tell me where she is once you're done," he said.

"I swear."

Largris' face twisted with displeasure for a moment, but he nodded. He took a deep breath, ruffled his hair, and nodded again. "I don't know the details. It was her personal project, and we didn't talk much about it. I was working on my own research at the time."

The magician spoke slowly as though he were sifting through his memories. He couldn't really remember many details because it had been so long ago. There were days when he wanted to forget everything and days when his memories did nothing but torment him, but they were also the only reason he was still breathing to this day.

"Ha..." He rubbed his face in frustration. "Right, it was around the time Eliza and I told Kynos we were getting married. That's when things between us started getting weird."

"Oh."

"It wasn't that long after our son was born. It was also around that time that Kynos forced her into a relationship with him."

"The emperor said that Eliza stopped working on the research because of him. Is that true?" Valeta asked.

Largris shook his head. Eliza wasn't the type to give up on her research over something like that. She had started that research for the people's sake, not Kynos'.

"That's not the reason she stopped. She's not that kind of person. For a while after that, she continued researching, but..." Largris paused, struggling with his words. He looked down at his poor hand, which had taken the full force of colliding with the wall, and clenched it. "One day, she just said, 'This looks good on the outside, but that's all there is to it.' Then she burned all of her research."

"All of it?"

"Yes. When I asked her why she did it, she simply said that nothing good would come out of it."

Valeta nodded.

She was right. Eliza must have discovered a fault in her research, deemed it dangerous, and incinerated all of her notes. Everything started falling into place.

Valeta narrowed her eyes. *The truth is probably not all that different from what I'm thinking.* It didn't seem like it would be all that hard to figure out which method Eliza had used.

"When she was working on her research, did she apply the alchemy symbol to the ground? Or directly on the crops?"

"That I don't know. I wasn't there when she inscribed the symbols."

Valeta frowned at Largris' response and nodded slowly. She would have to experiment a little, but it wouldn't be hard to make exactly what the emperor wanted.

"Can you take care of the snowta for me? I think this plan will work if you come back every night and let the snowta bite me. I need to do some research of my own."

"You're going to live as his puppet?"

"Just for the time being. That's the only way he'll accept the medicine that I make without any suspicion."

"What do you plan on doing?"

Valeta simply smiled in answer to the magician's question. She quietly stroked

the snowta's head, pressing a little kiss against its forehead. The snowta squeaked before it bit down harder on her hand.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

Meow! Mew! Meow! Mew!

Valeta carefully took the snowta by the scruff of its neck in an attempt to remove it from her hand, but the little creature squirmed and flailed about. Its tiny body twisted left and right as it desperately tried to remain attached.

"Snowtas don't usually like humans..." Largris said, looking curious. He reached out and yanked the snowta off of Valeta's hand, and immediately, eyes began to lose focus.

"Take... care..."

Her head slumped forward before she could even finish her sentence. She was so still that one might assume she was dead. The only indication that she was still alive was the gentle rise and fall of her chest. After a moment, she crawled into bed.

As if on command, she slowly closed her eyes. She no longer even saw Largris or the snowta.

\* \* \*

"Come here, Valeta," the emperor said as he held out his hand.

With a face devoid of expression, Valeta obediently placed her hand in the emperor's as she knelt by his feet. She had obeyed his command in less than

five seconds.

*Good enough.* Over the past week, the emperor had given Valeta many orders. At first, the girl had taken a long time to obey his commands, but now she followed them immediately with almost no delay.

“Valeta.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Duke Delphine and Duke Leon asked to meet with you today. What do you think?”

Valeta looked up at the emperor and blinked several times. It felt like his words were going in one ear and out the other. Everything felt like a dream.

“If that is what you wish, Your Majesty,” Valeta replied in a voice void of feeling, her eyes blank and unseeing.

She was dressed in extravagant clothing, worthy of someone standing at the emperor’s side. Her dress was cut low in the back, displaying her lovely skin. The clothing revealed the lengths of both her arms as the sleeves were made from a translucent blue silk embroidered with gold. She also wore a silk choker and followed the emperor around all day like she was his pet.

The emperor showed Valeta off every chance he got. Whether he was at an event or meeting privately with nobles, she was always there. He was showing off that he had her firmly in his clutches. The emperor sat with his hand on his chin as he stroked Valeta’s cheek. Although she didn’t move as naturally as Guilian, it didn’t seem like it would be that hard to have her perform alchemy.

She didn’t seem as resistant when it came to alchemy.

“Then, I’ll tell them to come by.”

"Yes, Your Majesty," Valeta replied.

The emperor waved his hand and the girl rose to her feet. Kynos' lips curled into a smile as he rose from his seat.

"Someone go fetch Duke Leon and Duke Delphine. Oh, and prepare some tea, too."

Valeta stared out into the bustling office with a blank look on her face. Everything felt like a dream. It felt like there was a fog settled over everything, which made her just want to sleep. Ten minutes later, there was a knock at the office door.

"Thank you for inviting us, Your Majesty," Carlon Delphine said as Dreux Leon bowed his head respectfully.

Valeta stood silently beside the emperor, who was seated on the sofa.

"Well, I thought the two of you must be worried about your ward."

Carlon paused. "Yes, thank you," he said cautiously. He turned his attention to the girl. "Valeta?"

Valeta didn't respond. She simply turned to look at him before her gaze slid back to staring straight ahead.

Carlon's eyes grew wide with surprise.

"Valeta?" he called again.

There was still no response. It was then that he realized something was very wrong. Carlon and Dreux exchanged a weighted glance.

"Valeta, you should respond to Duke Delphine. Didn't I already tell you that it's bad manners to stay silent?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Carlon couldn't believe his eyes as he watched the way Valeta had immediately responded to the emperor. Something strange was definitely going on. He could see no good reason why the girl would suddenly be so obedient to the emperor.

"Have you been well?" he finally managed to ask.

"Yes, Your Grace."

Carlon grimaced at Valeta's utterly emotionless response.

Kynos watched the scene unfolding before him as he took a sip of his tea. It was all very amusing to him. Carlon Delphine was always so calm and collected, so seeing him lose composure was interesting.

*I can never tell what that one's thinking, though.* If Carlon was the type who always kept his emotions in check, then Dreux had no emotions at all. His face was as neutral as it always was. He didn't even blink upon seeing Valeta. He might as well have come all the way here with no higher purpose, for all the reaction he gave.

"Valeta... Is something the matter?"

The girl noticed Carlon's hand reaching for her and grabbed it. The duke looked down at their joined hands, puzzled. He couldn't hide his shock when he saw Valeta's lips move.

"Freeze."

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 125

Valeta flinched, and a beat later, she spoke. The emperor's eyebrows rose as he watched them interact. Carlon Delphine quickly snatched his hand away, realizing she was using alchemy. A large chunk of ice formed midair and came crashing to the floor. Valeta calmly stared down at it, then looked back up.

"Valeta..."

"Oh dear. I'm sorry. I ordered her to treat anyone who touches her as if they were an enemy," the emperor said, sounding chagrined as he held out his hand to Valeta. She stared before taking it and slowly kneeling before him.

Carlon's eyes grew wide with surprise.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

Carlon barely managed to force himself to respond, "No, I'm fine, Your Majesty." He clenched his fists tightly until his knuckles turned white. He couldn't say anything in front of the emperor. "Thank you for letting us see Valeta. I'm afraid we must take our leave now."

"Of course," the emperor said with a smile. He had an attractive smile, but everybody knew he had used countless bodies as stepping stones to get where he was. That was why nobody dared to challenge the emperor's power.

"Until next we meet, Valeta."

"Yes."

Carlon gave the girl a weak smile before leaving with Duke Leon.

"Everyone, leave us." The emperor clucked disapprovingly as soon as the room

fell silent. He hadn't thought she still had any ego left. The girl had hesitated before she used alchemy against the duke, despite his command to attack anyone who touched her.

He grabbed the girl's chin and dragged her closer to him. "Starting from today, you're going to begin work on that research I told you about. If you need anything, tell me..." He paused, sensing a disturbance. "Largris, I don't recall summoning you here."

The emperor slowly turned his head to regard the uninvited guest. Largris emerged from the corner of the room, hood pulled down over his head.

"Hello," he greeted them, approaching with a slight spring in his step.

He took a seat opposite Kynos without asking for permission. The emperor looked at the magician, a slight crease forming between his brows. Largris took one of the duke's teacups, tilting it to regard the contents before looking up at Kynos.

"What do you want?" the emperor asked.

"I was just curious about the girl you've been singing praises about. It feels like I'm looking at Eliza."

"So?"

"I want to watch her work on her alchemy if it's all right with you."

Kynos silently regarded Largris with narrowed eyes as if trying to figure out his true intentions. But all he saw was a man who'd always hidden his emotions behind a mischievous smile.

"This is the first time I've seen you take an interest in an alchemist who wasn't Eliza," he said.

Largris' smile only deepened upon hearing the emperor's words. He racked his brain, managing to come up with a convincing story.

"I'm curious to see what kind of research you'll have her do," Largris said as he glanced at the girl, who was still on her knees.

The emperor's expression changed slightly when he understood what Largris wanted. He leaned back on the sofa.

"It's to save Eliza," he answered. He carefully studied the magician's reaction. Kynos was very curious about what his response would be.

"To save... Eliza?" Largris repeated.

"She needs to be alive for the three of us to be together again. That's why I'm going to bring her back."

Largris' expression crumpled hearing Kynos' response. He swallowed a sigh and tried his best to suppress the curses that wanted to escape his lips, clenching his fists. Kynos always watched his opponents closely—it was his hobby. He constantly monitored reactions, checking to see if they matched his expectations. The emperor was the kind of man who knew how to get into people's heads. That's why one could never let their guard down around him.

"That sounds..." Largris started to say, voice shaking. The corners of the emperor's mouth began to curl up as he heard the repressed rage in his voice. "...like you're going to bring her back to life."

"Larg, you know that the living dead are causing chaos across the empire. They're being called rezir. Knowing this, I couldn't help but wonder if there was a way to bring back our Eliza."

Largris scoffed. The emperor would never know how terrible he felt.

"I see, I see..." he murmured to himself, despairing. He downed the last of the

cold tea in his stolen cup and ran his hand through his hair. Then, he closed his eyes, still struggling to get his emotions under control. He sat there, feeling emotional for a while, before slowly rising from his seat. “I take it that I have your permission.”

“Yes. How could I not allow it, when it’s a request from my one and only friend?”

Kynos happily granted permission. If anything went wrong while the girl was brainwashed, then Largris would be able to report it to him right away. Kynos laughed as he drummed his fingers against his armrest.

“Oh, and the Magicians’ Tower has sent someone to apologize for what happened to House Delight,” he added.

Largris couldn’t hide his surprise. Kynos’ smile grew even wider as if he was pleased by the change in the magician’s expression.

“Apologize? The Magicians’ Tower?”

“Right. So, let’s host a small banquet. I can’t wait to see what the head will say when he finds out what has happened to his toy.”

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” Largris said with a sigh.

Kynos leaned a little closer when he heard the magician’s sigh. His eyes curved into half-moons as his lips stretched into a wide, genuine smile. “It’s important to enjoy yourself, Largris. Life is boring if you don’t. Anything outside the standard should be considered precious. This is also out of the ordinary for the Head of the Magicians’ Tower.”

“Is it that important?”

“Certainly, though nothing comes close to how happy you and Eliza have made me.”

"People's lives, your subjects, even your friends... They're nothing but toys to you."

With every word the emperor spoke, Largris felt himself giving up little by little. After realizing just who the emperor really was, he couldn't help but despair.

"You're my friend. Everyone else... Well, they're just my toys," Kynos said, obviously deeply satisfied by his own words.

Largris let out the sigh he had been holding in. "Kynos... Do you remember... my son's name?"

"Of course. His name was Desilian."

Largris tilted his head back when he heard his son's name pass the emperor's lips like it meant nothing. He could feel his eyes growing warm and willed the tears not to fall. He prayed that any emotions that resembled sadness, rage, and despair wouldn't appear on his face. He was glad his back was turned, preventing Kynos from reading his expression.

Largris managed to conceal his contorted expression. "Kyn, I was always so happy when I held my son in my arms. He was so lovely. I vowed to treasure him and protect him for the rest of my life."

"You did?" Kynos asked, slightly surprised.

"Yes. I was ready to lay waste to anyone and anything that might try to harm my child. I would have gone through hell and back for him."

"You did..." Kynos replied, sounding questioning. "You watched the culprit be tortured for days. You watched as his body was cut into pieces and fed to wild beasts while he was still alive."

This is what Largris had done to that man, when he'd believed him to be the culprit. He didn't believe him when he'd cried and said he didn't do it. He was

blinded by the pain of losing his son.

"You made sure he remained conscious for the whole thing. You wouldn't let him pass out. That was all you, Larg."

"And you, Kynos, killed his family, his relatives, all his closest friends, even his acquaintances. You killed everyone he knew. As if..."

As if he had been trying to remove any trace that the man had ever existed. Largris slowly squeezed his eyes closed, trying to keep his emotions in check as he swallowed the urge to speak this realization out loud.

If Kynos had uttered one word, just a single word of apology... if he had said that he did it so they could stay together forever, would Largris have forgiven him? No, he didn't even need to think about it. Kynos would never tell him the truth, so Largris would never have to forgive him.

*Our relationship was doomed from the start. It was a disaster just waiting to happen. He couldn't tell if the burning in his eyes was from tears or rage anymore.*

"I still don't know."

"What?"

Largris wanted to cry when he heard how warm and supportive Kynos sounded. He knew that this would be their last conversation as friends.

"What was my son doing in there?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know," Kynos replied, voice utterly neutral.

There wasn't a single hint of emotion in his voice, not even the slightest bit of remorse. The emperor sounded like he was pretending to be sad about something that had happened a long time ago.

"Why did an arson attack happen precisely there?"

"Life is ruled by chance. We were just unlucky that day. There was nothing you could have done."

"You're right, there was nothing I could have done."

*It was all out of my control.* Largris' expression hardened as he repeated Kynos' words. *Our paths diverged long ago.* He should have just moved on when he lost everything. It would have been better to just turn his back on Kynos, but he had been too foolish to see it.

"I don't think we should see one another again, Kyn."

"What do you mean?"

"I hate how everything has been destroyed," Largris said with an awkward smile as he tilted his head.

Kynos' eyes widened in surprise when he saw that smile on Largris' face. That he would have to eventually kill his old friend wasn't a pleasant thought, either, however, Largris said nothing more, just turning on his heel.

"Everything that was destroyed will return to us soon, Larg."

It was time to put an end to their long, ill-fated relationship. With that, Largris walked away from the man he had once called a friend.

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## Chapter 126

\* \* \*

The feeling of something biting her brought a by-now-familiar pain, and the fog that had filled Valeta's head slowly dispersed. She breathed out a low sigh. Even though she had gone through this several times, she still couldn't get used to the feeling. She blinked away the fog and caught sight of a familiar man wearing a familiar smile.

"Hello, Valeta," he greeted.

"Largris..."

Valeta lowered her head for a moment, trying to process all the new information flooding her brain. Although she was the one acting them out, the unfamiliar memories left a bad taste in her mouth. Once she had regained her bearings, she turned her attention back to the man.

"Are you okay?" she asked, recalling the conversation she'd witnessed between the emperor and Largris.

Largris shrugged from where he sat perched on the bed. The motion was casual, almost nonchalant, but Valeta had learned that he was not an easy man to read after a week of watching him.

Largris opened and closed his mouth several times, clearly trying to say something. He looked like a fish gasping for air as he tried to find words. In the end, he smiled bitterly.

"No, I'm not okay," he admitted. "Over and over, I wanted nothing more than to slit his throat for the entire duration of that conversation. I can't tell you how many times I've imagined him suffering, begging for his life."

"Largris..."

"Don't look at me like that. I simply decided to do something I've been putting off," he said with a smile.

It wasn't that he didn't have a way to kill the emperor; sentiment stayed his hand. They had once been friends. The emperor was the first friend of his kind that he and Eliza had ever had.

"I should be asking if you're okay," Largris continued. "The Magicians' Tower is showing their neck because of you."

"Well, it might seem that way, but Reinhart probably has a plan. If he were acting impulsively, he would've come for me the same day I was captured."

She had been here for more than a week and Reinhart had still yet to appear. That meant he had understood what she wanted from him. Valeta had nothing to worry about. With the powers he possessed, he could live a good life no matter where he went.

*Reinhart's just going along with my plans.* It would have been so much easier for him if he were to just wipe the entire empire out and be done with it.

He was certainly strong enough. Yet, all these unpredictable things were happening because he was trying not to just kill everyone.

"That's Reinhart's way. He'll only make contact with me when he has a solution."

"You have a lot of faith in him," Largris commented.

"Well, he always does exactly as he says he will when it comes to me."

Largris laughed bitterly. Valeta watched an equally twisted smile spread across the magician's face.

"He might've figured out a plan, but what about you?"

Valeta shook her head. She understood the theory of what she was trying to accomplish perfectly. It wouldn't be all that difficult to pull off what the emperor wanted.

At the same time, she had come to realize exactly why Eliza had abandoned her research. The process was bound to be imperfect. It was impossible to regenerate infinitely. Cells were supposed to constantly grow and regenerate, but this was only the case for new cells. If the same cells were regenerated over and over, it would cause defects to occur, meaning they wouldn't be the same as they were before. There was also a limit to how often people could regenerate.

The same applied to plants. Eliza had conducted a similar experiment using plants. By the end of it, she had produced only imperfect regeneration—the plant was smaller, with fewer petals, and eventually, it grew back with no buds at all. It was obvious that Eliza had come to the same conclusion Valeta had and thus closed the book on her research.

"You said Desilian was still alive?"

"Yes. I hid him somewhere the emperor won't be able to find him."

There was a sense that Largris was intentionally creating distance between himself and his old friend by calling the man by his title.

"Losing a portion of your soul is the same thing as losing any one of your senses. It's not possible to regenerate something so delicate, so bringing him back is impossible, but..."

According to her theory, it would be possible to return his ability to move and think again. Given all the ingredients the emperor had provided her, she had enough to produce a rezir. Janice had known how to wield a sword; swinging it around wildly had been the only thing she could do, but...

"It's possible for him to learn and grow again."

"What do you mean?"

"The rezir can learn and develop, so Desilian can too. For example, if he forgot how to apologize, then..."

She began to explain as she scrawled on a piece of paper. Largris listened attentively as he watched her work.

"I think he'll be able to live like a normal person again if you teach him how to feel things, how to talk and walk, and if you allow him to gather new memories of his own."

"That's possible?"

"Theoretically speaking, at least."

Largris' chin dropped to his chest as he squeezed his eyes shut. He sighed deeply, giving Valeta a weak smile. His son being able to live any sort of life was more than enough for Largris.

"That would be great."

"It's just a theory, so don't get your hopes up. I'm just saying that it's a possibility," Valeta said, still writing. She was busily scribbling away, pausing to think occasionally and then writing again. She was only able to use one hand because the snowta was dangling from her other one.

"What are you writing?" Largris asked.

“A letter.”

“A letter?”

“I’m explaining the situation to Reinhart. We can’t have him f\*cking things up.”

“F\*ck... You know, you have a rather foul mouth for a lady,” Largris said, sounding amused.

The letter grew long as she wrote all that she wanted to say, but most of it consisted of ordering him not to do anything stupid. *Is this too harsh?*

After some more thought, she added a final sentence at the bottom. Valeta slowly let go of the grip on her pen. Leaving the ink to dry, she turned her attention back to Largris.

“Can you handle not getting any sleep at night?”

“You could say I’m something of an insomniac. I just want to get this all over and done with so I can rest.”

Wearily, Valeta called out, “Gene.”

A tiny tornado swept through the room.

Valeta patted the snowta on its tiny head as she completed the summoning. A familiar wind elemental appeared. He lightly perched on Valeta’s outstretched wrist.

Largris whistled, his eyes wide with surprise.

“*Has your body recovered?*”

“Yes, I’m fine. I have a favor to ask. You can’t enter the Magicians’ Tower, right? Can you fly up to the sky room as you did before?”

"Are you saying you want me to go to that horrible place?" the bird asked, his eyes narrowed.

Valeta glanced at Largris. He was still sitting cross-legged on her bed, watching the scene with interest.

"Are you talking to an elemental? I never imagined you were also an elementalist..." Largris' lips twisted as his eyes narrowed. "You! You called that tornado!"

"Yes, that was me."

"You know, you may have a contract, but it doesn't look very happy. What did you say to it?" Largris asked as he poked at Gene.

The bird elemental angrily flapped his wings, pecking at Largris' finger as hard as he could. "You *pathetic human!*"

To be more precise, Gene had tried to peck Largris, but the magician was too fast for the wind elemental. Having accomplished nothing but pecking at air, Gene's eyes burned with fury.

Largris snorted, then turned to Valeta.

"We don't have a contract. I summoned him by force once, and ever since then, I just call on him whenever I have need."

"Wow. How is that even possible?"

"I guess you can say I'm special. He was really surprised, too."

Gene, who had been watching the two talk, huffed and then snatched the letter from Valeta's hand. She offered Gene an awkward smile and a few gentle pats on the head.

"Are you mad?"

*“You! What are you doing?!”* Gene suddenly cried, finally noticing the snowta dangling from her left hand.

Valeta awkwardly avoided his gaze by looking down at the letter Gene had dropped in his shock.

*“How in the world did you end up with that thing burnt into your hand? Why don’t you take better care of your body?”*

“I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Actually, no. It wasn’t a mistake. It’s just... Well, I guess you could say it was forced on me. Anyway, please don’t be mad. Just get this letter to that punk for me.”

*“You fool! What are you going to do now? Who put this spell on you? It’s a shoddy parody of an ancient charm, too!”*

“A charm? Don’t you mean alchemy?”

*“It’s neither alchemy nor magic. You could say that it’s what originated the two. This charm is very, very old... From back when alchemy and magic used to be one.”*

Valeta’s mouth dropped open as she was offered an answer she had never even considered.

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Gene must have seen something in Valeta's expression because he flapped his wings and perched on the girl's wrist once more. Valeta rested her hand on the desk. Her arm was beginning to grow tired under the weight of the snowta.

The wind elemental sighed as he shot a disapproving look at Valeta out of the corner of his eyes. He craned his neck, peering closely at her hand before turning his beady eyes back on her face.

*"This is an ancient practice that allowed more people to call on elementals. But it was used in the distant past, long before you were born or the empire was founded. It was before even the rise of the Magicians' Tower."*

"Oh..."

That was certainly a long time ago. It was beginning to dawn on her just how old the wind elemental perched on her arm really was.

*"Also, there were still many people who knew how to use these charms at the time. The ancients used to call this practice sorcery, and the people who used it were called sorcerers."*

Valeta bent down to pick up the letter as Gene explained, stooping at an awkward angle in an attempt not to jostle him. Gene glared at her as she straightened up, letter in hand.

"So, what exactly is sorcery?"

*"It is a dangerous practice, for both small animals and humans alike. Sorcery requires you to give up your life force. The power was too dangerous for human beings to possess, and so the age of the sorcerers has come and gone."*

*Sorcery was true power.”*

Valeta felt herself becoming dazed as she listened to Gene's explanation. Gene was describing a power she had never even imagined. No book could teach her what the bird was now describing.

*“It was too dangerous. Many sorcerers met an early end, and it wasn’t uncommon for them to forcibly steal the lives of others to power their spells.”*

“So, what happened?”

*“The shortcomings of their craft tormented the human sorcerers. They knew that their lives were short-lived, yet they didn’t wish to die. So, they tried to find a way to keep their powers without sacrificing themselves.”*

Valeta nodded. This information was new and interesting and might very well be the missing piece of the puzzle she had been looking for.

Gene glanced at Valeta and cleared his throat. *“After much research, the sorcerers decided to divide the practice of sorcery into two lesser crafts to eliminate the risks associated with sorcery. That division gave birth to what is now known as alchemy and magic.”*

Valeta gently nudged the snowta out of the way to look at the mark on the back of her hand. It looked like alchemy to her eyes, but the center of the circle more closely resembled magic.

In fact, it was very similar in form to the circle she had seen back in the village. She was sure she saw Janice making a circle similar to this one that night. The circle and formula itself were similar to an alchemy circle, but the connecting lines and dots were just like a magic circle, only drawn at slightly different angles.

The act of offering a sacrifice resembled alchemy, but forcibly creating

something from nothing was magic. Alchemists and wizards were similar, yet polar opposites, like fire and ice. Who would have thought that they shared such a history?

"So, how do I get rid of this?" Valeta had been working hard laboring under the misconception that she was dealing with alchemy. *No wonder I couldn't find a solution.* She sighed, realizing that she'd wasted an hour of her life on this.

*"It can only be dispelled when the sorcerer who cast it dies or if it's canceled by another spell."*

"The man who did this smeared blood on the circle in order to activate it. Are you saying that tiny smear of blood was the price he had to pay?"

Largris was watching their conversation unfold without a word. Although he couldn't hear the wind spirit's voice, it wasn't hard for him to guess what they were talking about.

*"No, that's just a taste of what he was offering, a mark to indicate who he intended to sacrifice. Whoever's blood is in the circle will have had their life robbed from them. As I told you, all sorcerers died young."* Gene tutted disapprovingly.

He was regarding the mark with such open distaste on his little bird face that Valeta quickly hid her hand, along with the snowta, in case he decided to peck at it.

Meow?

Valeta glanced down at the snowta, who was gently licking the brand, and smiled. It suddenly occurred to her that the snowta seemed to be growing. It seemed a little bigger than when she'd first met it.

"Can I use sorcery?"

*“Sorcerers also had magic circles in their eyes. Magicians don’t have a circle in their eyes, but alchemists do.”*

“I see.”

*“Magicians were given great power, but alchemists could still use the ancient circles. The caveat was they were burdened with cumbersome restrictions. Think of it as maintaining balance.”* Gene glared at Valeta, who was looking down, lost in thought. He flapped his wings to gain her attention. *“I’ll tell you this much—sorcery is dangerous. Essentially, it demands a heavy toll from the caster. In the past, sorcerers used to steal blood from others to offer secretly instead of their own.”*

“Wow, that’s... insane.”

*“It’s only natural that a human would prefer not to die. Sorcerers are the same. They did this because they needed a stand-in so they could cast the spells they wanted to.”*

“Do you mean...”

*“Unless you plan to split your body in two, no one person could handle the power alone,”* Gene said firmly.

He was so adamant that Valeta was at a loss for words for a moment. She rolled her eyes, sighing as she plopped into her chair.

“What can you do with it?”

*“Sorcery? You can bring corpses back to life, return people’s souls to their bodies, and replace lost limbs. You can even subjugate people to your will.”*

“Oh...”

An idea was forming in her mind. She’d sensed something while in the village—she’d felt the faintest trace of alchemy from the roste, identical to the trick

that Eliza had shown her that didn't require an offering. Everything was beginning to make sense to her now.

The roste outbreak was detailed and thorough, unlike the sloppy alchemy used on Desilian that had failed to bring him back perfectly.

*Largris was the one who spread the outbreak.*

One of the answers that she had been seeking had fallen into her lap. She felt a little empty inside because the truth was less complicated than she had thought it would be. If she had known this earlier, she wouldn't have agonized over it for so long. Valeta moved Gene to her shoulder, opened the letter again, and added something to it. Then, she resealed the letter and handed it back to Gene.

The bird glared at her hand. *"Their story vanished from history because sorcerers toppled the balance by trying to go against the laws of nature. They were made to suffer consequences they couldn't handle. Human greed knows no bounds."*

With another annoyed tut and a shake of his head, Gene took the letter in his beak and flapped his wings.

Largris opened the window, and Gene dove through it, flying away without another word. One of the disadvantages of the island in the sky was that it could be easily accessed by anything that could fly. Not that it mattered since humans didn't have that ability. It was impossible for them to reach the top of the Tower.

Reinhart would see Gene coming, so he would clear a passage for him. If the magicians had any disadvantage, it was that the traps protecting the island could be disabled from the inside.

*Although that was only discovered after I ran away,* she thought. Valeta retrieved the notebook she had been hiding in the back of a drawer. She had recently discovered the hiding place since it seemed like someone had made a small

notch in the desk. *Maybe it was Eliza.*

She sighed as she looked at all the symbols written inside the notebook. Feeling dizzy as she realized all her hard work had been for nothing, she shut her notebook with a snap and then looked back at Largris.

"Have you ever heard of sorcery?"

"I have," Largris said after a long pause.

"How?"

"Eliza and I would read any book we could get our hands on, and we came across something written in the ancient language by chance. There was only one volume."

Valeta covered her eyes with her hand. Realization hit her like a ton of bricks. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized the relief she had felt was an illusion. "So, you tricked the emperor into believing that you started the roste outbreak when in reality you were spreading the rezir?"

Largris was stunned silent for a moment. Valeta lowered her hand so she could look the magician in the eye. He sat silhouetted by the moonlight, his chin in his hand, wearing a bright smile on his face.

"You caught me," he said finally.

The atmosphere changed between them.

"Caught...? What do you mean?"

"You're too smart for your own good, you know." Largris smiled almost sheepishly. The magician's ever-present smile sent chills down Valeta's spine. He reached out, grabbing her arm and pushing her down on the bed. "The unintelligent monsters created by the rezir are so easy to use."

Valeta was speechless.

"I told you. I decided to finish the work I'd been putting off. I'm going to knock the emperor off that throne and trample him under my feet."

"Are you crazy?"

"Valeta, would you not go crazy having to endure what I have? I lost everything dear to me, and I just realized that the man I've been trying so hard to believe in was playing with me." Largris' easy-going voice was suddenly dripping with rage. "Why should I punish him fairly? When someone you care for dies right in front of you, it's only natural to want to rip the man responsible to shreds," he said calmly as he squeezed her shoulder tightly.

A stabbing pain bloomed in Valeta's shoulder as she tried to squirm out of the man's iron grasp, and her face twisted with pain.

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The little snowta's eyes darted from left to right as it growled, at a loss for what to do. It couldn't let go of the hand it was latched onto, but it also couldn't ignore what was happening either.

"Largris, you...!"

"I started all this so that I could one day revive Eliza. I planned to resurrect her once I could locate her body, but I needed test specimens."

Valeta swallowed hard. What he had just confessed was so shocking that it left her at a loss for words.

Largris smiled down at her, taking no note of her stillness. "Truth be told, the book contained spells capable of bringing back the dead, though most of them have taken the same form as the rezir we see now."

"You were planning on resurrecting her in that state?"

"I didn't care what form she took. I just wanted her to look at me again, even if she only had a fragment of her soul left. Not that I expect you to understand that."

"You're right. I don't understand that sh\*t at all," Valeta retorted, cursing at him.

If someone asked her what the most useful part of retaining her old memories was, Valeta would have said the ability to curse. Growing up as a teenager in South Korea had exposed her to all kinds of expletives and profanities.

The magician's eyes narrowed as if her vulgarity had soured his mood, but the crushing grip on her shoulder was unwavering.

"I was sure that Kynos had somehow preserved Eliza's body."

"How could you have been foolish enough to trust him with something like that," Valeta quipped.

"You're good at getting under people's skin, aren't you?"

"You think I'd stay up all night trying to develop a potion that would screw the emperor over if I wasn't?" Valeta growled.

Largris burst out laughing. He couldn't tell if she was putting on a brave face or if she was just hot-tempered. She wasn't an easy woman to handle, that much was for sure.

"When Kynos told me about the roste and ordered me to spread it, the timing was perfect. So I made a few improvements to those primitive circles." Largris went on speaking, choosing to ignore Valeta's sass. "But... I never would have suspected that Eliza was still alive. And lately, I was concerned about what I should do about Desilian, but it's a relief that I won't have to turn him into a rezir."

"You're a crazy bastard." Valeta spat through gritted teeth.

Largris shrugged. All the more annoying was how completely unbothered he seemed.

"I am crazy. I'm going to kill him. If the roste was what brought the emperor to power, it's only fitting that it's what brings him down, too, don't you think?"

Largris said as he reached out and grabbed the snowta by the scruff of its neck. The little creature's eyes widened with surprise.

"Stop!"

As Valeta tried to reach for the snowta, Largris pressed down harder on the struggling girl's neck.

“Ngh!”

She abruptly stopped moving. Largris was squeezing her windpipe. The snowta growled, its golden eyes flashing as they landed on the magician. He tightened his grip on the snowta’s scruff.

“Ne... Nereid...”

With the magician’s hand still bearing down on her neck, Valeta managed to rasp out the name of her remaining elemental. Immediately, a whirlpool appeared, and a little mermaid jumped out as if she had been waiting to be called.

The water elemental’s expression was bright with joy. “*It’s been so long... ah, Human!*”

“A water elemental?”

Largris’ voice was colored with shock. An elementalist could only ever have one elemental. That was the norm, but this was the girl’s second summoned elemental!

“*What is this horrible human being doing to you? What does he think he’s doing to my weak little human? She can’t even breathe underwater!*” Nereid cried as her eyes widened.

In a flash, she grew to her full size and flooded the whole room with a swirling whirlpool of water. Valeta could hear a snake’s hiss coming from somewhere unseen. She looked around. Behind Largris, she could see a deep blue snake forming out of Nereid’s whirlpool. The blue snake launched itself at Largris, coiling around his neck. Then, another stream of water spurted out and wrapped itself around the magician’s body, quickly rendering the man immobile.

“Ha, you really are incredible.”

Even though the snake had its fangs bared, aiming for the magician's jugular, another watery rope tying his hands behind his back, Largris breathed out in wonder. Valeta kept quiet and brought a hand to her neck, gasping wordlessly. It was like she could still feel his hands squeezing her neck.

"I can't believe you can summon both a water and an air elemental without a contract."

*"Aye, aye! You don't have any idea how special our human is! She's one of a kind in this rotten era! Her kind is practically endangered! So, how dare a mere magician like you try to hurt her...!"*

Nereid glared at Largris as she stood in front of Valeta, shielding her from view. For some reason, the water elemental's angry words weren't all that pleasant to hear. Valeta massaged her sore throat.

"What are you saying?" Largris wasn't even able to hear Nereid's voice. Seeing the water elemental's scowl, Largris clicked his tongue, pressing his lips closed. "I wasn't trying to kill you. That snowta just wouldn't let go."

After a pregnant pause, Valeta said, "I have no need of you any longer."

"It'll only be to your detriment if you push me away. You don't even know how to use sorcery. I can break the circle for you," Largris said, his eyes flicking down to the back of her hand.

Valeta frowned. It didn't matter whether he knew how to use sorcery or not. Her problem was that she couldn't trust a man who changed his mind so capriciously.

"I'd rather cut off my hand than accept your help."

"I'm still going to bring down the emperor," Largris said calmly.

Valeta clenched her fists. "When did I imply that was a bad thing? Take revenge

if that's what you want. It's only fair that you get him back for what he's done to you."

Reinhart had done the same thing when he'd massacred the occupants of Delight Manor. Who was she to criticize? She was also trying to get her revenge on the emperor, too. It's just that Largris was going about it all wrong. He was unnecessarily dragging other people into his schemes.

"You know that you're a cowardly, pathetic man, right?" she added. "You and Janice are no different. You're not strong enough to take what you want for yourself, so you use other people instead."

"Curse me all you want, I don't care. I don't know what method you plan on employing, but I have no intention of limiting myself to a humane revenge."

Largris wouldn't be satisfied with simply stabbing the emperor or cutting off his head. He had to make him suffer as much as he had. Was that not fair?

"What method did you think I was going to use?" Valeta spat out, barely able to control her fury.

Largris crossed his arms and scoffed. "One of you wants to make her immortal so she can't even kill herself to get away. And the other wants to bring her back from the dead, even if it means turning her into a zombie."

*I feel sorry for Eliza.* Valeta had thought that having one disturbed man lingering around her was bad, but Eliza was cursed with two. She laughed in disbelief. *I feel like I'm going insane myself, surrounded by all these madmen.*

"She's the only one for me. Just because you have a mouth doesn't mean you can say whatever you like."

"So, you destroyed half a dozen villages just to bring back your true love as a zombie, all while completely ignoring her wishes and using the research that put

her in this situation in the first place?"

Largris' expression contorted with fury upon hearing Valeta's sarcastic jab. Her throat still hurt. She could almost still feel the man's fingers squeezing her neck. She grimaced as she gritted her teeth. How could one man be so selfish?

Although she had met Eliza only twice, each time for less than thirty minutes, she knew exactly what the woman would think about all this. She knew that Eliza wouldn't be happy seeing what Largris had become. The most annoying part was that Valeta knew Reinhart would do the same thing for her.

"Watch your mouth, Valeta."

"Ugh, you're a lunatic..." Pressing a hand to her forehead, she thought the pain would have faded by now, but it was just lingering and pissing her off. "You think that you're the only one who was in love and in pain? Eliza was too!"

Largris frowned fiercely, clicking his tongue. Whenever he tried to move, the watery snake bared its fangs at him.

*What am I doing?* Valeta was suddenly struck by the reality of her situation. Dealing with Reinhart was more than enough for her. What was she doing trying to reason with another unreasonable magician? She had nothing more to say to this man. He had not a single good deed to his name at this point.

"I can't do anything about the past. All I did was light the fuse."

"You son of a b\*tch," Valeta cursed.

"It'll be dawn soon. Unless you want to get caught by Kynos, give me the snowta and go to sleep. I promise I won't hurt you," Largris said, his voice calm now.

Valeta tilted her head as she regarded the magician. Then, annoyed, she ruffled her hair. The most frustrating thing was knowing that there was nothing she

could do right now.

"Damn it," Valeta grumbled as she buried her face in her pillow.

If she was born again, in her next life Valeta hoped that she would be born with a steely resolve, so she would be capable of just chopping off her own hand without a second thought. Face still buried in her pillow, Valeta held the hand the snowta was still latched onto out to Largris.

Largris glanced at the water elemental, who grumbled as she released her hold on him.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 129

\* \* \*

The sound of fluttering paper was endless. Balteer Baroksis' eyes swept over the room as he stood behind Reinhart, offering advice. The room was meticulously tidy because Reinhart cleaned every day—rather odd, given the other heads of the Magicians' Tower had used the sky room as a garbage dump or a pigsty.

The difference between Reinhart's treatment of the room and theirs was like night and day. The comfortably furnished room was as tidy as ever, but it was now filled with piles of documents and books. The atmosphere was very different from when Valeta had been there...

At least, according to Kurt and Silon.

Balteer stared at the back of Reinhart's head with curious eyes. The man, who had seemed determined to never set foot in the Magicians' Tower ever again, had begun to carry out his duties, meticulously and at lightning speed.

The island in the sky became active once more as he tackled the backlog of work that had piled up. He had even come to a decision regarding the most recent issue regarding the socoro's emperor—a very unexpected decision.

*Thump! Thump! Thump!*

Balteer frowned at the sudden sound. It sounded like a strong wind was banging something against the window. Reinhart clicked his tongue. He tore his eyes from the book he was reading and looked up at the sound, wondering if a bird had collided with the window. His eyes narrowed as he located the source of the thumping.

The older magician's eyes followed his gaze. "Isn't that a wind elemental?"

"That annoying bird belongs to my master," Reinhart muttered.

Balteer's brow furrowed. No matter how many times the girl asked Reinhart to stop calling her by that title, he refused to do so. *I'm glad that he's settled down, though*, he thought to himself. Balteer had been most pleased when Reinhart had ordered the older magician to teach him how to run the Magicians' Tower.

The man who considered himself second to none had asked Balteer for a favor. The head had learned all the duties required of him within the Tower in less than three days.

At first, Balteer had been slightly skeptical, but he tried to tell himself that Reinhart would be different now that he'd taken on his responsibilities. The older magician had worried that Reinhart would let his emotions dictate his decision-making. Contrary to his expectations, the head had been rational, even fair and just, and solved all manners of issues using only his common sense.

*He even prepared magic stones to send to the socoros.* He had no idea what Reinhart was scheming, but he couldn't exactly complain. The situation they found themselves in now was an enormous improvement. The man who had once said that his world was only big enough for two had finally properly stepped into his role in the Magicians' Tower. And he had decided to bend a little to the imperial family. Although Reinhart didn't show his face around the Tower nor the island in the sky, the mood among the magicians was festive, like a celebration that went on for days on end simply because he was there.

“A letter...?”

Reinhart finally rose from his seat, clearly annoyed by the wind elemental’s presence. He walked to the window and gave it a couple of light taps. With a crack, a hole opened in the glass, just big enough for the hawk to fly through.

It looked annoyed as it squeezed through the hole. Then, the bird spread its wings as it landed brazenly in the center of the desk, flapping them about so that documents were sent flying everywhere. Finally, it dropped the letter on the desk. Reinhart, who had been watching this minor disaster unfold, took a single step toward the hawk.

“Do you want to die?” he asked coldly.

Gene, who had been preening, suddenly froze stiff. Silently, Reinhart held out his hand. Gene picked up the letter and carefully deposited it there.

“*Annoying human,*” Gene huffed to himself.

He knew that Reinhart was unable to hear his complaints. It hurt his pride that an elemental of his esteem had to bow to a human like this. But if Gene was being honest, he was scared stiff of Reinhart. The magician examined the letter carefully. He flipped it over and found it addressed to him.

—To Reinhart...

He smiled faintly as he saw the neat handwriting printed across the stark white paper. Such sweet words had been written down on paper. Steps much lighter, Reinhart moved to sit on the bed while carefully opening the letter.

“Is that a letter from Miss Valeta?”

Reinhart paused halfway through opening it and frowned. "Balteer, get out. I want to rest."

"Can I read the letter with you?"

"Get out now unless you want your eyeballs to explode inside your skull."

Reinhart's infamous wrath returned, summoned by Balteer's request. The aging magician took one look at the head's expression before deciding it was best to make himself scarce.

*I nearly lost my head,* Balteer thought to himself.

There was no limit to what Reinhart would do when it came to that girl. He would put up boundaries and threaten to tear apart anybody who dared to come close. His patience would become more fragile than the paper he was holding.

"I'll come back after dinner then."

Reinhart said nothing. He went to open the letter again, but instead of doing so, looked at Balteer pointedly. Balteer could practically feel his red eyes boring into his skull.

As soon as the other magician had disappeared, Reinhart carefully unfurled the twice-folded letter with both hands. He handled the paper as carefully as if it were a baby, careful not to accidentally crinkle the paper.

*-Hi.*

A tender smile appeared on Reinhart's face as he read the first line.

*—How have you been? I hope you're staying out of trouble.*

The letter wasn't very long because all of her sentences were short. This was just like Valeta: She only wrote what was necessary. There was more blank space on the paper than not, and the words themselves didn't carry any particularly deep meaning, either.

Still, Reinhart read each line two or three times before moving on to the next, savoring each and every word. In all, the letter was only about ten sentences. Valeta explained that there was a slight problem, but that he shouldn't get mad or cause a scene. Reinhart read and reread the letter, which was no different from a written scolding, for over thirty minutes before his eyes finally landed on the last line. It was more of a footnote.

*—Let's eat a meal together when this is all over. Keep an eye on the house, okay?*

The color of the ink was slightly different as if she had added it later, after a lot of thought. Either way, it was clear that it wasn't originally part of the letter. She must have added the final sentence after something had pricked at her conscience.

Still, the words couldn't be sweeter. Reinhart mulled over them for a long time. The words themselves weren't a big deal. It was similar to what one might say to a dog. But who else would dare say something like that to him? Who would dare ask him how he was doing? Who would dare order him not to do something that he wanted to do?

Who else in this world...? Was she promising him a future together? Outside of

her, not a single person had ever treated him like a person—he was only ever shown obedience or respect. Even when Reinhart sifted through all the memories in his head that belonged to the previous heads of the Magician's Tower, there was no one like Valeta Delight.

"I am keeping an eye on the house, Valeta."

*My one and only master.* Closing his eyes, Reinhart deeply inhaled the letter's smell. He was hoping to get a whiff of her scent. If it had once lingered, it was now completely overpowered by the smell of ink.

"She said that this would be the last time, but..."

He had a feeling that he was going to have to keep his emotions in check again, just as Valeta had requested of him. It wasn't like he hated following her orders exactly, so he just sighed. *It won't be long now.*

He would be visiting the imperial castle in just ten days. Caspelios had taught him all about both the roste and the rezir. He explained that both phenomena had been created by sorcery, which was the origin of both magic and alchemy.

Reinhart remembered that Valeta had said she could feel traces of both magic and alchemy. There weren't any traces left of sorcery, which had long since vanished. Caspelios had said a few documents had remained regarding sorcery in his era, but they no longer existed now.

*I never imagined that black magic originated from sorcery, though,* Reinhart thought. He had asked the watchdog several questions, and the man had hesitated before finally answering. If recent events were related to sorcery, then the Magicians' Tower would have to decide if they wanted to step up and do something about it.

"That little rat of a man was the cause." Reinhart's eyes flashed.

In Valeta's letter, she had written that Largris was the culprit. She had said that it was probable and that she'd said that at all meant that a part of her was certain that it was the truth. After reading her letter, everything had fallen into place.

*They used sorcery on her.* However, no matter how many times he reread the letter, Valeta made no indication of what kind of sorcery had been used against her. In other words, she was trying to hide it. He pressed his lips together.

"She does so enjoy testing my patience."

What would she do if he just snapped and destroyed everything in his path? Despite these dark thoughts, Reinhart was smiling. He was in rather good spirits.

"I miss you."

He knew she couldn't sleep without him. He longed to cradle her in his arms and cover her body with love bites. Reinhart wanted to see her succumb to his touch. He would be so happy if he could just hear her moan as his fingers gripped her waist.

"The longer you leave me to endure on my own, the more I just want to make you cry, Master."

Did Valeta know? Did she know about the wicked thoughts that filled Reinhart's head, crawling upwards from the pit of his stomach? How he had to choke back tears as he endured by himself?

"I have to suffer these trials because of my master..."

But he believed it would all be worth it in the end. With smiling eyes, Reinhart carefully tucked the letter away in his desk drawer.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 130

The slightly transparent hawk remained perched on Reinhart's desk, watching him.

"It's a shame you can't talk," he said as he poked the bird in its feathered forehead.

The hawk flapped his wings, looking like he was good and ready to peck at the magician's finger. But the bird seemed to think better of it as he folded his wings away once more, ducking his head.

"Leave," Reinhart said, waving the bird away yet again.

Gene refused to budge. On the contrary, he lifted one of his legs, showing off his sharp talons. He hesitated for a moment before he started scratching something into Reinhart's obviously very expensive desk. Whatever he had written was in the ancient language. He contemplated grabbing the hawk by his neck and chucking him straight out the window, but his eyes narrowed as he took in the ancient text. He circled around the desk so he was standing behind Gene.

*—Obedience spell. Nullification. Lifting spell. Price. Life of someone from the same species.*

As the hawk continued to scratch at the desk, Reinhart realized that the written text more closely resembled a list than actual sentences.

"An obedience spell has been cast on my master?"

The words alone immediately rubbed Reinhart the wrong way. His brows brew together in a furious frown. An obedience charm meant that she was being

forcefully subjugated to someone else's will.

*That means she's bowing her head to the emperor, is that it? His red eyes burned with rage. It wasn't hard to guess who was forcing Valeta's obedience. How dare he...*

"I only just managed to save my master from that pig, and now she's kneeling at that halfwit's feet," Reinhart said, voice ice-cold.

Gene took a startled step back. Reinhart glanced at the bird for only a moment before turning his attention back to the ancient script.

"Are you saying that in order to nullify the effects of the obedience spell, I'll need to find a lifting spell that requires a human life?" Reinhart asked with his arms crossed.

Gene had specified that it should be someone from the same species rather than a human, just to be precise, but the magician spat out the truth of the situation without blinking.

The wind elemental nodded, keeping a wary eye on the man's twisted smile.

Reinhart asked, "What's the spell to lift it?"

*—Existing spell, backward, sacrifice's blood, all three, together.*

"Are you saying I have to mirror the existing spell? Or are you saying that I have to reverse the order of the formula, like when you perform an extraction?"

Reinhart was easily able to understand what the bird was trying to communicate. The bird nodded his head twice before using his talons to carve a single word.

*—First.*

Reinhart slowly nodded. That shouldn't be too hard. There were plenty of people who deserved death in this world. Everything would be fine as long as Valeta didn't find out. In fact, it would be even better if the sacrifice was someone she disliked.

*If I had known this was going to happen, I would've spared someone from House Delight.* It was a shame. Reinhart smiled as he stroked his chin. Thinking on it, there were still people that she disliked left in the world.

"How much blood do I need?"

—*Small, confirmation.*

"A small amount of blood is enough to seal the contract? Then, the spell must drain the life from the intended sacrifice." Reinhart continued to stroke his chin as he speculated.

Although this human was scary and violent, he wasn't stupid. Gene was satisfied.

"I'm going to take care of things on my end. I expect that you'll keep quiet about this matter."

Gene nodded.

Just as the bird was about to take flight, Reinhart narrowed his eyes at him. Then, he smiled faintly. "You told me all this because you know my master wouldn't listen, right?"

Gene gave Reinhart a look. The bird's beak didn't part, nor did he move to scratch anything more, but Reinhart knew what his answer was. He perched on the edge of the desk, feeling rather pleased with himself.

"Let's keep it that way. If Master needs something but can't tell me, I want you to inform me instead. She doesn't need to get her hands dirty. I'll take care of it

for her."

The bird regarded Reinhart, the magician's eyes burning with rage, before he nodded.

Reinhart smiled, satisfied.

"Very well. You can go now," he said, waving the bird off.

In the blink of an eye, the wind elemental had disappeared within a small tornado. Now that he was alone in the room, Reinhart swept his hand across the desk. Instantly, the bird's scratches disappeared. The papers the bird had scattered around the room flew back into place with a single snap. He rested his chin on his palm, licking his lower lip.

"Ah... I want to catch her and eat her again."

After he had kissed her on his bed, the memory of Valeta sprawled beneath him—all composure lost—haunted him at all hours of the day. He recalled the look on her face as she clutched at his shoulder, her breath hot and ragged. He felt himself stirring once more, an increasingly common occurrence. Reinhart had taken to cold showers to aid him in taming his excitement, even taking care of it himself when it became too much. He figured that the wait would be worth it.

"Haa..."

Reinhart slowly stroked himself. He ran his thumb across his lips as he felt his desire growing. Unable to stand it any longer, he got up from his desk and headed to the bathroom.

He didn't emerge for a long time.

And so, time passed.

\* \* \*

She could hear footsteps. Eliza trembled where she was sitting on the bed. They were loud and deliberate. How long would she have to endure being locked in this horrid place?

She remained silent as the footsteps approached, holding her breath.

Not all that long ago, Kynos had interrogated her, demanding to know if anybody had been there. She had been caught lying and severely punished. Eliza had been bound to the bed, unable to move an inch. Her eyes and mouth had been covered, her utter hell complete when he covered her ears, too. Not being able to hear, feel, or even see anything, and not knowing when someone was coming or going, was beyond awful.

Not even having the ability to plead was horrifying.

"Hello, Eliza."

"Kynos."

"Everything's almost done. I brought you a present."

"A present?" Eliza repeated.

None of his presents were ever what she would consider a good thing. A touch of wariness entered her eyes. The emperor chuckled. He seemed happy. Confusion was visible on Eliza's face.

"It's time to fix what was destroyed."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Eliza asked.

"It means that the three of us will be together again," Kynos replied.

His eyes were brighter than usual, and he was clearly in a good mood. Eliza only grew more scared. This was a man who delighted in trampling other people under his boots. He had lost any sense of what was right a long time ago.

Kynos pulled up a chair and placed the thing he had brought with him on top of it. Then he began binding Eliza's limbs. Shocked, she began to struggle.

"But I've done nothing wrong today! Why...!"

"Correct. You haven't done anything wrong today. You don't have to make that face. I'm giving you a reward."

Eliza sucked in a deep breath. She had become as pale as a sheet. The emperor's golden eyes flashed, shining brilliantly in the dim room.

She shook her head. She didn't know what was going on, but she didn't like it. "I don't need it. I don't know what it is you brought, but I don't need it. Just take it back."

"You're so cruel, Eliza. Are you really going to act like this when you have the chance to see Miloyd and Largris again?"

She was frozen with fear. Nothing that Kynos had ever said he was going to do had turned out well. No one knew that better than Eliza.

"No."

"You have no choice. This is what I want."

"But Largris is...!"

"The impudent girl that came in here is an alchemist. She finally was able to make the medicine that I wanted."

Now that Eliza was fully restrained, Kynos leaned over and dug two fingers into the socket that had once held her missing eye.

Eliza shrieked, her limbs straining against her restraints. Kynos chuckled and finally withdrew his hand. His fingers were dripping with blood. Not a day went by when her eyes weren't filled with tears. He stabbed her there every so often, never letting the wound fully heal.

"Good, good. It hasn't fully healed yet."

"Ngh..."

Blood mixed with tears trickled down the woman's cheeks. Kynos picked up the box he had put on the chair and took something from it.

"Do you know what this is, Eliza?"

Eliza couldn't even look. She was too busy writhing in pain on the bed, so Kynos brought the round object in front of her face. Her eyelashes fluttered as she reluctantly pried her eyes open. Her gaze landed on the object Kynos held in his hand.

"Kyn, you..."

"I told you. I was going to bring back what's been destroyed."

"What? But who... Whose eye is that...?" Eliza asked, her voice trembling.

Kynos beamed.

The woman's bound body shook. The root-like tendrils protruding from the back of the eyeball squirmed in a nauseating fashion.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 131

“Do you know what this is, Eliza? It’s the completion of your abandoned research.”

He held out a bottle containing a pale purple potion. The potion’s crystal clarity was a testament to how highly refined it was. Even Eliza had to admit it was one of the finest potions she had ever seen.

“My abandoned research?” she asked.

“Regarding the crops that would never die no matter how many times you harvested them. Don’t you remember? It’s complete now.”

“Of course, I remember. But that project was...!” Eliza’s voice grew louder before trailing off. There was a reason she abandoned the research. Over time, the crops began to lose their flavor and started developing mutations. What once was a savory crop became less delicious, eventually losing its taste altogether.

Many people had suffered from indigestion after eating those crops. Strangely, some of the plants had taken on the characteristics of carnivorous ones. The crops tasted terrible after being harvested ten times and had fully mutated after twenty. Simply put, it wasn’t a viable solution to the food shortage. At the same time, it had also felt like she was violating one of the laws of the universe. In the end, Eliza abandoned the project and burned her research.

She knew what Kynos was like, knew that he would develop a greed for her work at some point. *Was it that girl...?*

If the girl was really that skilled, then there was no way she wouldn’t have discovered this drawback. Eliza thought slowly; she had tried so hard not to

think about anything for so long that she could practically feel her brain creaking from the effort.

"This is... just for me?"

"No. I have one, too. I told her to make two. I thought it'd be best to let Largris age a little since he lives for such a long time anyway."

Eliza began to tremble as she listened to Kynos speak. His voice was eerily calm. She stared up at him in a daze. *Surely not...*

Kynos smiled down at Eliza. He began to push the eye he was holding into Eliza's empty eye socket. He climbed on top of the woman and held down her writhing body, prying open her eyelid.

"No! No! Ahhh!"

Eliza screeched as she twisted and turned. The bed shook a little, but that was about all she accomplished. The eye's optic nerve, which was wriggling like tentacles, squirmed its way into her empty socket.

Tears dripped down Eliza's cheeks as she felt every wriggle of it working its way in. The emperor opened the bottle and carefully poured half of the potion into her mouth. Eliza was mid-scream when the potion was abruptly forced down her throat. She gasped for air as she choked on the liquid. Kynos watched her splutter for a moment before he poured the rest of the potion over her eye. Then, he climbed off the bed and untied the restraints.

"Nngh..." Eliza pressed a hand to her eye, a futile attempt at relieving the itch she felt deep inside.

Kynos observed her, a hand on his chin. "Can you see anything, Eliza?"

"Argh..." Eliza's face twisted into a grimace. She slowly looked up, catching sight of the man's smile. She covered her good eye with her hand. "Oh..."

She could see light seeping through what was once only pure darkness. Eliza shook her head, unable to believe what she had just seen. This wasn't possible. In addition, she had more questions...

"Who... Whose eye was this?" Eliza shrieked, her face pale.

Kynos' smile only deepened. It wasn't a dead person's eye. Or at least, they hadn't been dead when he'd plucked it out. She could feel a long-abandoned power returning to her body, one she hadn't felt in so long, it almost felt alien to her.

But Eliza was devastated.

"You... Which alchemist's eye did you take?!"

It wasn't just any random eye, but one that bore an ancient magic circle. Kynos' eyes narrowed into slits. He watched Eliza closely for any indication that she would try to gouge the eye out again.

"It's Guilian's."

"What?"

"He broke too many taboos to... Well, he was already on the brink of death. I was planning on giving his eye to you if he died. In fact, he gouged out his own eye when I asked."

Eliza's jaw dropped.

Guilian had worked directly under her when she had served as the imperial alchemist. At the time, he was the next in line. Eliza was only interested in research and didn't care for the official business that came with it. So, most of those tasks fell on Guilian's shoulders.

"You... You... Why?!"

Eliza threw herself at Kynos. She grabbed his collar, trying to shake him roughly. However, her arms were so frail and bony that she found it impossible to shake him.

“What on earth are you doing?!”

Kynos’ eyes met her mismatched ones—a deep, beautiful blue and a dark brown. He stroked her hair, pressing a light kiss to her forehead. “What do you mean? I’m just restoring that which was broken.”

“But you’re the one who...”

“Well, there was nothing else to be done if I didn’t have the necessary ingredients. When this is all over, I’ll give Miloyd the throne, and the three of us can go on a trip. What do you say?”

Eliza scoffed at Kynos’ completely nonchalant suggestion. She knew he was crazy, but this was on a whole different level. No... She hadn’t known he could be so terrible and cruel.

Oh, Valeta... Eliza squeezed her eyes shut. She had an inkling of what the impassive but gentle girl’s plans were. The alchemist collapsed to the ground, knowing there was nothing she could do now. She was afraid to learn just how many people’s lives he had taken.

“Kyn...” she whispered.

“Yes, Eliza?”

“There’s... There’s nothing I can do to save you at this point,” Eliza murmured, still clutching Kynos’ clothes in her fists.

She chose to remain silent after that. It was the only choice she had. Kynos said nothing as he peered down at her with a puzzled expression. He picked her up and set her on the bed, staring at her for a moment before turning away.

\* \* \*

For the first time in a long time, the imperial family held a banquet. On paper, it was a festival to welcome envoys from the Magicians' Tower, but those in attendance didn't see it that way.

Valeta Delight was kneeling by the emperor's side for all the world to see as if she was still her father's kept daughter. The rumors going around that the emperor doted on Valeta were meant to intentionally provoke the head of the Magicians' Tower.

The banquet hall was abuzz. Everyone spoke in hushed voices, not caring for the situation. Of course, this was just as Kynos' intended.

Dreux and Carlon hadn't been able to do anything to help her. When they voiced that she was being treated too harshly, Valeta replied that this was what she wanted. What could they say to that? Largris took up his usual corner in the banquet hall. He held a wine glass in one hand and the snowta was perched on his shoulder.

Everyone present had the same motive.

They were curious about what this mysterious head of the Magicians' Tower looked like. They also wanted to catch a glimpse of the missing Valeta Delight, who was now kneeling subservient at the emperor's feet. But most of all, they wanted to see what Duke Delphine's reaction would be, as he had once been the girl's guardian.

Largris was the first to notice that something was strange. He blinked and straightened up. The emperor was wearing a calm smile. A magic circle

appeared on the banquet hall's floor, followed immediately by the appearance of the magicians. Save for the handful standing at the front of the group, most of them were wearing dark robes, as if they wanted to very clearly indicate that they had no intention of participating in the banquet.

Balteer, Silon, and Kurt were among the former. The tiny manager of the 82nd floor was present, dressed smartly in a cute robe. He wasn't required to attend, but his eyes had nearly popped out of his head when he'd heard that Valeta had been captured.

The most eye-catching person stood at the front of the group—Reinhart. The nobles had been taken aback to see the largest magic circle any of them had ever seen, but one by one, their attention turned to him.

Reinhart's silver hair, illuminated by the chandeliers, swayed around his waist, his ruby eyes as stunning as his robe. His complexion was so pale that it looked like porcelain, and the gorgeous shape of his lips was enough to make anyone swoon.

Unlike the others, Reinhart was dressed in pure white, adorned in gold embellishments. He also wore a cloak draped over his shoulders, jet-black and lined with fur. His clothes only added to his attractiveness, the cloak resembling a pair of wings.

His appearance had grabbed the attention of everyone in the room. They were mesmerized. Silence descended over the banquet hall, punctuated only by the sound of breathing.

The only people who didn't so much as blink in the face of the head's stunning appearance were Valeta, who was kneeling at the emperor's side; the emperor, who was petting her hair like a dog; Largris; and the two dukes.

Valeta was wearing one of the low-cut dresses she had been forced to wear ever since she'd arrived at the imperial castle. Reinhart's face twitched when he

saw how she was dressed. She didn't so much as acknowledge the magician's presence. She didn't even look at him. To be more precise, she couldn't look.

Reinhart swept his hand through his hair, scanning his surroundings. Each and every one of his movements was elegant and full of grace, so much so that everyone very quickly forgot he used to be a slave. He didn't seem at all out of place, as if he had been born a nobleman from the start.

"Thank you for coming all this way, Head of the Magicians' Tower. It's very nice to meet you," the emperor drawled.

It wasn't hard to figure out who the magician had been looking for. Reinhart slowly turned his attention to the emperor.

Silon gasped. "That's... Miss Valeta, isn't it?"

"What in the world?!"

"Isn't that our lord's socoro?"

The magicians of the Tower started making a fuss upon hearing Silon's quiet observation. Although they spoke in hushed tones, the quiet banquet hall only amplified their voices.

Reinhart's smile widened.

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Everyone's breaths caught in their throats as they watched Reinhart closely. More than a few people's faces had turned bright red.

"Thank you for inviting us. I didn't expect to meet like this," Reinhart said, the words rolling smoothly off his tongue.

The nobles began to murmur, their resolve melting at the sound of the magician's sweet voice. This was the closest thing any of them had heard to a celestial voice.

The man didn't speak loudly. His voice wasn't as feminine as a woman's, nor was it as deep as a typically masculine man's. Every time he blinked, his long eyelashes fluttered. Many of the men swooned at the bewitching sight.

The emperor frowned slightly as he sensed the change in atmosphere. When Reinhart tilted his head, the gathered nobles sighed deeply.

The emperor cocked his own head from where he was still seated on his throne. "Well, I heard that you wanted to apologize personally."

"Ah... Indeed," Reinhart replied with ease. He didn't even flinch in the face of the emperor's easygoing words. "If I recall correctly, you were promised a formal apology, but what else did we already do? Dispatched magicians to the imperial castle, along with a great deal of magic stones?"

"That's right," the emperor agreed.

"By the way, you seem to be raising quite the cute little pet,"

Reinhart said as he turned his gaze on Valeta. The girl slowly turned to regard

the magician as though she sensed his gaze. Her eyes resembled those of a dead fish. They were utterly empty.

Reinhart's smile only grew deeper when he saw them. Valeta said nothing. She didn't even move or blink. She was no different from a corpse. The other magicians began to tremble in fear as Reinhart laughed.

"Yes. I heard that this little pet used to belong to you," the emperor replied.

"Well, I've never treated her as a pet, but you could say that," Reinhart said, his smile as broad as ever.

His fellow magicians fidgeted. They had never seen their lord conduct himself with such patience. Kurt and Silon kept stealing glances at each other, their expressions nervous.

"Do you know something?" Reinhart asked.

"What's that?" the emperor replied.

By now, the emperor was also wearing a smile on his face. He was delighted. It had been so long since someone had challenged him to his face.

"There was once another man who wanted to turn that girl into his pet. Do you know what happened to him?"

"Last I heard, he was made into this girl's birthday cake. Is that correct?"

It was clear that they were both referring to Count Delight, but Reinhart's eyes grew wide hearing the emperor's bold, shameless retort.

"How do you turn a bloody pig into a birthday cake?" Reinhart asked with a shrug. "You have to butcher it like a hog by plucking out its eyes and cutting off its tongue and limbs."

The nobles trembled hearing his sweet voice begin to spew such vicious words. Startled, the emperor stared at Reinhart, but the magician made no move, just continued to smile.

"I thought you came all this way from the Magicians' Tower to apologize, but it appears that we have a very different idea of what constitutes an apology," the emperor said as he finally stopped petting the girl's head.

Valeta rose to her feet and took a step forward. She looked as though she was trying to protect the emperor. Reinhart's expression twisted into a frown. He sighed softly. Dancing to the emperor's tune was going to very quickly cause him to lose his patience.

"I'll keep my word regarding the magic stones and give them to you, but I don't think we'll be able to send support at this time. You see, none of the magicians want to come to the imperial castle."

"I thought we had a deal."

"There's nothing I can do if no one wants to come. It's not like I can snap their necks, take their hearts in my fist, or force them to bend to my will." Reinhart smiled another friendly smile. "Unless you desire to host a corpse, that is."

The emperor frowned, hearing the edge in Reinhart's voice. The magicians held their breath as they clustered closer together for safety. The girl took another step forward as if she could hear the threat in the magician's voice. Finally, Reinhart's eyes narrowed.

"It hurts me to see you like this, master," he said, sending the nobles immediately into a tizzy. They couldn't believe that he was still speaking like he was her slave.

Reinhart paid no attention to them. He strode to Valeta, took her hand, and pulled her into his embrace. He looked down at her with an expression that was

warm enough to melt ice caps and brought their faces close together, their lips a hair's breadth apart.

"Just like the last time we were together..." Reinhart ran a finger along the girl's lower lip. "Unless you allow me to taste you, I'm going to have to ask you to step aside."

Valeta instinctively flinched upon hearing the magician's odd but affectionate words. The utterly emotionless look in her eyes was shaken. Reinhart licked his lower lip.

"Valeta."

When she heard the emperor call her name, her expression became abruptly firm again. Valeta brought her free hand to Reinhart's shoulder. Her expression changed only slightly when she opened her mouth to speak.

"Freeze."

With a loud crack, ice began to form around Reinhart's shoulder. He looked down, staring impassively at the layer of ice now encasing his shoulder.

"My lord!" the magicians cried as they lurched forward.

Reinhart raised a hand, stopping them in their tracks. The corner of his lips curved up into a smile, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. He leaned over slightly, matching gazes with Valeta.

"Now I'm cold, Master," he said. "It hurts, too."

Valeta's fingers twitched. Her thoughts kept returning to the man standing in front of her, even though she knew it was against her orders.

Reinhart straightened up, noticing the girl's breathing was growing ragged, and she was breaking out into a cold sweat. He easily crushed the ice around his

shoulder with his hand and pulled the girl back into his arms, petting her hair affectionately. Then, he slowly locked eyes with the emperor.

He was no longer smiling.

"I don't like getting mixed up in complicated or troublesome things. We will not be sending the magicians. I'll send you two tons of magic stones, and in exchange, you'll return my master to me. Then, I'll step down and have nothing more to do with the Magicians' Tower."

"You're putting me in a difficult position. The girl had declared herself mine. She said it herself. Didn't you, Valeta?"

There was a long pause.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Valeta eventually replied, her voice wavering as she spoke into Reinhart's shoulder.

There was obvious resistance in her hesitation. The emperor internally clicked his tongue. He hadn't expected her to be capable of resisting like this.

*Where does her iron willpower come from?* Valeta often seemed to have no interest in the world around her. She always looked dead inside and just followed his orders. He had assumed that Count Delight had tamed her to the point that she was simply incapable of disobeying. He never anticipated such an impassive girl would have such strong willpower.

Reinhart stroked Valeta's hair as though he were praising her efforts. However, the head's mood soured as he thought about how the girl was fighting without rest for her own reasons.

"Emperor," Reinhart said as he gently caressed the girl.

The nobles held their breath upon hearing the way Reinhart addressed the emperor as though he were a child. The emperor's eyes hardened.

"Do you think I'm playing along with your childish games because I have no other choice?" Reinhart said in a low voice, instantly wiping the grin off the emperor's face. There was no hint of the emperor's usual benevolence in his frosty glare. Reinhart smiled, noting that he'd successfully knocked off the emperor's mask. "I'll admit, I didn't expect to lose the bead. It's true that that threw me for a loop, but..."

Reinhart's words were so casual that he hardly seemed to care. This was just his way, however. It was a voice he'd honed in order to soothe and placate. However, no one moved a muscle. They were frozen to the point they couldn't even cover their ears. All they could do was focus on what he was saying.

"But now that I know you have it, you can do anything you want to the bead, and it won't make a difference. Who knows? That might change if you exchange it for a more powerful method to try and control her."

*Not that anything like that exists,* Reinhart thought as he gently played with Valeta's earlobe. Their world was one ruled by a hierarchy. People were born into certain positions, ones that allowed them to stand where they were meant to in life. The more powerful always had access to things that other people didn't. And Reinhart was at the very top of this hierarchy. However, sorcery was a better version of alchemy and magic combined. If there existed someone who was capable of using sorcery, that meant they were superior to Reinhart in power.

However, even a newborn baby could tell who the winner would be if Reinhart and Largris went head-to-head using sorcery.

After all, Reinhart had undone Largris' magic. If they had access to the same tools, Reinhart would come out on top, no matter what the situation.

"Do you think it would be hard for me to bring the imperial castle to ruins and force the empire to kneel at my feet?"

He sounded totally relaxed as he delivered this threat. His voice didn't waver, the smile on his lips flickering only slightly. There was no telling what he was thinking behind those ruby-red eyes.

"The reason why I haven't done exactly that is simple. It's because my master doesn't want it. I may look like I don't care, but if I acted on my true feelings and laid the empire to waste, I know I'd end up consumed with guilt and wish to hide away."

Not that he would ever reveal that particular side of himself to these people in reality.

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The emperor wore a hard look on his face, gripping the handrest of his throne so tightly that his knuckles turned white. The veins in his temple began to bulge. It was clear that he was quickly losing patience. Of course, Reinhart couldn't care less about that.

"You already ruined my reputation with that ridiculous roste outbreak of yours, and my master made the potion that you wanted." Reinhart smiled. "I was just playing along with your cheap theatrics... But don't you think you're being too greedy at this point?" he said in a flat, low voice, his eyes narrowing.

It was easier to kill an ant, rather than try to teach it right from wrong. He could just crush the emperor under his boot and be done with it, but that option wasn't available to him because he had been told not to.

*I could give her the entire world if that was what she wanted.* She refused to rely on him though. Just thinking about it made him sad. The crowd of nobles became abuzz with commotion upon hearing Reinhart's words. It wasn't just the nobles who were shaken, either. The servants busy running around refilling drinks were in shock, too.

"Come to think of it... Before the emperor ascended to the throne..."

The atmosphere in the banquet hall changed rapidly as the people murmured to each other in low whispers. The roste had been the talk of the empire. Even the nobility had been afflicted with the disease.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. How is the roste my fault in any way? If you were going to accuse someone so publicly, at least bring plausible accusations forward."

The emperor's voice was as cold as a frigid wind in the tundra. The nobles stiffened hearing it. Their whispers ceased.

"The way the infection spread, not to mention how none of the victims had anything in common..." Reinhart snickered as if he had said something funny. He buried his head into the girl's shoulder and stayed like that for a long time before finally lifting his head.

"Head of the Magicians' Tower, you are crossing a line. Continue with these vile accusations, and you will be paying insult to the imperial family," the emperor warned Reinhart. "Should you continue, I will have to assume that you wish to wage war."

"War, huh? That doesn't actually sound too bad," Reinhart said with a grin.

Valeta moved to protect the emperor reflexively when she heard the obvious aggression in his voice. She started to squirm in Reinhart's arms, but, in a soothing voice, Reinhart whispered, "Shh. Just hold on a little longer."

He moved her head to rest on his shoulder, putting an end to her struggles.

"Emperor, why do you think I've come here?"

"What?"

"Well, I'm not saying you're stupid, but..." Reinhart said, pretending to look troubled. "Did you know that my master predicted that this would happen and allowed herself to be caught?"

"What did you just say?"

"Or that she already found a way to break free of this?" Reinhart said as he grabbed Valeta's left hand and showed the circle seared there to the emperor.

The wrinkles surrounding the emperor's eyes deepened as he frowned, marks of

age that he couldn't completely hide.

"In other words... this girl has lured you into a trap," Reinhart said slowly, a smile stretching his lips wide.

From the moment he'd arrived, Reinhart had just wanted to blow the whole place up. The only thing staying his hand was that Valeta and the other magicians around him didn't want him to. She didn't want it to happen and was determined to find a different way to solve this. That was why he'd put aside his preferred option and what she least wanted.

He recalled the second letter he'd received just yesterday.

*"Hey, I'm done here. Largris brought me proof that the imperial family was the one who developed the roste. I asked him to spread it all throughout the empire, so everything should be finished by today. Largris is really annoying, but he does as he's asked. I'm going to send you everything you need, so don't run wild."*

Reinhart recalled the tired and exhausted tone of Valeta's letter as he glanced down at her. She had dark circles under her eyes. It was clear that it had been a while since she'd had a good night's sleep.

"You didn't have any interest in her, so you never noticed. If it were me, I would've kept an eye on her day and night," he said, tearing his gaze away from the top of Valeta's head.

The emperor looked uncomfortable as if he had forgotten how to smile or relax suddenly, much less put on a proper mask. After a moment, he spoke.

"What are you talking about? What did she do?"

"Who knows?" Reinhart said mischievously as he turned his gaze to the terrace. Instead of frowning at the stench of dead bodies that was wafting closer, he smiled. "Sounds like things are quite the mess in the capital, Emperor."

"What do you..."

"Your Majesty!"

A single soldier sprinted into the banquet hall. He looked half-crazed and disheveled, sword partially drawn. The pale, trembling man had foregone greeting the emperor properly. He shoved closed the doors to the banquet hall behind him. Then, he smashed a chair, wedging a leg through the handles.

Kynos frowned as he watched. "Why are you making such a big fuss?"

"Y-Your majesty! Please summon the army! There are s-strange monsters... I-laying siege on the c-castle gates...! No, not monsters! Crazy people... No... Eek...!" The soldier babbled, his teeth chattering with fear. He was so consumed with terror that he couldn't get the words out.

The emperor furrowed his brow.

"This man is out of his mind. Kill him now, Valeta!" the emperor ordered with an annoyed look as he rose from his throne.

Valeta stiffened hearing the firm order. She used all her strength to push Reinhart away. Emptiness clouded her blank eyes.

"Shh, it's all right," Reinhart whispered into her ears with a smile.

Valeta struggled even harder hearing the magician's words. He sighed before giving her earlobe a light nip. Her shoulders quivered, and she froze as if she had forgotten her orders, so unexpected was his action.

"Good girl," Reinhart said. He praised Valeta as if he hadn't been the one to

distract her and then whispered, “There’s no need to involve yourself, master.”

Reinhart snapped his fingers, still smiling. Suddenly, an ice spear materialized out of nowhere, silently slicing through the air. It was impossible to see, much less dodge. It was over in less than three seconds. The pointy icicle hit the frightened soldier in the dead center of his forehead.

*Crunch.*

Blood burst from the wound and the soldier’s limbs jerked as he hit the floor. He was dead before he even got the chance to scream.

“I told you, I’ll take care of all the dirty work.”

Blood pooled under the fallen soldier, staining the red carpet. Valeta stopped struggling now that her order was fulfilled. Reinhart looked down at her, a satisfied smile coming to his face.

“Ahhh!”

*Snap!*

The magician snapped his fingers once more.

“Scream one more time, and you won’t leave this room alive,” Reinhart warned as he made pointed eye contact with the noblewoman who had screamed. Here and there, the sound of sobbing echoed throughout the room. As one, the banquet hall collectively held their breaths. They could do nothing else.

A second snap of Reinhart’s fingers filled the entire banquet hall with ice spears. There was nothing the nobles could do but keep their mouths shut unless they wanted to die skewered and resembling an icy hedgehog.

“Is that good enough for you, emperor?”

The emperor's mouth was set in a hard line as Reinhart spoke, not a single drop of blood having touched him. At the same time, the noise outside grew louder, as if some great commotion was breaking out. The sounds of clashing swords and something scratching against the door were constant.

"Oh dear. Looks like we have quite the situation on our hands," Reinhart said as he shook his head, looking deeply apologetic somehow. But he didn't move to intervene; in fact, he looked as relaxed as ever.

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“Kyaaa!”

“Ahhh!”

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Horrific screams and weird sounds that resembled the slaughter of livestock could be heard through the door. Everyone in the banquet hall grew pale. They struggled to breathe.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

“O-open the door! P-Please! Open the— No! No! Ahhh! Aarrgghh!”

Eventually, the screams died out entirely on the other side of the door. The silence that followed was interrupted by the rumbles of unknown beasts and the sound of tearing flesh. Whatever was outside was struggling to gain access to the banquet hall, thanks to the dead soldier’s efforts to barricade the doors. Something was banging against them though.

The only thing keeping the doors closed was the two wooden chair legs the soldier had wedged between the handles. However, it wasn’t strong enough to keep the door closed against whatever was trying to force its way in. The sound of splintering wood echoed around the hall. Even though the break-in was imminent, not a single soul had found the willpower to make themselves move.

*Crack.*

One of the wooden legs snapped. For a split second, everyone remained frozen. When the door didn’t immediately burst open, everyone scrambled away from

it, their eyes glued to the doors. Reinhart paid no attention to the commotion. Instead, he kissed Valeta on the top of her head and breathed in her scent deeply. He felt the curve of her bare waist through the fabric of her skimpy dress. Valeta's shoulders trembled as the magician's index finger traced the curve of her spine.

"You bastard! What the hell do you think you're doing?!" the emperor cried as he drew his sword, his patience wearing thin.

Reinhart sighed when the emperor interrupted his long-awaited physical therapy. He looked up at the man with wide eyes and cocked his head.

The emperor's expression grew dark with fury as he watched the scandalous scene unfold. He couldn't stand that such a young upstart was causing him to lose face so terribly. It put him in a foul mood. If nothing else, Kynos hated being in a bad mood.

"I can't believe you're asking me that. I haven't done anything. All this would have been a lot easier if you just accepted the offer of two tons of magic stone," Reinhart said with a click of his tongue. He sounded like he was chiding the emperor for foolishly kicking his offer to the curb. Really, he didn't want to be involved in this whole mess.

"That doesn't make any sense!"

Reinhart ignored the emperor's bellowing as he produced a glove and carefully slid it over Valeta's left hand. His actions were so careful in contrast to the pressing situation unfolding that everyone was left speechless. Even though Reinhart appeared more noble than anyone in the room, his actions suggested that this servile attitude was second nature to him.

No one could take their eyes off the two as Reinhart looked at Valeta so sweetly. He skillfully slid on the glove, soothing the girl as if she were a child when she tried to squirm away.

When he was done, Reinhart looked up.

“Oh...”

He twirled his finger twice, and the icicles aimed their pointed ends at the emperor. Despite all the projectiles now aimed at him, the emperor did not blink.

“It’s futile.”

“I’m sure,” Reinhart said as he snapped.

The icicles flew at the emperor, who raised his sword and deflected a few shards, but there were too many.

*Thud. Thud. Thud.*

The emperor gasped in pain as the icicles embedded themselves in him. Once he was fully pinned, the projectiles stopped.

“Your Majesty!”

Astonished voices cried out. Dozens of icicles had pierced through the emperor, including in his head and heart, and he toppled from his throne.

Largris, who had been watching the whole affair unfold, slowly lifted his head. Kynos gritted his teeth, even dazed and bleeding as he was. Reinhart burst out laughing, feeling rather good about himself. He summoned one of the ice spears back to his hand.

“Ngh...”

Kynos shuddered as he felt the spear rip free from his body, but even still, he only flinched minutely. All at once, his wounds, starting at his forehead, began to heal. His cells began to rapidly regenerate, filling in the gaping spaces.

“Oh my god...”

“Your Majesty...!”

“H-he’s a monster...”

Everyone in the banquet hall was left stunned by what they had just witnessed. No one could say a word in the face of something so strange and bizarre. They trembled with fear. The emperor could no longer be considered human. His wounds had disappeared almost instantly.

Kynos reached out and carefully pulled the spears out one by one, starting with the one lodged in his heart. Even though his healing abilities were incredible, it didn’t mean that he couldn’t feel the pain. However, the emperor continued to wrench out the spears without so much as a groan of pain, his eyes burning with rage.

Holding his singular spear, Reinhart watched the emperor closely as the wounded man’s blood dripped slowly from the point. He carefully directed some of the blood to the glove he’d put on Valeta. The sorcery circle that had been embroidered on the glove soaked up the blood and started to burn with a loud whooshing sound.

The flames burned blue, not red. Valeta blinked as she looked down at her hand as it was engulfed in flames, but she didn’t feel any heat from them. In fact, they felt cold as they lapped against her skin.

Valeta blinked as she looked down at the fire. It was clearing away the fog that had filled her head. She quietly watched the flames burn from the fog-filled darkness of her mind. They consumed the fog as though they were made from a combustible material. All she could see was an ocean of blue flames. The eerily beautiful sight was mesmerizing.

“Valeta...”

The voice she had been hearing from a distance was suddenly a lot closer. She slowly blinked. As the voice called to her, the fog began to disappear from her mind. The stifling darkness blanketing her began to lift. She slowly closed her eyes. The first thing she noticed was the stench of blood assaulting her nostrils.

"Long time no see, master."

"I don't know if it's just me, but it certainly doesn't seem like it's been all that long," Valeta retorted with a hollow smile. She swallowed as another wave of new information hit her. Overwhelmed, she leaned her head against Reinhart's shoulder. She slowly processed everything that was happening and stiffened when she felt the man's warm hand caressing her back. "Take your hands off me."

Reinhart simply smiled at the girl's menacing demand. He brought his face closer to Valeta's, hand firm on her back. She furrowed her brow. He was so happy to see her expressing emotions again. "Oh dear. I thought you wanted me to kiss you. I was so happy about it."

"Do you want to die?"

"No. But when this is over..."

Reinhart's voice was heavy with implication as he slowly ran a hand down her back. This was a new, unfamiliar feeling for her. Reinhart was usually the one to back away, so this was the first time she'd felt this way.

"....I think I'll have to do something to mark you as mine."

This whole affair with the emperor had been incredibly unpleasant for him. Reinhart had no desire to see Valeta kneeling at anyone's feet, but that she had done so not once, but twice... His breath ghosted across her face, lips parting as if he was about to devour her. His breathing quickened as though he was running out of air. She stiffened as he gave her a light peck on the corner of her

mouth before stepping away.

"You'll let me taste you again, won't you?" he asked. "I think I deserve a reward."

Valeta's mouth opened and closed as she clenched her fists tightly. As she made to speak, a hand reached out from behind and grabbed her. Reinhart's face darkened as he watched her being snatched from him.

"Valeta, are you okay?!"

It was Carlon Delphine.

Reinhart clicked his tongue, lowering his hand, which was seconds away from snapping.

"Oh, Carlon... I'm fine. I'm sorry for making you wor—"

*Whoosh!*

Valeta's eyes narrowed as she heard something cut through the air, followed by the feeling of a threatening aura. Despite understanding what had happened, Reinhart simply crossed his arms and sighed. The first person to notice something amiss was Dreux.

As he drew his sword and stood in front of Valeta, she cried out, "Gene!"

A giant tornado materialized in the center of the room. The violent storm consumed the icicle that had been sent flying at Valeta, disintegrating into tiny shards. The giant bird flapped his massive wings, wrapping one of them around her as he landed behind her.

"An elementalist..." the emperor whispered in shock.

Valeta pet Gene's neck gently. Then, she slowly turned and looked to where the spear had come from.

"That good-for-nothing Count Delight was sitting on a truly valuable piece of treasure," the emperor said, some of his surprise breaking through his apathetic expression. Kynos brushed off his robes and then turned his attention to the girl. "What did you do to me, Valeta?"

"Nothing. I simply did what you asked me to do."

Kynos' expression grew more stiff when he heard how impassive the girl sounded. He blinked, unable to find words. The emperor slowly descended the stairs, each one of his wounds now healed. Gene spread his wings, looking menacing, but Valeta laid a calming hand on him.

Kynos grabbed her by the neck, lifting her into the air. "Then, tell me. What did you do to Eliza?"

"Eliza didn't tell you?" Valeta asked with a puzzled expression.

He sneered at her, fully aware this was a blatant attempt to get under his skin. Kynos tightened his grip on her. Reinhart continued to stand there, arms crossed. He watched the scene unfold with deep displeasure.

"What do you mean?" the emperor growled.

"There's no way she wouldn't have known the potion's exact weakness."

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“The weakness...?” the emperor repeated with a bewildered expression. He didn’t look like he believed Valeta.

Her eyes squeezed shut when he tightened his grip on her neck, but she managed to keep speaking. “Did you really think that Eliza abandoned the project she worked so hard on for the sake of the people just because your relationship with her went south? I don’t think so.”

Their conversation was going around and around in circles. The emperor tightened his grip on her throat. Valeta gritted her teeth, her face contorted with pain, but she refused to make a sound. Kynos squeezed harder, displeased with her silence.

“This is the last time I’ll ask, Valeta Delight. You better answer me if you don’t want to die. What did you do to me?”

“Put Valeta down,” Dreux said, bringing his sword to the emperor’s neck.

The duke had drawn his sword. As the emperor, Kynos knew what that meant better than anyone. He bared his teeth.

“This is treason,” he snarled.

“Ah, ah, ah. It’s treason that the next leader has not been decided upon yet...” Reinhart said as he stood behind the emperor, the corner of his eyes crinkling with a smile. He cocked his head to the side. “Why don’t we make a war of this? Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Largris!” Kynos cried, all traces of his smile now gone. The emperor’s relaxed attitude had vanished, nowhere to be seen, his foul mood giving way to pure

rage.

"What, Kynos?" Largris replied calmly.

"Activate the magic circle, now! They must be punished for their treason."

"That avenue is closed to you," a high voice said. "Largris will never consider himself your friend ever again."

Kynos said nothing.

Instead, his face twisted with fury when Valeta replied instead of his old friend. When he turned to look at the magician, Largris was leaning against the wall, the snowta still perched on his shoulder, twirling a glass of wine. The magician looked right back at the emperor, observing him with a faint smile on his lips. It didn't seem like he had any plans to lift even a single finger in Kynos' defense.

Kynos quickly understood exactly what this meant. He smiled sinisterly. "How dare you... Are you betraying me, Largris?"

"You're the one who betrayed me first, Your Majesty. You're the one who killed my son, and you used Guilian to make him into a monster and eventually disposed of him."

While the emperor sounded furious, Largris sounded only bitter. He slowly covered his eyes with his hand, looking exhausted.

"I thought Eliza was dead, but you lied to me. She's alive ..."

Kynos' face quickly fell upon hearing this. He tilted his head to the side, eyes emotionless. He made a gesture indicating he wanted Largris to go on speaking.

The magician opened his mouth. "You took my son from me. You said that he was dead. You used him as an experiment before finally throwing him away." Largris slowly lifted his head to look at Kynos properly. His cold gaze no longer

held any hesitation or affection. "You've done nothing but deceive me."

"Have I been caught?"

The emperor spoke with alarming casualness. Kynos shrugged as if he were saying "I guess the cat's out of the bag?"

Largris clenched his teeth. "I told you before, don't make me kill you."

"Yeah, you did say that. So, you're the one who called the rezir?"

"Yes."

"No wonder. I thought it was strange that it was happening at all the same places I chose."

The thought had crossed his mind several times, but he had never suspected Largris. Kynos stroked his chin. Then, he burst out laughing. The whole situation was just so amusing to him. It was funny to him how things hadn't worked out the way he'd wanted them to.

"There's no one like you, Largris. You make life so much fun."

He'd never thought that his old friend would stab him in the back while wearing a smile on his face. There was nothing left for him to do. It would be too much to ask for another chance at this point, wouldn't it?

Kynos smiled, resigning himself. Everything was just a game to him, even ascending to the throne. He hadn't liked that the throne wouldn't have been his just because he wasn't born first. He was curious about what sitting on the throne was like. That's why he did what he did at only twelve years old.

"I'm curious. You don't even know how to use alchemy. How were you able to use that incantation?"

"You gave me the solution: Eliza's eye. I couldn't throw it away or bury it, so I turned it into an alchemy stone. It wasn't hard."

"I see. You and Eliza were always so smart. I never should've given it to you." The emperor clicked his tongue, bemoaning his mistake. He had given Largris her eye to make his story more credible. To think it would come back to bite him like that...

*That means he's been suspicious of me for a very long time,* Largris thought. It had been a while since the first reports of the rezir had started coming out.

Kynos readjusted the sword in one hand and kicked off the ground, launching himself at Largris. Completely unconcerned with what was happening outside the hall's doors, he lashed out, aiming for Largris' throat.

As if he had expected this, the magician quickly whipped out his magic wand and blocked the attack. Their weapons collided with a dull sound. Largris shot a magic blast at the emperor, who parried it with his sword.

"That sword."

"There's a spell on it that cancels out magic," Kynos said with a smile. He had to prepare these sorts of countermeasures since he was always surrounded by alchemists and magicians. Also, he had never known when Largris was finally going to make his attack. "I'm so very sad, Largris."

"Surely you can't be anywhere as devastated as I am." Largris bared his teeth at Kynos' shameless mockery, their sword and wand still locked together in battle.

"I wanted to stay together for the rest of our lives. I was planning to give the throne to Miloyd so the three of us could go on a trip somewhere..." He sighed heavily as if he really was sorry. "But there's no doing that now, is there? Just die, Larg."

"You... Aren't you at all curious why Eliza gave up her project?" Largris asked as he struggled to block another of the emperor's blows.

Although the emperor and the magician were engaged in the same battle, Kynos remained not at all tired. He clicked his tongue as he looked around the ruins of his castle. "Am I curious? I don't know."

"You'll find out soon enough." Largris held his wand in one hand. With the other, he produced a sword from inside his robe and swung it at the emperor.

Kynos saw the attack coming but did nothing to block it.

*Stab.*

There was a sickening, wet sound, but Kynos was unfazed. All he did was peer down at the sword sticking out of his side. He laughed. "So, all the commotion outside is just the rezir you summoned?"

"That's right."

"Stepping all over innocent people just for your revenge is cruel. Then again, that's what I liked most about you," Kynos sounded innocent, childlike. He loved that the magician could be cruel when he needed to be.

Largris' expression contorted. "I'll show you just how cruel..."

*Clang!*

Largris' wand collided with Kynos' sword. At the same time, Kynos unsheathed another sword at his waist, thrusting it into the wall next to Largris' neck.

"...I can be," Largris finished through clenched teeth. They continued to fight, but anyone watching could tell that Kynos had the upper hand.

A wizard wasn't a match for a well-trained swordsman.

*I'll have to take care of that, too.* Kynos thought to himself. There was one more thing he had to take care of in addition to Eliza and Largris. Given how much time he had spent positioning the pieces in his game, he felt it was a shame that all his work had gone down the drain.

Even in the middle of the fight, Kynos was calmly formulating his next steps. He'd know he couldn't remain on the top of the world forever. He'd expected someone to stab him in the back one day, even though the chances of it actually happening were very low.

"We can die and move on to the next life together. I've accomplished everything I wanted to here."

"You crazy bastard," Largris spat.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

*Crack!*

*Boom!*

Unable to withstand the pressure, the doors to the banquet hall finally collapsed inward. Both Kynos and Largris turned at the sound. A throng of rezir began to push their way into the banquet hall, each of them brandishing a weapon of some sort.

"Ahhh!"

"S-save me!"

One of the rezir immediately launched itself at a nobleman, biting his arm. The other rezir pounced on the nobleman as well, attracted by the smell of freshly spilled blood. They began to bite him, gnawing at his flesh.

"Aah..."

Nobles and servants alike screamed and quickly backed away from the doors. They all huddled behind the throne, trembling with fear.

“Tch.”

Dreux charged forward, brandishing his sword. Carlon followed closely, snatching a sword from a nearby rezir and decapitating it.

“Oh, you can’t kill it like that. You have to make the head explode. Or...” Reinhart said, aiming a long finger at the rezir Carlon had just attacked. “...it’ll come back to life otherwise.”

Gene’s large wings engulfed Valeta, lifting her out of reach of the creatures. Reinhart grinned and joined her, taking up guard next to his master.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 136

"What the hell is going on? Did you do this?" Valeta asked, her mouth hanging open.

Reinhart huffed. "Of course not. I would never do something that displeased you. This was probably his doing."

Valeta turned to Largris, who studiously avoided her gaze. She tried so hard to prevent this from happening, but everything had still blown up in their faces like this.

"Just how many rezir are there in the castle right now?" Valeta demanded.

"Mmm, who knows? Definitely seems like the place is teeming with them," Reinhart replied helpfully as he glanced out the window.

Largris frowned. Reinhart stroked his chin, noticing the change in the magician. It seemed as though he hadn't anticipated things unfolding as they had.

After processing what was happening himself, Kynos backed away from Largris. The emperor easily parried the rezir charging at him with a swing of his sword before leisurely disappearing from the banquet hall entirely.

*Clang! Clang!*

The narrow hall had descended into the chaos of battle. Anyone who knew how to wield a sword began fighting off the creatures. Young men and nobles who had seen war, alongside any women who had learned how to fight, took up their blades. More and more rezir continued to crawl into the banquet hall with no end to the steady stream in sight.

All the magicians either used cloaking magic or fled into the air. Clearly, they wanted no part in this particular battle. If the head of the Magicians' Tower wasn't going to involve himself, then they certainly weren't going to either.

"What should we do, Master?" Reinhart asked with a smile. He had no sympathy for the people who were fighting for their lives down below. "There's a way to turn the rezir back into corpses. It's not that hard. All we have to do is separate the tiny sliver of a soul that's trapped inside."

Creating a rezir was no different from stuffing a soul into a doll. In other words, all they had to do was separate the said soul from the said doll. It was that simple.

"But to do so for the whole imperial city? It's impossible to make an alchemy symbol that big. This isn't a small town. It would be different if you were talking about using magic," Reinhart continued. "You have nothing to sacrifice, either. Let's just kill them all."

"I made a sorcery circle yesterday," Valeta said, her voice growing strained thanks to the persistent smell of blood. She had a strange look in her sunken eyes.

Reinhart immediately shook his head, displeased by what she was implying. "I'm sorry, but sacrificing yourself is out of the question. Now, if you were to use some of those people down there it would be a different story."

Valeta clenched her fists. She carefully pulled a small vial from her dress, only about the size of a finger. Something red sloshed around inside. With just a glance, anyone would be able to identify it as blood. She stared at the blood in the vial for a long moment before looking down at Largris, who still wore a frown on his face.

He looked up, sensing her gaze on him. Then, he paled as he realized what she was about to do. He plucked the snowta from his shoulder and placed it on the

table.

“Valeta. You—!”

“This is all your doing. I never wanted this to happen. I wasn’t even planning on using this.”

Valeta had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. She had been saving the vial of blood, hoping that she would never have to use it. She’d only taken it to use in the worst-case scenario.

“No...”

Openly despairing, Largris shook his head in denial. He quickly summoned a teleportation circle and disappeared.

“Whose blood is that?” Reinhart asked.

“It’s not mine.”

“Then...?” Reinhart pressed.

Valeta would say nothing more about it and turned away from him. She could see the snowta jumping from table to table down below.

*Meow! Meow!*

The snowta growled as it set its sights on a specific target. It crouched down low, wriggling its rear in the air, ready to pounce. Then, it kicked off from the table with its hind legs, sending its little body flying through the air. It landed on the head of one of the rezir, its tiny mouth stretched wide open.

*Nom!*

The snowta bit down with all its might, and a small trickle of rotten blood oozed out. The snowta only clamped its jaw harder. As its teeth sank into the rancid

flesh, the rezir, which had been flailing its arms around in search of prey, twitched before collapsing. The snowta hadn't even bitten it that hard, but the rezir was dead, its corpse not so much as twitching.

The snowta gave a triumph squeak as it puffed out its chest proudly.

"Wow, that little snowta is amazing."

"More useful than most socoros, I'd say."

Excited by Valeta's praise, the snowta climbed back on top of one of the tables, squeaking as it went. Then, it was once more leaping between tables in search of more prey.

"Do you think you can mark this circle around the entire imperial city?" she asked.

"Hmm... it shouldn't be that hard," Reinhart said, looking down at the small notebook Valeta was holding up for him to inspect. The pages were filled with densely packed symbols, all of which looked like they were based on magic circles. Developing all of them in a matter of days couldn't have been easy.

It was clear that she hadn't gotten any rest in days. Her eyes were heavy with dark circles. Reinhart tutted in disapproval as he stroked the bags under her eyes with his thumb. Valeta did nothing to stop him, too tired to care. She simply waited for him to finish. Finally, his hands retreated from her cheeks, and she just stared at him, waiting.

"If I'm being honest, I was going to do this myself, but... I don't have the power to make such a large circle alone. I need your help."

Instead of responding to Valeta with words, Reinhart pressed his lips against her earlobe. His arms wrapped around her waist as he whispered in her ear, and she naturally leaned into the curve of his body.

"You could take every last drop of blood in my body if that's what you want," he said.

"No, I'm good. I feel like I'll only end up cursed."

"What a shame."

Then, he took the drawing of the circle Valeta had created, floated down to the ground, and began to release his magic. The other magicians surrounded Reinhart, protecting him.

Reinhart glanced at the magicians clustered around him and then looked up at her. Valeta shrugged, a smile creeping up her face.

"Don't laugh, Master. It just makes me want to eat you."

"Crazy bastard."

"You're always so sweet to me," Reinhart said with a smile on his face.

He snapped his fingers and a large circle appeared on the floor of the castle, its magic spreading out from the center. Soon, a delicate but enormous circle covered the entirety of the imperial castle.

\* \* \*

"What in the world?!"

Miloyd had been residing in a castle gifted to him by his father, ordered to stay there and reflect on himself. He had managed to escape, only to be greeted by the putrid stench of rotten corpses the moment he stepped outside. All around the castle, strange things that were neither human nor monster were roaming around freely.

They made sounds that couldn't quite qualify as human speech but weren't exactly growls, either. Regardless, they were grotesque. Miloyd made his way to the imperial castle with his sword drawn. It wasn't that hard to avoid the horde of monsters, since he was able to travel by secret passage.

"The roste?" he wondered out loud.

But these creatures didn't seem like they could feel pain. Their skin was rotten, made up of a blotchy black and blue. Many of them were infested with maggots. It was a stretch to describe them as alive.

"Father..." Miloyd murmured to himself with worry as he cut down the monster in his way. He wasn't allowed to receive any outside information during his period of self-reflection, so he had no idea what was going on.

He'd heard snippets of news, that Valeta had returned for instance, but he didn't know the details. No matter how many times he requested an audience with his father, he was just told to reflect on himself some more. Miloyd had no idea what to do. He cleanly sliced another monster's throat open with a swift stroke of his sword.

"Damn it! Why won't they just die?"

It didn't matter if he stabbed them in the arms or sliced their throats—they wouldn't fall. At most, it made them pause for only a moment. He held his breath, moving swiftly on as quietly as possible.

It was chaos inside the imperial castle. The monsters were eating people alive as if they were determined to turn the hunters into the hunted. He wanted to help the people he came across, but there were just too many of the creatures. The city was completely overrun by them.

He wondered if the army had been held up somewhere. Either way, he had to find his father and get more information about the circumstances unfolding in

the city. I'm sure he knows what's going on.

But why wasn't his father taking action?

Based on how quiet things were, there had to be something very wrong. Miloyd continued down the secret passage until he finally reached the castle. He quickly took in his surroundings. *I heard that there was going to be a banquet today.*

That much Miloyd knew. Some of his maids had been transferred elsewhere to help with preparations. He immediately made his way to the banquet hall. As he hurried toward the hall, taking down any monsters he met along the way, he saw a familiar figure in the distance.

His eyes widened.

“Father!”

The emperor stopped in his tracks when he heard a voice calling him from a distance, sounding as though they were glad to see him. The emperor fought off the monsters with a smile on his face as he watched his son run toward him.

“Are you okay, Miloyd?”

“Yes, I’m fine. What about you, Father? What happened to your clothes? Was the fight difficult? Where are the knights?” Miloyd asked in a rush, sounding worried as he examined his father.

Kynos placed a hand on his beloved son’s cheek. “I’m glad that you’re safe.”

“Yes, but why didn’t you call the army?”

“Because we don’t need them. They won’t be of any help in this situation.”

Kynos pulled his son into a hug. He let out a deep sigh. He ruffled Miloyd’s hair

and the boy blushed, a little embarrassed by this show of affection.

“Father, this isn’t the time for—”

“Son, our days spent playing family are over. My dearest, most trusted friend has betrayed me. Now, I’m forced to dispose of that which is no longer useful.”

“Playing family? Who betrayed you, Father? And what you do mean, no longer useful?” Miloyd asked, wearing an expression of deep confusion.

Kynos’ expression was one of mild regret. There was no telling whether it was genuine or not, but he certainly looked dejected. “I was thinking of giving you the throne. I was so very happy to have you as my son. It’s a shame, really.”

“What is?” Miloyd said. “Father, I have no idea what you’re—”

Miloyd heard the sound of a blade cutting into flesh and then felt a sharp pain. His breath caught in his throat as the sword slowly buried itself deep inside his body.

Kynos gently stroked Miloyd’s cheek, staring into his son’s blue eyes as they grew wide with pain and horror. It wasn’t until much later that Miloyd realized exactly what had happened.

His father had stabbed him.

He knew little more than that.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 137

“Father...?”

Kynos twisted the sword, intentionally causing terrible damage to his son’s organs. His actions in no way matched the look of pity he wore on his face. He twisted the sword once more for good measure before slowly yanking it out.

Blood began to pour from Miloyd’s wound. The prince gasped, pain tearing through his entire body. He grabbed at his father’s cape with bloodied fingers in order to try and hold himself up. However, he only managed to hold on for a moment. In the end, the strength drained from Miloyd as quickly as his lifeblood, and he slowly collapsed to the ground.

“I told you that I’m disposing of things I don’t need anymore. I’ve kept you around to keep Eliza calm, and to serve as my substitute when I chose to step down...” Kynos looked down at his son, gaze completely apathetic. Miloyd was writhing on the ground, trying ineffectually to staunch his wound. “Everything will have to go now that it has turned out this way. I have no intention of leaving my blood or anything connected to Eliza and Largris behind.”

“F-Father... Ngh...”

“Yes, Miloyd? You love your father, right? So you’ll forgive me?” Kynos asked, his voice somehow brimming with affection. However, the emperor made no move to bend down and comfort his son. He took off his cape, now stained with Miloyd’s blood, and tossed it over his son.

The cape fluttered as it came to rest on top of Miloyd, covering his entire body as the boy gasped for air wetly. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling having to destroy that which he had carefully raised for so long. Kynos sighed again before

stalking back in the direction he had come. He'd planned on going to Miloyd's castle to kill him, but Miloyd had saved his father the trouble by coming to him. All that was left for him to deal with now was Eliza, Largris, and Desilian—the boy Largris was hiding.

Kynos headed directly to Largris' basement, where he knew Desilian to be. Kynos stared down at the boy in silence. He was sitting deathly still with his eyes closed as if he had died a peaceful death. There was a knife buried in his heart.

Kynos frowned as he took in the unexpected scene. As he paused, trying to process what had happened, something began to appear on the floor. He felt it suddenly surge to life with power pouring off it. His sword hummed in his hand as if sensing the great energy rising from the ground. Kynos glanced from his sword to the already dead Desilian. Then, he turned and left. He headed straight to his office, his sword clenched tightly in his hand.

*What is this?* he thought as he moved quickly, examining the circle as he went. Even at a glance, he could immediately tell it wasn't alchemy or magic. It more closely resembled sorcery.

It wasn't hard to cut through the throng of rezir filling the hallways. He took a few more steps and another blurred magic circle appeared. All of a sudden, the ground began to shake. The tremors were strong enough that they risked toppling the castle entirely, but Kynos only raised an eyebrow and continued moving. His expression never once faltered.

As the magic circle consumed the castle, the rezir who had been attacking Kynos began to drop to the floor, one by one. Kynos' eyebrows rose. The rezir collapsed like puppets whose strings had been cut. None of them rose again. They remained completely motionless.

*They did something...* It was clear to him that the wicked little Delight girl had

done something, but Kynos didn't care what that was. He was going to kill Largris. He would question Eliza and kill her, too.

*And then I'll have to die, as well.* One problem remained though, and it was that both he and Eliza had drunk the potion of infinite resurrection. Chances were that he would have to continue to live until he faded from this earth. The same would probably be true for Eliza.

*Poor Largris.* Had Kynos known this was going to happen, he would have made Largris drink the potion, too. If they were unable to die, at least they could've lived like monsters together forever.

Kynos entered his office, working through the many plans brewing in his mind. The office was a mess; the door to the hidden room was wide open, looking as though someone had intentionally left it that way. He kicked aside the bookshelf, sending it toppling to the ground, and went inside. The alchemy that had been in place to hide and protect the room was broken.

As he entered, Largris and Eliza did not react.

"Of course, I would find you here, Largris."

Kynos regarded the man silently. The magician was sitting on the ground, clutching Eliza in his arms. There was only one person left breathing in the room. When Kynos entered, that number grew to two. Largris was moving. He was alive. In other words, it was clear who was now dead.

"Did you kill Eliza, Largris?"

"Do you want to know something, Kynos?" Largris sounded broken, his eyes welling up with tears. Eliza's body had been cold for a long time. He kissed the woman's pale, unmoving lips. Then, he gently lowered her body onto the bed. "I think... you're wretched and cursed."

"I know."

"I regret ever having met you. You're a walking, talking curse on my life. I wish I could go back and change the past."

"That pains me, Largris. But Eliza shouldn't have been able to die."

Largris clenched his teeth when he noticed that Kynos seemed more intrigued than saddened by Eliza's death.

"The girl gave her a mere healing potion!"

Kynos' eyes widened. He had wondered how exactly Valeta had gone about stabbing him in the back. *No wonder she told me the potion for Eliza was a special kind of restorative potion.* He thought he had her completely under his control and so hadn't doubted her for a minute. He was baffled, wondering momentarily if perhaps she had actually been the one controlling him.

"It's a healing potion made using sorcery. It's better than any top-tier potion, but... It doesn't have infinite regenerative properties."

"I see," Kynos said calmly as he stared down at Eliza, who looked like she was merely in a deep sleep. He had thought he would be the one to destroy her with his own hands. But looking at her now, he felt sick to his stomach.

Largris smiled bitterly, shaking his head in despair. "Kynos, you wanted so desperately to be friends with us?"

"We are friends."

"We were friends. You were so full of greed that you didn't once think about us and what we wanted. Things turned out this way because of your selfishness."

"It couldn't be helped."

"Yeah... It couldn't be helped. You thought that way about so many things!" Largris cried. His teary gray eyes were filled with rage.

In contrast, Kynos wore an unreadable expression on his face.

"I... truly wish that you had really thought of me and Eliza as your friends," Largris murmured.

"I do think of you as my friends."

"Yeah, yeah, you must. That means this will hurt more for you." Largris smiled as he cried.

Those days more than ten years ago had been the happiest of his life. He'd been so happy that they were all together. Perhaps, if he hadn't tried to hold onto those times so tightly, maybe they wouldn't have ended.

"I'm going to curse you, Kynos."

"Curse?"

"You'll always be lonely. No one will trust you, and you'll always be suspicious of everyone you meet until the day you die. You'll never age, either. That's my curse for you," Largris said miserably.

Kynos remained silent. He couldn't think of anything to say. He had lived his life exactly how he'd wanted to. He had nothing to live for now that he'd disposed of everything that had ever made him happy.

However, it was true that he felt a wide range of emotions whenever he was with Largris and Eliza, but he hadn't ever thought that he would hesitate when it came time to cut them down. Now, he found himself almost immobilized at the thought of doing so. It was an unfamiliar sensation.

Kynos looked down at the sword in his hand.

"I learned how to use sorcery alongside Eliza. We researched it together and learned a lot."

"That's right."

This is also how Kynos had learned about it—everything he knew about alchemy, magic, and sorcery, he'd learned from them. He couldn't use any of it himself, but there were a lot of people in this world he could use as chess pieces.

"You're going to live a long, lonely life. You're going to push away anyone who tries to love you, longing for the days we had together. You'll dwell on that time endlessly."

With that, Largris took a knife from his pocket. It was a dagger he had stolen from Valeta's bag, imbued with the power to break spells and enchantments. Largris brought the tip of the dagger to one of his eyes and slowly began to push it in. Blood dripped down his face. Kynos' expression hardened as he watched the scene unfold, doing nothing to stop his old friend.

Largris kept his other eye fixed on Kynos, not even wincing from the pain. But that didn't mean the experience was painless. The betrayal hurt more than the pain of gouging out his own eye. Despite the horrific pain, Largris didn't stop. The magic in his body began to scatter and disperse. His vision filled with blood. Despite the despair that filled him upon losing his magic, Largris smiled. He pulled the dagger free from his skull and held it to his neck.

Face dripping with blood and sweat, he chanted cruelly, "Slowly descend into madness, Kynos."

"Stop, Largris."

"There will be no rest for you. Our lives are over, but you are cursed to continue living yours."

Then, Largris jerked his arm, slashing his own throat. Kynos leaped toward him, but it was too late. The dagger had already sliced clean through the magician's throat. Kynos caught his old friend's body as it fell.

Then, a sorcery circle appeared on the back of Kynos' hand, one that he had never seen before. No, it was a *curse*. The back of his hand burned as if someone was carving the lines directly into his skin.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 138

Despite the strange inscription on his hand, Kynos was more preoccupied with trying to treat Largris. He was stunned, all his usual composure had abandoned him.

“Larg, you...!”

Largris’ windpipe had been cut clean through. Blood poured from his throat. Kynos tried to stop the bleeding by pressing one large hand against it, but it was too late. The light was already fading from Largris’ one remaining eye. The magician blinked dazedly up at Kynos, seemingly taking in his panic. It seemed like the devil of a man could feel something after all.

“I went to your room and found Desilian there, dead. You killed him.”

Largris merely smiled upon hearing Kynos’ observation. It was a weak smile.

There was no emotion on Kynos’ face anymore. He was finally showing his true self after all this time.

“You knew that this would happen,” he muttered.

That’s why Largris had been preparing for the end. It was clear that he came to this room with every intention of dying. He must have sensed something in the banquet hall. Largris’ lips moved slightly in response to Kynos’ words. No sound came out of his mouth, but Kynos could easily make out what he was trying to say.

“*Congratulations. Now there’s nothing left for you.*”

The magician’s lips moved, forming words that resembled a curse, and then he

fell still.

The light went out in his gray eyes. Kynos gritted his teeth and moved Largris to lie by Eliza. He regarded his old friends with painfully cold eyes, any trace of a smile long gone from his lips, before abruptly turning away.

The hand that held his sword was clenched around the hilt so tightly that his knuckles were white. Kynos closed his mouth with such force that his teeth clacked together loudly, and he stormed from the room.

\* \* \*

“Protect Miss Valeta and the head of the Magicians’ Tower!”

“Don’t let those things approach them!”

The magicians who had intentionally kept to the sidelines until then began to move. It took a long time to draw the giant sorcery circle. It took Reinhart longer than it usually would because he had never drawn such a large circle before. Moreover, it wasn’t one of his own. Noticing this, Balteer Baroksis took charge.

Carlon Delphine and Dreux Leon joined the ranks gathering to protect Valeta and Reinhart, along with the remaining nobles. Both socoros and magicians worked in harmony surrounding the two of them. Valeta stood next to Reinhart giving him instructions that he silently followed. Before long, the sorcery circle was finally complete. Reinhart took hold of Valeta’s hand as firmly as he was able.

She slowly knelt in the center of the sorcery circle. Reinhart followed suit, kneeling beside her. Valeta clutched the vial of blood.

"Those guys will never do what you expect them to. I'll give you this. Use it if you need it. I don't have much time left anyway," Eliza had said when she'd handed it to her.

Valeta carefully opened the bottle and poured the blood onto the circle. It slowly began to seep into the lines of the circle, before disappearing with a flash.

"Don't worry. We'll keep the magic coming," Reinhart assured her.

"Okay."

Valeta placed both hands on the circle and took a deep breath. Reinhart silently placed his hand on top of hers. No matter how hard he tried, he wasn't strong enough to cast sorcery spells alone.

*How troublesome.* Things would have been so much more convenient if he was able to use it himself. Valeta's fingertips trembled. She had never really experienced the feeling of a huge amount of power slipping away from her before, but it probably wouldn't be a pleasant feeling.

She closed her eyes, focusing on Reinhart's warmth, taking another deep breath. She still wasn't used to the sudden exodus of power leaving her body when she did small acts of alchemy. Reinhart squeezed her hand as if he could sense her hesitation.

Valeta gave him a small smile.

"Disassemble."

Her eye instantly flashed, an ancient magic circle appearing in her pupil. The snowta sitting nearby stared up at Valeta. It was mesmerized by the beautiful circle in her eye, which was now even brighter than usual.

Valeta's breath caught in her throat as she felt the power drain from her body. It

felt like her body should be empty, but at the same time, it wasn't. She couldn't take her hands off the circle, so she slowly looked up instead.

Reinhart was looking back at her with a calm expression on his face. He had his hand over Valeta's, and was motionlessly channeling power into the giant magic circle. Valeta could feel her vision beginning to grow hazy, so she concentrated even harder.

"Master."

"Yes...?"

"I've been watching the house. I've been cleaning every day and taking care of the Tower's affairs, just like you told me to. I worked through a mountain of documents every single day. I learned how to take care of the Tower, too. And I didn't kill anyone, either."

No matter how hard Valeta tried to concentrate, her vision was beginning to blur. She nodded, trying to focus on Reinhart's voice instead of anything else. She could feel the power draining from her body like the cool tide drawing away from the shore, but she could also feel Reinhart's warm magic filling her up. It was a strange feeling.

*How long does this take to cast?* Valeta wondered, blinking her heavy eyelids.

With Nereid's help, she had been able to meet with Eliza last night. They were able to use water as a medium to have a conversation in a way that was similar to a video call. Eliza had told her that she didn't have much time left to live, but her blood would be better than nothing. The rest of the power necessary would have to be supplied by someone else's blood or magic. She didn't feel comfortable sacrificing someone else's life, so she had to depend on Reinhart's magic, but...

*I didn't realize it would take this much power.* She began to worry about Reinhart.

She wanted to tilt her head back and look at him, but even that was difficult. Her head just felt so heavy. By now, she struggled even trying to speak to him. She felt hot like she was about to explode.

*I guess my body really is weak, Valeta thought with a weak smile. Even with the help of Reinhart's magic, her body was screaming. He's taking responsibility, she thought about what he'd just told her. This man, still a child really, was taking on the monumental task of living life on his own. Suddenly, it hit her. If something happens to me, he'll be alone forever. He would be all alone in this tiny world with so much power and no one who could understand him.*

Through her hazy vision, she could see Carlon and Dreux fighting off the rezir. She rolled her eyes, trying to stay conscious.

"Master."

"Yes...?"

She thought it must be a good sign that she could still hear his voice clearly.

"Did I do well?"

"You did very well," she replied, forcing her heavy lips to move.

Reinhart squeezed her hand even tighter. She could feel the abnormal heat building inside her was getting hotter and hotter.

"When we go back, will you kiss me?"

"Ha, is this really the time and place to be talking about this?"

"Master, I need a reward if I'm going to work even harder."

Valeta scoffed. Still, she slowly nodded.

She would do anything to be allowed to sleep at this point. Her head was a

mess because she hadn't slept enough in days. Reinhart squeezed Valeta's hand a little harder and watched her closely. He observed her carefully—the way she breathed, her expression, how much magic she was using.

Then, he asked casually, "What about after we kiss?"

"Do you like me? That's the sort of thing you do with someone you like..."

"I like you. If I had to rank everything I liked in this world, you'd be at the very top."

Valeta was silent.

"I don't like very much other than you, but I guess you don't feel the same way about me."

Valeta's ears twitched. He sounded sullen, as if his feelings were hurt. Reinhart's constant chatter kept pulling Valeta's exhausted mind back into the present. Valeta kept answering him because she knew Reinhart would only continue talking about it if she didn't.

"Like and love are different things."

"How are they different?"

"Well, love is..."

How *were* they different? Valeta hesitated. What *was* the difference between like and love? Was it the difference between wanting to have a relationship and not having one? But could you not start a relationship just by liking someone, too? You could even be in a relationship with someone without liking them at all. And whether you like someone or love them, you'd want things to work out regardless, right?

"I don't know what the difference is," Valeta said.

"Then it doesn't matter. You said you liked me too, Master." Reinhart beamed.

"I said I didn't hate you."

"Wow. How cowardly of you, master," Reinhart grumbled. But he still sounded ever-so-slightly amused. Valeta chuckled, too, knowing that he didn't mean it. She took another deep breath, still feeling the magic draining from her body. The spell was almost complete.

Reinhart must have felt it, too. He glanced at the sorcery circle before turning his attention back to her. She was panting, cold sweat dripping down her neck. He didn't like this. He didn't like that she was putting in her best effort for someone who wasn't him. He squeezed her hand even harder, almost painfully so by now.

"Valeta, I'm the type of man who wants to devour you whole."

Valeta was silent.

"It would be better if you pushed me away if you really do hate me."

"What if I really do push you away?"

"Then I really will lock you up."

His sweet voice, tinged with amusement, tickled her ears. Valeta took her hands away from the circle and stared at Reinhart, bewildered. The beautiful man wore a gentle smile on his face. There wasn't a single hair out of place on his head, even in the midst of all this chaos.

"Then I don't have a choice."

"That's right," Reinhart said. He sounded so proud of himself as he lifted Valeta into his arms. "Give up, Valeta."

“What?”

“You messed up in this life. It’s a shame, but you’ve already been bitten by this crazy dog. You’ll have to try better to get away in your next life because I’ll never let you go.”

A smile blossomed on his face as they stood awash in the glow of the magic circle.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 139

Valeta's pupils dilated as she saw Reinhart bathed in light, giving him the appearance of a being not of this world. The ground beneath their feet began to tremble. At first, the tremors were subtle, barely noticeable. Then, the shaking intensified.

Reinhart reached out from behind her and wrapped his arms around Valeta's waist. She could do nothing but lean against him—she didn't have the strength to stand on her own.

"This is the worst..." Valeta said weakly.

"You're the one who asked a monster to live like a human. You're now responsible for me as long as I live," the magician whispered in her ear.

The rezir suddenly began crashing to the ground. They stumbled and then fell to the floor, their weapons tumbling from now lax fingers. Souls fled the rezir's animated bodies, leaving them mere corpses once more. Before anyone could really process what was happening, the imperial castle was filled with corpses. Valeta was so utterly exhausted she could barely lift her head.

"Where's the emperor?" she breathed out.

"Who knows? Oh, here he comes." Reinhart pressed a light peck to her forehead. "Ah, this reminds me. Are you ever going to tell me who the bastard that stole your first kiss is?"

"What...?"

"If you tell me, I'll let you rest," Reinhart said, his voice pitched to entice her. He seemed to be completely at ease, even as the emperor stormed toward them at

a terrifying speed.

Valeta sighed deeply.

"I promise I won't kill whoever it is. Really."

She remained resolutely silent.

"Fine, fine. I promise to leave his limbs intact," Reinhart said with a small groan. Valeta burst out laughing at his generous offer.

Reinhart frowned as Valeta continued to laugh, her face buried in his chest. He looked to Kurt and Silon for answers, but the two magicians just shook their heads, equally baffled.

"Master?"

Valeta gestured for him to lean down. Reinhart obeyed, and she came closer to whisper in his ear. Something in Reinhart's face shifted, leaving him with a strange expression. He hooked an arm under her knees, sweeping her into his arms. Then, he jerked his chin at Balteer.

"Take her back," he commanded.

"Understood, my lord."

Valeta's eyes widened. Surprised, she clung to Reinhart's shoulders. "Hang on. Where am I going?"

"You're going home, Master."

"What about you?"

"Oh, leave the rest to me. This is what's best for your mental health."

He didn't want her to see what was going to happen next. Reinhart pressed his

lips against her forehead in a kiss, and as soon as they met her skin, Valeta's vision began to grow dark. She couldn't fight the familiar sensation. Surprised, she looked up at Reinhart, only to find him smiling down at her.

Valeta clenched her fists as she felt consciousness slipping away.

"You...!"

"Sweet dreams, Valeta."

Her eyes drifted closed as soon as he said the words. Reinhart licked his lips as her head tilted back, exposing her neck to his eyes. He transferred her into Balteer's arms.

"Put her to bed. And don't even think about touching her."

"Haha, I would never."

"Just because you're old doesn't mean you don't have a sex drive, correct?"

"I don't really, my lord..." Balteer replied, a little embarrassed.

Reinhart managed to suppress his surprise at this response. He looked the old magician up and down before smirking.

"Poor fellow."

Balteer said nothing. All he could do was swallow nervously. He felt like he should say something, but he didn't know what. He couldn't even muster an acknowledgment of what the head of the Tower had just said.

"Go on," Reinhart said.

"Yes..."

Balteer resisted the urge to allow his lips to curve into a bitter smile. He felt like

he had somehow just become a pitiful creature with no sex drive in the eyes of his lord. He had been treated differently by a variety of people throughout his long life, but being treated as a eunuch was a first. It was an odd feeling.

Balteer disappeared using a teleportation circle. Reinhart smiled as he drifted into the air once more. Kynos glared up at the magician from where he stood down below on the ground. Spears of ice began to silently form around Reinhart, all of them directed at the emperor.

"You said that you were curious about the curse's side effects, is that right, Emperor?" Reinhart asked.

"Is running your mouth all you are capable of?"

"I could ask you the same question. You should've cherished those things important to you while you could. I could never destroy anything that was so precious to me," Reinhart said.

He snatched one of the nearby spears from where it was hovering midair, looking down his nose at the man. Reinhart ran his left thumb down his right arm, leaving a trail of protruding veins in his forearm.

"Well, I suppose there's no cure for stupidity."

Reinhart flung the spear easily. Kynos deflected it with his sword, with equal ease. There was an undercurrent of irritation hidden beneath his stony expression.

"You don't know what you've got til it's gone, hm?"

"Bullsh\*t."

*Crash!*

The ice spear shattered against the ground when Kynos sliced through it deftly.

Reinhart laughed. He reached out and plucked another spear from the hundreds floating around him. His smile was relaxed.

Kynos' sword was heavy, but he wielded it swiftly. Reinhart was still a little weaker than him, even after enhancing his strength with magic.

*I don't want to exert myself physically.* He'd always hated any form of physical activity, even when he'd been just a small child running around on the battlefield. Reinhart's body didn't build muscle easily, so enhancing his strength with magic was the most he could do. But he hadn't expected that he would lose to the emperor in terms of strength, even after using magic. One of the reasons Reinhart hated swords was because he was of the opinion that most people looked utterly ridiculous swinging them around.

Reinhart drifted backward, running his right thumb down his left arm. Only once he'd magically enhanced his left arm and taken up spears in both hands was he evenly matched with the emperor.

"I've had to watch Valeta suffer for a very long time now. It was painful to do so. I promised myself that I wouldn't allow it any longer."

When he'd forced himself to bow his head in the manor, he'd vowed to become one of the few things that Valeta treasured in life. He had sworn this to himself when he was at his most powerless, when he'd hated himself for not being able to do anything to help her. If Reinhart had experienced a happy childhood, he might've become someone like Kynos.

"You know, you and I are pretty similar. Nobody understood us because we were different from everyone else. We're solely motivated by our own self interests, but... I was lucky enough to find someone who understands me."

"Shut up," Kynos said, raising his sword.

The emperor wasn't just a charismatic man; he was also a terrifyingly skilled

swordsman. His movements were quick, even though his sword was heavy, and his whole body gave off a murderous aura. His sword was dripping with blood, informing anyone with eyes that he'd already killed several people.

Reinhart saw the blood on the sword and smirked. "Dear me. You've gone and killed them all. What are you going to do now that you have no way of resurrecting them?"

Eyes blazing, Kynos pulled a dagger from inside his coat, tossing it at Reinhart. Just as he was about to step out of the way, Kynos thrust his longsword, tip down, at Reinhart's feet.

*Thud. Thud.*

The sword stabbed through the top of that magician's foot, meaning he was unable to dodge the dagger as it struck him in his side. Instantly, his magic fled him. Reinhart's eyes narrowed, and he glared down at the dagger.

"How did you get this?"

"I couldn't say," Kynos said. "Maybe I should have asked Largris where he procured such a thing."

Reinhart clicked his tongue in understanding. Largris was a magician. He probably knew exactly what the dagger was capable of and had gotten it to put an end to his life. Reinhart wrenched the dagger free and tossed it aside.

*Clatter.*

*Whoosh.*

The instant the dagger clattered to the floor, Kynos pulled his sword free of Reinhart's foot and made to slice at his neck. Reinhart chuckled at the sight. Nobody dared to intervene, partly due to the violent aura coming off him in waves, but also because of the brilliant smile he wore after seeing his own

blood spilled.

"I have to tell you, exercise really isn't my thing," Reinhart said, peering down at the wound in his side. Then, he reached up and snatched the blade that was rapidly approaching his neck.

The sound of clattering metal followed. Kynos tried to wrench his sword away, but couldn't. Reinhart wasn't holding it all that tightly, but it was like the blade was firmly embedded in rock.

The magician sighed. "I'm glad that the memories I share with Valeta aren't as happy as the ones you seem to share with your precious ones. The pain awakened something in me, the understanding of how rare it is to experience finding something truly precious."

Reinhart took a step back, the wound in his foot healing instantly. He reached for the emperor's sword hand, still holding the blade firmly, then pried Kynos' fingers, one by one, off the hilt.

Kynos' gaze hardened. He couldn't move, frozen by some invisible force. Once his hand was forced open, the sword fell to the ground.

*Crash!*

Reinhart picked up the weapon and then took a step closer. Kynos clenched his jaw, completely immobilized by the younger man's magic. Reinhart stared blankly back when faced with the emperor's murderous glare.

"How does it feel to have ruined everything?"

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 140

Reinhart prowled closer to Kynos, who remained rooted to the spot, unable to move. He twirled the sword in his hand, before aiming the blade at the emperor's feet. It sank slowly into Kynos' foot. The emperor merely glared at Reinhart without so much as a groan of pain. The fiery look in his eyes only grew more fierce.

"Oh, right," Reinhart said. "The side effects. Do you know why your little alchemist stopped her research and burned everything she'd been working on?"

"She stopped because she didn't trust me."

"Well, you certainly have a very high opinion of yourself," Reinhart said with a smirk. "Let's hope you can maintain that going forward."

Kynos continued to glare at Reinhart. He was only able to move his mouth and eyes. *I didn't realize...* He'd known the head of the Magicians' Tower was stronger than most, but he hadn't realized that he was *this* strong. Still, Kynos wasn't worried. Or at least, that's how it looked to any onlookers.

"I'll show you why."

Reinhart pulled the sword free and twirled it several times. Then, he gripped the hilt firmly and aimed at Kynos' left arm. There was a sickening sound.

His eyes widened.

*Thud.*

The emperor's left arm had been severed cleanly from his body and was sent

tumbling to the ground. Someone screamed. Kynos scowled as Reinhart smiled. Cruel madness glinted in the magician's smile-curved eyes.

Reinhart scowled upon hearing an ear-splitting shriek, however. He turned to the source of the noise, his gaze landing on a noblewoman. She flinched before slapping both hands over her mouth.

"Good," Reinhart said with a smile.

"Hmm... I wonder how long it will take for the mutations to start."

"What are you..."

Reinhart's smile belonged on an innocent child's tiny face, while his voice was full of joy. He went on to bring the sword down on the emperor's newly regenerated arm again and again. Finally, something happened following the fifth swing. Five arms were strewn across the floor like mere pieces of trash.

Reinhart whistled. The sixth arm that grew from Kynos' shoulder looked strange. It was limp, appearing almost squishy, as if the bones within weren't fully developed.

Kynos' face paled.

The nobles, huddled together, were stunned. Reinhart laughed at the look of shock on the once-almighty emperor's face.

"Didn't your alchemist tell you?"

"What... What did you do?" Kynos sputtered.

"Me? Think about it. You're smart, right? You should be able to figure it out. Why did that woman stop her research? You have always been curious."

Kynos breathed in deeply. He stared down at his limp, sagging arm with cold

eyes.

"It's a shame that such a kind woman turned her back on you," Reinhart said. "She could have explained exactly why she abandoned it if you'd told her what you planned on drinking."

Kynos said nothing. Instead, he continued to gawk at his limp arm. He could feel it but couldn't move it no matter how hard he tried. He no longer had any joints.

At some point, his body regained the ability to move, but instead of attacking Reinhart, he just stood there, lost in thought.

"*Ky.*"

"*Yes, Eliza?*"

*"There's... There's nothing I can do to save you at this point."*

He recalled his last conversation with Eliza. She had known all along but never told him. Kynos chuckled hollowly.

"The cells couldn't continuously regenerate perfectly," he said.

"Nothing's perfect," Reinhart agreed. "She realized that she could do nothing to stop the cells from mutating. That, combined with your greed..."

Kynos closed his eyes for a long moment, before finally opening them again. Eliza knew that he would develop an interest in her project. That's why she tried to get rid of it. He had been too late in understanding Eliza's true intentions. *Even after the way I treated her. Did she burn all those documents for me? Even as she wept before me?*

Kynos picked up one of the abandoned swords on the ground with his right hand. Then, he cut off his left arm. He watched blankly as the useless appendage fell to the ground. Then, he lunged at Reinhart once more. The next arm that grew back wasn't the same sort of flabby husk as before, but it was still missing a finger. Still, Kynos didn't care. Reinhart easily dodged the emperor's attack.

"You know you can't win, but you keep attacking me because you want nothing more than to kill me, right?"

*Crash!*

Kynos' sword missed Reinhart, as he jumped into the air, instead slicing a table in half. The man's eyes were fixated on his target, the swings of his sword swift and accurate. But he couldn't win against Reinhart, who was on another level to him entirely. All Kynos could do was uselessly swing his sword about.

"I'm not going to kill you. Master told me not to," Reinhart said.

"What nonsense."

"You're right, of course. I did kill that one guy earlier," Reinhart teased, sticking out his tongue.

Kynos swung at him again, this time swinging from left to right.

Reinhart giggled and dodged. "Do you have any idea how strange you look right now? Your body is cursed. Sorcery is a scary thing,"

The emperor's entire body seemed to be exuding dark malice. It was amazing that he was able to move at all with such malevolence weighing him down.

"I'm the only one capable of killing you. Dying is probably the only way to break that curse. But, I don't really feel like doing anything to help. You'll never be able to die as long as that curse exists. If you try to die, your body would just mutate

every time you get injured..." Reinhart said in a low voice. He wore a broad smile on his face. It was clear to onlookers that he was having a lot of fun. They could only shudder at the strange sight. "Of course, you'll never die. Congratulations. You've achieved the one thing everyone wants—immortality."

"You bastard!"

"You'll never be able to embrace even the bodies of those you loved. Your children and the power that you so coveted will abandon you. And, of course, you brought this all on yourself," Reinhart said with an expectant smile. He reached out and stroked Kynos' cheek, then tilted his head as if trying to soothe a child. "What are you going to do, Emperor? All that you disdained will now rise above you."

Kynos' eyes widened, his grip on his sword going slack. He clenched his teeth, tossing aside his sword and grabbing Reinhart's neck instead. He shook the magician.

"I've never wanted power," he said in a low voice.

It had never been power that he coveted. Power had just followed in the wake of his actions.

"I know. Everything you've done, you only did for fun," Reinhart said, grinning. His expression remained unbothered, even though the emperor still had him by the throat. "You found it fun releasing the roste, seeing what would happen if you ordered poor Janice to do those cruel things to that ant Desilian, forcing Eliza and Largris to stay by your side as your friends..."

The nobles were shocked by Reinhart's words. In contrast, Kynos' expression was empty. All emotion had vanished from his face, replaced by a deep nothingness. Only the veins bulging from his fists betrayed what he was feeling.

"It was probably fun for you, having them in the palm of your hand. You thought

you could have your fun, then put everything back to how it was, but..."

Reinhart's smile widened. "Is this fun for you, too? You were so happy, and you didn't even realize it."

The emperor said nothing in response to his mocking. Reinhart didn't know if he couldn't speak or didn't know what to say.

"My world was so dark that I wanted to kill everyone in it. Valeta brought color into my life. Thanks to her, I know exactly what happiness looks like."

The light was much brighter in the darkness. It was hard to know that something was shining brightly when it was surrounded by more light. What could the youngest son of the imperial family possibly want for?

Despite dangling in the air, Reinhart continued to smile. He seemed utterly relaxed, as though he knew that the emperor couldn't do anything to him.

"Congratulations. You finally have the one thing everyone covets in your hands."

Reinhart's voice was so sweet that it made everyone in the room tremble. He stared down at a man who looked like he was in the pits of despair with such affection. The strength left Kynos' hand. Reinhart landed softly on his feet and smiled.

"Kill me..." Kynos said.

"No."

"Kill me," Kynos said, his voice wracked with pain.

Reinhart's smile only deepened, his eyes curving.

Finally, the emperor had lost all composure. All that was left of his great game was despair and a plea for death. *You're smart. You should know. You know what's in store for you. A future consumed by you constantly wishing for death. You'll live an*

*ugly life, one that you never wanted.*

"I'll consider it once you've lived a lifespan that's a hundred thousand times longer than the time you made my master suffer."

Kynos gaped silently, struck speechless.

"How long will that be? Two thousand years perhaps?" Reinhart wondered aloud, smiling.

Kynos surged forward, reaching out and attempting to strangle Reinhart again, but the magician simply stepped out of reach.

"It was only natural that Eliza and Largris should stay by my side. What else should I have done?"

"What do you mean, it's only natural? Do you know how much I have to beg and cling to my master?" Reinhart's voice was light and clear, as if completely unconcerned by the emperor's distress. He looked happy to be there, wearing an expression of deep interest. "If they were the kind of people who easily succumbed to us, we probably wouldn't have had any interest in them in the first place. They refused to bend, which is why they caught the interest of a person as twisted as we are."

Kynos said nothing.

"Trying to subjugate that kind of person will only lead you to ruin."

Kynos' pupils dilated at Reinhart's words. The magician calmly stared into the emperor's golden eyes as he snapped his fingers. A magic circle appeared under Kynos' feet.

"Go swim in the open seas and consider your place, you pathetic child."

Kynos lashed out with his foot, sweeping a sword from the ground into his hand

before throwing it at Reinhart, moving as fast as lightning. The light consumed the emperor a moment later, and he disappeared without a trace.

Reinhart saw the sword flying at him. The moment he tried to snap his fingers though, someone stepped in front of him.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 141

*Clang!*

The sword was flung away as a figure stepped between it and Reinhart. The magician frowned, lowering his hand mid-snap.

“What the...”

“Good job.” Dreux reached out and patted Reinhart on the head. He nodded as he looked down at the magician, the snowta cradled in his arms.

Carlon stifled a laugh as he appeared at his friend’s side. “We’ll take care of things from here. You should go.”

“Hmm... Why are you being so polite?”

“As you can see, we’re in public. And this mess is all over, thanks to you.”

Reinhart shrugged in response to Carlon’s words. He tapped the floor twice with his toe. A magic circle appeared, one large enough to cover the entire banquet hall.

He tapped a finger against his lips in thought. Then, he said, “I think Blondie is dying out there somewhere, so you’d best go save him. As promised, I’m leaving one ton of magic stones behind, so use them.”

“Where is His Majesty?”

“The depths of hell, perhaps.”

Silon’s lips quirked at Reinhart’s uninterested response.

The head let out a low sigh and nodded. "You're finally all free. Alchemists and magicians, both. If there are any dispatched magicians out there, tell them they're free to return to the Magicians' Tower if they wish."

"I'll tell them."

"As for the non-aggression treaty... Well, we can talk about that if a new leader is ever established."

It was possible that the socoros would make their lives difficult again, so it was time for magicians to remove themselves completely. Reinhart didn't want to be bothered by drama anymore for as long as he was the head of the Magicians' Tower.

"Don't do anything weird to Valeta," Carlon warned just as he was about to leave.

Instead of responding, Reinhart just smirked mischievously. Then he, the snowta, and the magicians disappeared with a flash of light. The survivors in the banquet hall were left standing among the piles of rotting corpses.

None of them were smiling, to say the least.

\* \* \*

Reinhart and his party instantly arrived at the Magicians' Tower. The head brought his shirt to his nose and took a whiff. It smelled of blood, even though he wasn't all that bloody himself.

"Hmm..." Reinhart didn't enter the Tower immediately. Instead, he turned and approached Kurt and Silon. He held his robes out to them. "Do they smell?"

“What...?”

“Does it smell like blood?”

“No...?” Silon managed to say. He was so used to the smell of blood that he wouldn’t have been able to tell if it did, but he felt as though he had to give some sort of answer.

Reinhart nodded and went about tidying up his appearance. Looking down at his foot, he snapped his fingers, repairing the hole in his shoe. Then, he summoned a teleportation circle and disappeared.

He took a deep breath after appearing in the sky room, breathing in Valeta’s faint scent. The tension around his eyes finally relaxed. He sighed as he set the snowta down on the floor. As he approached the bed, something bundled under the sheets squirmed.

A sleepy voice called out, “You’re back?”

This was not what he had expected. He was sure that she would still be sleeping. *I used magic to send her to sleep.* Reinhart narrowed his eyes. Valeta was extracting herself from the sheets on the bed. He shrugged off his cloak, hanging it up before striding toward her.

He collapsed onto the bed, dragging her closer. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he rested his cheek on her thighs, a by-now familiar position. He nuzzled his face into her stomach, clinging to her in desperation.

Valeta reached out to stroke Reinhart’s hair.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?”

“I managed to resist long enough to ask Caspelios to dispel your magic for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I was worried about you.”

Reinhart pouted at her. “No one can defeat me.”

“Yes, but you always seek out warmth after you see blood, even if you run warmer than me.”

Valeta’s response was calm, almost like they were having a perfectly ordinary conversation. He liked it. Reinhart was pleased with the calm she brought to his life. He could never get bored of her, even in times of peace.

“Master.”

“Hm?”

“I took care of everything and I didn’t even kill anyone.”

“You know I hate it when you lie, right?”

Reinhart immediately corrected himself. “I only killed one person.”

Valeta smiled as Reinhart suddenly changed his tune. His lips remained pursed in a pout.

“Good.”

“Praise me more, Master,” Reinhart said as he slowly rose to his knees.

His face drew closer. Valeta’s eyes narrowed when his lips were only a hair’s breadth from hers. Then, she slowly closed them, lashes brushing her cheeks. Reinhart didn’t hesitate, rushing in and capturing her lips with his own. Their open mouths met, and Reinhart slowly rose from his knees.

As he did so, he pressed his tongue into her mouth. He parted her lips, exploring, and slowly pushed her back to lie on the bed, his knee between her legs as he settled atop her.

Valeta shuddered when she felt his knee against the bare skin of her thighs.

“Ngh...”

The feeling of his moist tongue inside her mouth was unfamiliar. Although this was only their second kiss, he was both skilled and insistent. It was different from the last time they’d found themselves in this position. Reinhart was attacking her mouth, desperately nibbling at her. The sound of their lips meeting was obscene in the quiet of the room.

Valeta’s cheeks grew flushed. “Rein...”

“Haa... Valeta, my master... Did you eat honey before I arrived?”

Her mouth tasted like sweet honey. She was soft under him no matter where his lips explored. If he bit her, she would flinch. She squeezed his shoulder if he licked the roof of her mouth. Every part of her tasted sweet to him.

“Wait...”

Reinhart took her hand in his, locking their fingers together as if he were trying to stop her from squirming away. When his tongue gently caressed the inside of her mouth, her grip relaxed. If he brushed against a sensitive spot, her fingers tensed.

“Valeta...”

“Mmm...”

Their saliva mingled, tongues tangled together. Reinhart captured her in his arms, pulling her to him. He sipped at her mouth, nibbling on her tongue. She could feel his aching desire to devour her.

Valeta made a face. “That hurts...”

"I'll be gentle," he whispered into her ear. He wasn't sure he was capable of it, but he would try for her. "Valeta, do you have any idea how deeply I wish to completely consume you? You're so sweet, it's driving me crazy."

He didn't even like sweet things, so he didn't understand why the flavor of her was so pleasing to him. Everything about her was sweet—her warm breath mingling with his, her saliva, the inside of her mouth, her lips. He wanted nothing more than to sink his teeth into her neck and drink the nectar of her blood.

She sighed in pleasure.

"You said you were going to give me a reward, right?" Reinhart whispered in her ear. Then, he bit down on her earlobe *hard*.

"Ah....!"

Reinhart pressed his lips to Valeta's collarbone as she let out an involuntary cry, then grazed his teeth against it. Her breath hitched. She tried to stifle a moan. Reinhart thought that hearing her attempts to restrain herself was like listening to a sweet, lovely symphony. Now that he had her in his arms, he wanted to cover her in his marks.

Using magic, he began to cut off her top. The fabric split and parted under his finger as he slowly dragged it between her breasts, and down to her navel. He caught glimpses of her skin between the folds of her sliced clothes.

"Hey, what are you...!"

"You said it didn't care," Reinhart said with a mischievous grin.

As Valeta gritted her teeth, he continued until his finger met her belly button. As he sucked at the skin slowly being exposed to him, he could feel her breath hitching, her stomach tensing under his lips.

"Nothing will ever be more valuable to me than you. So... You have to give me my reward, Master."

*Be formal when you speak to me or don't! Pick one!* She was dying to say this to him, but the sensation of Reinhart sucking at her bare skin left her feeling almost ticklish, and she couldn't open her mouth to speak.

His tongue ventured upwards, coming to rest over her heart. The mark he had left there was barely noticeable now. He clicked his tongue with disapproval, before biting down hard, determined to leave an even deeper mark.

Valeta gasped in pain. She clutched at his shoulder so hard that the veins in her hand became visible. Reinhart relished in the feeling of her clinging to him. He removed his teeth from her flesh, leaving behind a dark red imprint of them. He stroked the mark he made on her skin gently.

"So? You'll give me my reward, right?"

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 142

Reinhart's fingers lingered at Valeta's clavicle before inching lower and lower, caressing her. She couldn't help but gasp, even though his hands were still over her clothes. Contrary to the deep red mark he had left on her chest, the rest of the kisses he pressed into her skin were comparatively gentle.

Valeta's legs tensed. She tried to quell the warmth growing inside her by curling her toes, but doing so only provided momentary relief. Reinhart was already pressing his lips against hers once more.

"Valeta."

Her responding moan was muffled. His sweet whispers in her ear sent an electric shock through her body. She trembled at the feeling of his hands on her waist. Reinhart slowly took off his top, revealing his pale skin, which was peppered with scars.

Valeta's breathing was by now coming in ragged gasps. She gazed blankly up at Reinhart, who smiled as he straddled her legs. The way his long silver hair swayed around his waist captivated her. His red lips tempted her. He untangled her fingers from the sheets and held her hands in his own as if he were about to swear her a knight's oath.

Reinhart brought their interlocked hands to his mouth, kissing the back of them, and Valeta gasped, eyes glued to him. He squeezed, palms warm against the cold sweat forming on her own. Her eyes widened more. Heat formed wherever their skin met, hotter than a furnace.

"You..."

Reinhart settled his weight on Valeta's legs and slowly ran his tongue over his

red lips. Since when had he become this incubus-like creature capable of seducing anyone in his path? Without realizing she was doing it, Valeta held her breath as she gazed up at him. She could feel something twitching against her leg.

"You're out of your mind..." Valeta murmured, dazed.

Reinhart's eyes widened, then he laughed and nodded. "Yes, you're correct. I just want to chew you up and swallow you."

Valeta stared at his chest and slowly reached out, mesmerized. His upper body was dotted with old scars. She frowned, noticing the way sweat beaded on his skin. There was nothing she could do for these old wounds, even with all her alchemical power. The thought was upsetting to her.

Her thin fingers traced the scars all over his body. Reinhart moaned quietly as his eyes followed her hand. His muscles jumped under her every touch. His eyes were hungry, like he was about to devour her. He squeezed her shoulder, but Valeta didn't stop, despite the almost painful grip on her.

Reinhart's hold on her grew so tight that his knuckles turned white, the veins visible in his arms. He groaned as he moved his hips against her. Valeta abruptly snatched her hand back, as if she'd only just realized what she was doing. She averted her gaze.

Another deep groan escaped him. As if trying to tempt her, his tongue darted out and wet his lips, disappearing as quickly as it came. "What is it, Master? You could've kept touching me all you liked."

Reinhart pressed his leg between Valeta's, pinning her down.

Her eyes widened. She looked anywhere but at him. *What is he doing? He must have done this before to be so confident.* Of course, she had learned all about sex and a variety of more adult topics during her time at the Delight Manor. But

nobody had ever told her what she should do if her partner was as unhinged as Reinhart.

Panicked, all she could do was blink up at him. Reinhart settled between Valeta's legs, forcing them apart to make room for himself. He leaned down and began to kiss the soft skin of her inner thighs.

"Wait, hang on," she gasped.

Reinhart's teeth grazed her skin, and he nibbled at her, leaving a trail of dark marks. Valeta's toes curled as both pain and embarrassment washed over her in waves. Reinhart used his tongue, working at her skin until embarrassing sounds filled the room. He removed his lips, revealing a particularly dark red mark.

Valeta shuddered, overwhelmed by the strange tingling sensation that sizzled down her spine. She gasped, trying to fill her suddenly empty lungs, fisting her hands tightly in the sheets.

"Ah, Valeta," Reinhart breathed in ecstasy. He smiled. "Do you have any idea how insane you make me feel?"

Reinhart's smile grew slowly, drifting wider like a door that hadn't been closed properly. He was teasing her, and Valeta found that she couldn't breathe because of it. Every time she tried, she was paralyzed by his desire for her.

"I want to eat all of you. Including this..." Reinhart said as he trailed a finger along her thighs.

Valeta refused to look at him as she trembled. The sheets were beginning to grow damp under her fingers. They were in uncharted waters, his attentions unfamiliar and scarier than anything else she had ever encountered.

"I want to swallow you and leave nothing behind. I want to drink all of you, even your blood."

"You're out of your mind..."

"Don't say such sweet things to me when I'm already so worked up," Reinhart whispered, his lips twisted into the faintest of smirks.

He spoke to her in a tone that was sticky sweet, as though drenched in honey. Or rather, it was as if his entire being oozed that same cloying syrup. She could do nothing to escape, no matter how hard she willed herself to move. It was like he was absorbing her into himself. Valeta turned her head to the side, only barely able to see herself struggling against him out of the corner of her eye.

"Don't look away from me, Valeta." Reinhart's voice grew deeper, his eyes hard and displeased. He yanked her hips closer as he leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Unless you want to see me really lose it."

Valeta was about to retort that she already knew he was utterly mad, but when she turned her head, she caught sight of his red tongue again. It rendered her speechless. His hands began to roam all over her body as the corner of his lips quirked up in a smile.

Before Valeta knew it, their lips were meeting again. He captured her tongue between his teeth, sucking and nibbling until she ached. The lewd sound of their lips meeting was so embarrassing that Valeta wanted to cover her ears. As if he could read her mind, Reinhart intertwined their fingers. Then, using magic, he gently sliced open the fabric covering her lower half.

His smile grew more suggestive, and his eyes flashed dangerously at her in the low light.

"I'm hungry, master," Reinhart said as he caressed her legs, his eyes flashing those of a starving beast.

Valeta turned red, a single tear dripping down her cheek. Reinhart quickly lapped it up, not wanting any part of her to go to waste.

"Hm?" Reinhart then did something with his fingers that made her go cross-eyed.

"Damn it! Stop!"

"Why? You don't like it?"

"I don't like it! It feels weird!"

"That's impossible," Reinhart said, clearly amused.

What was that supposed to mean? Valeta gasped and threw her head back, face flushed. She was flustered by all the sensations she was feeling for the first time.

Reinhart smiled as he burrowed a hand underneath her to caress the small of her back. His eyes narrowed in amusement.

"You're a liar."

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 143

Valeta gasped as Reinhart proceeded to press kisses all over her body. His gaze lingered on her most enticing parts, before he returned to eye level, pressing a kiss against her cheek.

"Ah!" Valeta cried out, her cheeks burning.

She glared at Reinhart, which did nothing to discourage him from maintaining eye contact as his hand moved down her body. Her ears picked up the sound of fabric rustling. Her breath hitched as her eyes found his exposed desire.

She tensed, making Reinhart laugh.

"Move. I'm not doing this."

"Are you sure? After all that foreplay?"

"That's a monster... No, I can't!"

Reinhart laughed as he watched Valeta flounder. He captured her lips in a deep kiss, taking his place between her legs. She struggled to tear her eyes away from his length. Reinhart stroked the back of her head gently.

Then, the air was forced from her lungs, and she couldn't believe how full she felt. Her legs tensed, before relaxing and falling open wider when Reinhart gave a shallow thrust. The whole time, he was whispering in her ear.

Valeta's face paled.

"Don't say something so vulgar— Ah!"

"I am vulgar. I've never pretended to be anything but when it comes to you. I'll

kneel before you and lick your feet if you allow me to.”

Reinhart continued to whisper in her ear as his body moved at a steady, relentless pace. He forced their bodies as close together as physically possible. They parted and met again and again, sharing warmth. Every time Valeta trembled and gasped warm puffs of air, Reinhart was right there breathing her in, greedy for any part of her.

“Please take all of me inside you, my master. I don’t have anywhere to go if it’s not by your side. If you ever abandon me, I’ll slaughter countless people in mourning.”

“Stop... threatening... Ah!”

“Every part of you and every sound you make should belong to me. I want to lock you away, but I can’t because I’m scared you’ll refuse to look at me if I do.”

Valeta stifled a groan at Reinhart’s words. His hand slid down her neck, caressing her. She shuddered. Then, he pressed his lips against the column of her neck, desperate for her. It was like he was chasing the warmth of her body for himself.

“The emperor tried so desperately to trap all that was precious to him close by his side and only ended up losing everything. I’m scared the same thing will happen to me. I’m utter trash, no different from that scumbag,” Reinhart said, mouthing the words against her neck.

Valeta struggled to adjust to the feeling of his warmth pressing inside her. Had they ever been this close before? After a long moment, she finally managed to say, “You’re not the same as him.”

“I am. I’m afraid I’ll ruin you, but I still can’t seem to let you go. Should I kill you instead? I could kill you and stuff your corpse, keep you by my side forever.”

Valeta finally released her tight grip on the sheets upon hearing the mad possessiveness that seemed to be consuming him. Her hands felt stiff and weak, but she reached for him, placing a hand on Reinhart's head.

"I asked you not to kill anyone, and you didn't."

"I killed one person..."

"That's true, but you could have easily put an end to my whole plan, and you didn't."

"A lot of people still probably died," Reinhart replied calmly.

Valeta's eyes narrowed as Reinhart refuted her attempts to reassure him one after another. She glared at him, annoyed as he simply blinked.

"I told you to restrain yourself, and you did."

"It's what you wanted, Master," Reinhart said as if it was natural that there was nothing else he could do.

Valeta was suddenly at a loss for words. If she thought about it, this had always been the case. Reinhart always did his best to keep any promise he made to her. If she told him not to do something, he didn't do it.

Of course, he ignored her every now and then to do as he pleased.

"As long as you keep me in mind, you'll be all right. The emperor turned out the way he did because he didn't think about anyone but himself, not even Eliza or Largris. He dreamt only of what made him happy, by himself."

Reinhart stared at Valeta as she spoke. He wore an unreadable look on his face. Even his hands, which had constantly been clutching at her body, paused for a moment.

Valeta hesitated, then said, "If I can see you're about to do something stupid, I'll stop you."

"That's a dangerous thing to say. It almost sounds like you're promising to never leave my side."

"At least, until I find somewhere new to live," she said cheekily.

Reinhart pressed his lips to her neck and chuckled. The tension around his eyes relaxed. Valeta could see that he was in a better mood. His soft smile was suddenly confident, like he'd found something that reassured him in her eyes.

"Oh no, I'm afraid that's not going to work out," Reinhart said.

"Why is that?"

"I worry that any house you live in will be poorly constructed. It'd be a shame if an earthquake were to hit..." Reinhart said as he nibbled at her neck. His body felt like open flames brushing against her, his tongue burning her skin.

Valeta ran a hand down her face as she swallowed the urge to scoff.

"Are you joking?"

"No, I just took a peek into the future. Oh, it looks like the house you planned to move into will collapse," he said, with a fake mournful sigh. He sounded pleased with himself, however.

Valeta gaped at Reinhart, shocked. He leaned in and kissed her eyelids.

"Ah, this fire inside me isn't dying. The more I look at you, the hotter I burn. What should we do?" Reinhart said as he lifted his hips, pressing into her. He gasped as Valeta's breath hitched. Her eyes widened when she heard his low groan.

She could feel his primal desires for her crest. Reinhart gasped and collapsed on top of her. He rubbed his face against hers as he closed his eyes. The smell of sweat mingled with her scent. The smell was so enticing that he couldn't help but grind against her.

"You know, Master."

"Hm?"

"When I asked you who had stolen your first kiss... What did you mean when you said it was me?"

"I met a future version of you in a dream, that's all. An older you who kissed me."

Reinhart's eyes narrowed before he laughed quietly. "Did I desire you in your dreams? What did I say after I sucked your tongue into my mouth? Ah, f\*ck... you're driving me mad," he cursed under his breath.

Reinhart rarely swore. That he did now meant he was excited.

"Seriously, you..."

"I can't help but be vulgar. Every time I see you, I want nothing more than to devour you. How was I able to resist this long?"

"That's a question you have to ask yourself," Valeta eventually replied for lack of a better response.

Her whole face was red, right down to her neck. She'd always known he was out of his mind, but she hadn't known he was this bad. She sighed, long and deep, feeling as though she were losing her mind.

"Ah, I want to rip my future self limb from limb," he said with a groan.

"Stop, you sound insane."

"I told you not to praise me so. You're making me hard again," Reinhart said, scraping his teeth along her neck.

Valeta sighed again, shaking her head at him.

"You're like a dog in heat," she said, fed up.

Reinhart only smiled as if amused. He sighed, then licked his lips, now moving as if he'd lost the last of his restraint. Another kind of heat was building between them.

"Ah..."

Sparks lit up along all her nerves as Reinhart clenched his teeth. Her vision blurred. Valeta reflexively wrapped her arms around his neck, clutching him to her. Her vision went white and ecstasy coursed through her veins, her toes curling as intense pleasure and satisfaction washed over her. They climaxed together, and it was long and intense. Dripping with sweat, Reinhart carefully slipped out of her.

He fumbled for the blankets, drawing them up to Valeta's chin before settling in next to her. He then gently tugged her into his arms.

"Ah, you madman..." Valeta cursed him. She never would have imagined things would turn out this way between them. His reward was just supposed to be a kiss. Dazed, she couldn't think straight. She hadn't realized that experiencing such intense pleasure would exhaust her so thoroughly.

The mind-blowing ecstasy had only lasted for a moment. She couldn't say she disliked it. She had been scared, but she hadn't hated it.

"It's true I'm like a dog in heat, but only for you. Everyone else is just that. Dogs. Rabid dogs. You'll get rabies if you let one bite you."

Valeta wondered what he was talking about, before realizing he was still on

about their topic of conversation before she'd climaxed. Sighing deeply, she turned away from Reinhart, who only shifted closer in response, putting her back against his chest.

She could still feel him, hard against her. Valeta stifled a wry smile. While she'd accused him of being a dog in heat, she hadn't actually thought it was true at the time.

"You really are a dog," she said.

Reinhart laughed as he pressed a kiss to the back of her neck.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 144

“Haa...”

Valeta felt Reinhart’s warm breath against the back of her neck. She flinched as he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist, then tried to relax in his embrace.

“I wonder if you ever noticed, Master.”

“Noticed what?”

“That I used to wait outside your door and talk to you? When you were locked in your room as punishment, I mean.”

“I noticed...” she said softly, her voice trailing off. Her violet eyes peered across the dim room as she mentally searched through her dark memories of the past. It wasn’t a pleasant memory. Her horrific past was what made her scared of the dark.

“Did you listen to my voice? You never replied, so I didn’t think you could hear.”

He hadn’t been sure whether the girl was kept awake by her fear of the dark, so he had taken to babbling about anything he could think of. He didn’t even remember what he’d said—it had been meaningless, just anything that came to his mind.

He vaguely recalled sharing rumors he’d overheard around the manor. Not knowing any stories that ended in a happily-ever-after, he’d just talked about boring things like who’d passed away or who’d had an affair.

“I was listening.”

"How often?"

"Nearly every time I was locked up."

Reinhart snapped his mouth shut with a click. She'd never given any indication that she was listening, but he'd continued to do it as a way of consoling himself.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Valeta's eyes slipped shut as Reinhart asked this. She was silent for a long time, reluctant to answer. He didn't press. He didn't want to force her to tell him something she didn't want to share. Eventually, she said, "Because I worried I'd grow weak."

"Weak?"

"Because I thought... I was sure you would one day kill everyone in the manor, including me."

More precisely, she'd known exactly what was going to happen. There was no point in telling Reinhart the details of how she'd known now that the future had changed.

"You were half-right."

"No, I was half-wrong. You didn't kill me."

It wasn't a huge change in the grand scheme of things, but Reinhart hadn't killed her. Valeta Delight hadn't died. This was largely because of Reinhart's fickle nature and the effort he'd put into not giving in to his impulses.

"So, I didn't want to be weak against you when the day came that you would kill me." Valeta tried to organize her thoughts as best she could, carefully choosing her words. This was the first time she was being so honest with him, so she felt like she had to do it right. "If I relied on you to comfort me, I knew I'd end up

letting you into my heart. I don't think I could have handled that at the time."

Reinhart listened silently.

"Honestly, I was scared you would hurt me. I was more afraid of you walking all over me than my father."

Valeta tried hard to ignore the feeling of Reinhart pressed against her back. Thinking carefully, she tried her best to express her true feelings.

"Me? Walk all over you?"

"I hated the idea that I'd have to beg you to spare me if that day ever came. It's silly, though, because I still ended up relying on your voice as you spoke to me from the other side of the door."

The darkness had terrified her. Not being able to see anything made her feel weak. She hadn't wanted to admit that she was scared. Valeta had to be brave. If she'd shown any weakness in front of Count Delight, he would have used it against her.

She did everything she could to force herself not to reach out and beg whenever the door had closed, plunging her into darkness. Being strung up upside down by her ankles had been a hundred times better than that. Being left alone in the dark was a fresh level of hell to her.

*It's okay, it's okay.* She'd repeated those words to herself like a mantra. The only thing she could do when she was locked in that room was crawl into a corner and cover her ears. She hadn't wanted to hear or see anything.

She could trick herself into believing that it was just nighttime, which was how she'd endured all alone for so long. She'd continued to do this, even after Reinhart had arrived at Delight Manor. And she would have gone on in much the same way if he had never chosen to speak to her that day.

*“Are you awake, Master?”*

It had been the first time someone had talked to her. She refused to open her eyes, but she had taken her hands from her ears. The boy waited a while for her to respond, but when she didn't, he spoke again.

*“I was trying to eat my meal today when someone flipped my plate over. I'm hungry now,” he said.*

*“After I finished cleaning today, someone spilled dirty water all over the floor. I want to kill them, but I don't have the strength to,” he'd said another time.*

Some days, he would launch into a rage-filled rant.

*“Do you know what that old man did when he fell head over heels for that beautiful girl?”*

*“I saw two cats earlier today. I did what you did and secretly fed them some meat. They're cute, Master.”*

Other days, he told stories that were strangely out of character for him. She wanted to hear more, so she stopped covering her ears as she sat in the dark. Her eyes had still been tightly closed, but the voice coming from beyond the door made her feel like she wasn't alone anymore.

*“It’s already dawn. I’d better go before someone catches me. Good night, Master.”*

His goodbye was always the same. She only responded once or twice out of every ten or twenty things he said, but he would return almost every single day to talk to her until she was freed. Strangely, after Reinhart left in the early morning, her insomnia would release its hold on her, and she would fall into a deep sleep.

Her insomnia had begun around the same time she started getting confined to her room. It always felt like something was crawling along her skin whenever she tried to sleep. She could never see anything in the room, even during the day. It drove her crazy. She was hesitant to fall asleep, waiting for the day the door would open again. She would even desperately watch the hole that the servant shoved food through, so that she could see just a glimmer of light.

“I told you. Your voice saved me.”

“You should’ve just asked me to save you.”

“I didn’t want to. I told you. I didn’t want to be weak in front of you.”

“But why?”

Reinhart turned Valeta so she was facing him. There was affection in his cold eyes.

She slowly blinked, stunned by such open affection directed at her. She released the sigh she’d been holding back.

“Why?” Reinhart asked again.

“I don’t know.”

“Were you scared of getting hurt by me because you liked me? Valeta, do you like

me? Do you want me? Do you want to be the only person I see? If I promise to never abandon you, will you always stay by my side?"

Valeta slowly pressed her lips together in the face of his anxious questioning. She placed a hand on the back of Reinhart's head, weaving her fingers in his hair.

"If you want a family, I'm willing to make one."

Reinhart went still. "What?"

"Terion... I want to raise him."

"Are you crazy?" Reinhart cried as he quickly sat up. *Why is she suddenly bringing up that little runt?* Feeling betrayed, he stared down at Valeta.

"No, it's just... I feel like I should take care of him because I was the one to find him."

"Technically, I'm the one who found him."

"Then, do you want to take care of him?"

"He doesn't need us if he's raised in the Magicians' Tower. There aren't many kids here, so the others will love him."

Valeta just shrugged at Reinhart's blunt response. He was being childish again. Where had all the seriousness from moments ago gone? She glanced at the magician out of the corner of her eye and sighed.

"Also, I want to start up my own alchemy store, just like I planned to while I was at Carlon's. And I think I should talk to Miloyd, too."

"I should've killed him..." Reinhart muttered.

Valeta probably thought that he was still alive, and if the others had taken action, he probably still was. Reinhart shouldn't have said anything to the dukes. It

would have been better if Miloyd had just died. He sighed. Frustrated, he wormed his way back into Valeta's arms.

"And you need to get things straightened out around here. I'm sure you have lots left to do."

"I don't. My subordinates will take care of it," he said bluntly.

Valeta shrugged. "When this is all over, what do you think about leaving this place behind and getting a house somewhere?"

"What?"

"The head of the Magicians' Tower doesn't have to stay at the Tower. If something needs your attention, they can always just call you back."

Reinhart's eyes were wide with surprise. Then, they narrowed. He burrowed into Valeta's arms, looking up at her from within her embrace.

"Just the two of us?"

"Huh? No, with Terion, if you're okay with that. So, the three of us."

Reinhart glared up at her petulantly.

"Oh, and we can't forget the snowta, too," Valeta added.

Reinhart was speechless. With every word she said, the scowl that marred his handsome face grew deeper and deeper.

Fully aware of this, Valeta just shrugged.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 145

"You know I'm upset with you, right? Am I no better than an animal or a child to you?"

"Fine, I'll just live with Terion and the snowta, then. You can visit us if you want."

"How could you say such a terrible thing to me, my dear master? I don't have a lot of patience for being teased, you know," Reinhart grumbled, sighing.

He grunted, then slowly began nodding to himself. He liked that she was asking him to live with her. More than anything else that was what his heart desired.

"Well in that case, can't you just live here?"

"It's just... I want your world to be more than just this tiny place," she said. "The world is so big, with its wide lands, vast skies, and endless seas. It'd be a shame to just stay cooped up in here all the time."

She thought about it from time to time—how Reinhart of the future had said that the sky room was the entirety of his world. That could have been her Reinhart had things turned out differently. She wanted to show him places he'd never been before.

All the many heads of the Magicians' Tower that had come before him had probably never tasted such freedom, but she wanted to let him taste the real world. If she did, then whoever came after Reinhart would see how big it truly was. They wouldn't be able to just lock themselves away in the Tower.

"I can't even be mad at you. You always say things I never expect you to, things that would never occur to me."

Would he ever adjust to her? She was so precious he didn't even know what to do with himself. Defeated, Reinhart pressed a kiss to the back of her neck. Breathing in her scent, he stroked Valeta's hair.

"Just thinking about having a house together is making my heart flutter."

"What...?"

"What are you planning on doing down among the ants, though?"

"Well, I did some reading, and there isn't actually any law that prohibits women from inheriting titles. Actually, there was a time when women held noble titles."

Reinhart's smile froze on his lips as Valeta spoke. His eyes narrowed as he took her hips in his hands and pulled her closer to him.

"Hm... So you wish to be a noble again?"

"What do you mean? I am noble. I always have been. I'll take care of Father's affairs, open a drug store, get my bearings, and..."

"Father? Father? I should've skinned that pig right in front of you. Then, maybe you'd address him like the swine he was," Reinhart said.

Valeta's eyes narrowed at his vicious words, and she glanced back at him.

"Fine, I'll fix the mess that *pig* left behind," she conceded with a sigh.

"You're too kind," Reinhart whispered in her ear, clearly pleased. His voice was soft as a breeze and sounded happy.

Valeta looked over her shoulder at him, hesitating for a moment before speaking again. "I need to be able to support you, the snowta, and Terion."

Reinhart's eyes widened at Valeta's words. A happy smile played on his lips.

"I have a lot of money, though," he said.

"Do you have a problem with my plan?"

"Not at all."

Valeta squeezed her eyes shut when she felt his warm lips against her cheek. He was slick as oil. Reinhart reached around her, carefully coaxing Valeta's eyelids closed with a brush of his hand.

"Good night, Valeta."

His familiar nighttime farewell met her ears. Valeta gave over control of her body to Reinhart.

He had called her name after all, ever so sweetly and instead of master. She felt the most comfortable she'd ever felt, tangled in the warmth of his arms. Reinhart's eyes slowly closed, too. Soon, the only sound in the room was that of their soft snores. It had been a long night.

\* \* \*

The unprecedented events that had unfolded at the palace that night had turned the entire empire on its head. Posters detailing the emperor's many atrocities were distributed all throughout the empire, including an explanation for the living corpses that had suddenly risen en masse.

Word of how the emperor had tried to kill the crown prince, who was still fighting for his life, and then murdered the palace's representative magician spread like wildfire. Meanwhile, people began to spread heroic tales of how the new head of the Magicians' Tower and Lady Delight had been the ones to put a

stop to the living corpses. Kynos, who had once been regarded as a wise king, was now known as a mad and terrible tyrant.

The imperial castle's staff had suffered heavy casualties due to the rezir invasion. Many of the rezir within the capital were neutralized by the sorcery circle that Valeta and Reinhart had created, but those who weren't caught went on a rampage, killing many. Fortunately, Dreux Leon gathered the imperial knights and began picking these stragglers off one by one.

The only surviving member of the imperial family was the crown prince since the emperor had killed off anyone with imperial blood. However, since the crown prince was now hovering between life and death, the two highest authorities in the empire were Duke Carlon Delphine and Duke Dreux Leon. They had no choice but to step up and take control of the situation.

Carlon Delphine dealt with the mess caused by the imperial family, while Dreux Leon provided military support to all those affected by the roste and the rezir in the surrounding villages. Many nobles had lost their lives during the attack on the Imperial Castle, leaving many administrative positions vacant. After Reinhart had informed them of the gravely injured Miloyd, Dreux had quickly found him and stabilized his condition.

They had used a huge chunk of the high-quality potions that the imperial family had hoarded. Miloyd's body had completely healed, but for some reason, he had yet to regain consciousness, even though three weeks had passed. The terrible events of that day were slowly becoming just a nightmare of the past.

As Carlon Delphine continued to sort through the imperial family's mess, more and more of the emperor's atrocities were uncovered, many of which it was obvious he had committed for the fun of it. For days on end, wave after wave of new rumors began to spread throughout the empire before the previous ones even had the chance to die.

After the emperor's alleged death, alchemists began to come out of hiding.

They distributed what resources they could to the needy villages and gave out potions to the wounded. The people of the empire weren't the only ones who saw Duke Delphine as their leader. Word began to spread among the nobles and the knights that Duke Delphine was also the head of the alchemists.

He began helping the afflicted villages by using simple alchemy symbols out in the open to make new bricks and dispose of any wreckage. Regardless, the capital was hit the hardest by the disaster. There were many victims who had been infected by the rezir, and even those who had escaped that fate had ended up eaten alive by them. Others still had lost limbs.

Entire villages had been lost to the roste, leaving the few survivors stripped of any will to live, limbless and alone. Reinhart had sought out these people himself. It didn't matter whether they'd been afflicted by alchemy or magic, restoring their lost body parts was impossible. The only thing he could do was make what time they had left as painless as possible.

For better or worse, there weren't many people who survived a roste attack, so it didn't take Reinhart very long to travel between these places. One month after the emperor had been officially declared missing, Valeta opened an apothecary in the middle of the capital. She couldn't be officially declared countess because there was nobody on the throne to do so, but she opened her apothecary to help those who desperately needed it.

Other alchemists began opening apothecaries around the empire, too, since they didn't have to hide anymore. Of course, they were no longer being controlled by the emperor, and the other nobles were too busy dealing with the aftermath of all that had happened to stop them. Alchemists had begun to gain more recognition in the aftermath of the attack.

Before long, alchemy potions became one of the empire's official exports. All

the magicians who were sent to the imperial castle to placate the emperor were finally freed from the short leash they had been kept on and were eager to return to the Magicians' Tower.

At Reinhart's command, the magicians of the Tower went throughout the empire to relocate alchemists and get rid of any remaining magic circles. The citizens buckled down and worked hard, and soon, the empire began to return to a sense of normalcy.

"Oh, it's midnight."

Valeta put down the book she had been reading and stretched. She could hear her stiff joints cracking loudly as she did so. Letting out a small groan, she shut her book with a snap.

"My master is so diligent."

Although the words sounded like a compliment, they were said in a disapproving tone. Valeta's eyes narrowed. She turned her head and found Reinhart leaning against the wall, his arms crossed.

"Thank you for the compliment," she said.

"There's no one here. Do you really need to keep the shop open from morning until midnight?"

"It just still feels so strange seeing people use my potions," Valeta replied as she shrugged on her robe.

She felt strange whenever someone profusely thanked her after buying one of her potions with their own money.

"Dreux dropped by earlier."

"Dreux Leon?" Reinhart asked. "Why?"

"He found Janice's diary and wanted to give it to me... I honestly don't know why, though. I never felt anything much for her."

She'd accepted the diary regardless, but still felt nothing even after reading the whole thing. Valeta thought that death was exactly what Janice had deserved, and she had no regrets about ripping the girl's corpse to shreds.

Janice had attacked and hurt Reinhart, so she considered it self-defense.

"You didn't get tired of it and give up, huh? So what did the diary say?"

"Nothing we didn't already know. Janice used to serve as one of the emperor's knights, but I guess she became Desilian's guard because she felt bad for him. The emperor must've known, but allowed it to happen anyway."

He had likely been curious about how the woman's interest in Desilian would change over time after he became a monster. He'd no doubt wanted to know what choices she would make and who she would become. In the end, she had chosen to obey the emperor, dooming Desilian to a slow and agonizing death. That was probably the reason why she couldn't bear to call him her friend, even when he addressed her as such.

"Hmm..."

"The emperor told Desilian that his father was a brilliant magician and that his mother was a talented alchemist, and that he had been a close friend of his parents."

"Ah, that makes sense."

"He said that Desilian's parents had abandoned him and that it was the emperor who had saved him and cared for him... He basically exploited the kid," Valeta said calmly with a slight frown.

Janice's diary was filled with pages of pained regrets, remorse and guilt. There

wasn't a single entry that didn't contain the words *I'm sorry*.

"Do you feel bad for her?"

"No, not at all."

Janice was a coward. Instead of talking to Desilian and searching for another way, she'd made decisions on his behalf and left him to die a horrible death, his entire life nothing but a lie.

*Well, Largris was technically the one to kill him.* She heard that Largris had killed himself, but not before casting a curse.

*"My blood is already sullied. How many atrocities has he used my blood to commit? For that, I must atone."*

Valeta shook her head, shaking free of the memory. The blood that Eliza gave her must have contained the last drop of her life force.

"Oh, and Silon's been begging me to return to the Magicians' Tower."

"He's been here...?"

Reinhart's face lit up, but, as usual, his intentions were not pure. Even though he was smiling, he was emitting a bloodthirsty aura, as if he wanted nothing more than to tear someone limb from limb.

"Because you're always with me at Carlon's house."

"How could I possibly leave you all alone at that bastard's place?"

Valeta sighed.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 146

Valeta shook her head at the magician, who was now crackling with magic. The moon was bright tonight. She held her left hand out to Reinhart.

"Wanna go for a walk? It's been a while."

Reinhart's eyes widened, but he quickly took her hand as if he was afraid she was going to take it back.

Valeta chuckled quietly.

"Sounds good," he answered, even though he was already clinging to her hand.

After Valeta had closed up shop, she and Reinhart slowly walked hand in hand toward Duke Delphine's manor.

"It's a beautiful night. Have you eaten dinner yet?"

"More or less. What about you, Master?"

"I'm going to eat when we get back. I lost track of time reading. So what did you get up to today?"

Reinhart forced himself not to laugh bitterly at Valeta's response. Deflection was quickly becoming Valeta's specialty. Their newfound peace was boring to him, but every boring day felt new and exciting with her. Reinhart suddenly darted in front of her, leaned down and pressed his lips against hers.

"Maybe you should focus on feeding yourself first instead of worrying about me. At this rate, I might have to start packing your lunch."

"Are you going to make it yourself?"

"I couldn't possibly feed you something someone else had made," he said.

Seeing Reinhart's smile, she just nodded and sighed. Valeta wanted to call him out for his nonsense, but it was just too much work. She could tell that he wasn't going to like what she had to say.

*I can't tell if we're dating or not.* They hadn't properly confessed their feelings to one another, nor had they agreed that they were in a relationship either. That said, even if they hadn't said they loved each other out loud, they slept in the same bed every night, their bodies joining more often than not. They were too close for it just to be sex, but calling them lovers wasn't right, either.

"I'm going to the imperial castle tomorrow," Valeta said.

"Why?"

"To see Miloyd."

Reinhart clenched his jaw. Valeta didn't have to ask to know what he was thinking. She squeezed his hand.

"He's not even awake," he grumbled.

"That's the problem... and it's why I want to check on him. I need to inherit my title and get the manor back since Terion agreed to live with us, too."

Reinhart kept quiet. He knew that she was doing all this so they could live together, so he couldn't say anything. Regardless, being forced to keep his mouth shut was the worst. Of all the bastards, why did it have to be *him* that they needed?

"Aren't you still technically engaged to him?"

"Yes, I think so... I haven't ever seen any documentation about breaking the engagement," Valeta replied, carefully watching Reinhart and trying to gauge his reaction.

He pursed his beautiful lips without saying a word as they arrived at the duke's manor.

"Don't worry. I'll figure out how to break the engagement off myself."

"Master, can you do that with me?" he asked.

"What? An engagement?"

"Yes, I'm far better than that bastard. I'm much prettier, too. And more useful, wouldn't you say?" Reinhart said petulantly.

Valeta hated that he was well within his rights to brag about how beautiful he was because he possessed such a gorgeous face. She stood dumbfounded, her mouth opening and closing wordlessly.

"That's true, but..." she managed to say.

"Then you should get engaged to me."

"But that's for two people who want to get married to one another..."

"Then we should do that," Reinhart said firmly. "Who else would you spend your life with besides me? You're the only one for me."

Valeta said nothing.

"Hm? Are you planning to abandon me?"

Reinhart smiled sadly. For all he knew, Valeta's soulmate could show up one day. If that were to ever happen, he vowed to make them disappear off the face of the earth. Or if someone tried to court her, they may suddenly find themselves

in a foreign land or drifting in the middle of the ocean.

As Reinhart plotted to himself quietly, Valeta stared at him wearing a puzzled expression. Noticing the look on her face, Reinhart said, "Want to come to the Tower? It's been a while."

"Why?"

"Your room here is awful. There's no mood and the bed squeaks. Basically, it's trash."

Carlon Delphine had gone to great lengths to prepare the best room he could for her. He would've taken Reinhart by his collar and shook him if he'd heard. Of course, the bed he'd procured for her couldn't live up to what Reinhart was capable of conjuring, but she also didn't think it was squeaky or uncomfortable.

Valeta was about to say as much when Reinhart suddenly brought his face close to hers. He looked down at her, wrapping an arm around her waist. She could feel a blush rising on her cheeks. It was hard to focus on anything else when such a beautiful, seductive face was right in front of her.

Reinhart smiled when he saw Valeta avert her gaze, looking anywhere but at him.

"Hm? We still haven't moved. Let's go to our room."

"Ugh, you're so..." Valeta mumbled through gritted teeth.

Reinhart chuckled, pressing his lips against hers.

The streets were fairly dark, but the guards were still right around the corner. *We're kissing even though they're right there!* Valeta thought.

Still, she slowly parted her lips to him.

"Do you want them to catch us? I feel like you get even more riled up when we're in public."

"I'll kill you— Mmm...!"

Reinhart pushed his tongue between her parted lips, silencing her.

"Mmph!"

He smiled into their kiss, his tongue trapping hers. His whole body shuddered.

"Haa... Wanna do it right here?"

"I'm really going to kill you," Valeta hissed, clutching his shoulder.

Reinhart smiled and nodded.

"Then let's do it in our room."

Instantly, their surroundings changed. Valeta squeezed her eyes shut. *Damn it. He tricked me.* Before she could even finish her thought, they were in the sky room. Reinhart directed her by her hips, pushing her down on the bed.

"Master, I heard that you have to be in love with someone to propose to them..." Reinhart said as he deftly removed her robe. "But I don't know what love is, so I don't know if I can truthfully say those words."

"I didn't expect you to," Valeta replied calmly.

That's why their relationship was so vague in the first place. In her opinion, there wasn't much to be done about it. They were both so twisted, they couldn't possibly have a normal relationship. *That's why I thought we should try being a family.* Of course, given their messy upbringing, they weren't necessarily capable of being a normal family either.

"But Valeta." Reinhart leveled a serious look her way. She felt like she needed to

remain silent until he'd said his piece. "The only thing I can promise you is that you will always come first to me."

She stared up at him.

"Of course, if you want me to whisper that I love you into your ear, then I'll learn how to do that as convincingly as I can."

Valeta was speechless. What was she supposed to say to someone who was offering to study up on emotions they didn't understand so they could whisper lies to her? Reinhart wasn't a person she could easily define. If she had to describe what he meant to her...

"You are dear to me."

Valeta blinked up at him. Reinhart looked down at her through narrowed eyes. It was clear that he didn't understand what she was trying to say. Valeta carefully chose her words. She searched for the words she needed to persuade him without putting him in a bad mood.

They could be lovers. They could see each other. They could be in a relationship and whisper sweet-nothings to each other. But she couldn't promise him that for the rest of her life. She couldn't promise him that he would always come first. She didn't want to hurt him if she one day had to leave him behind. It wasn't a good idea to pour her love into a man who may end up living a lonely life, unable to find someone who truly understands him.

Valeta sat up, leaning against the wall behind the bed with a sigh.

"Reinhart, I know I'll worry if I don't have you by my side. However, I don't have the confidence to completely embrace you either. I don't know how capable I am of being able to tolerate and understand you," Valeta spoke as her eyes met his red ones.

Their breaths mingled. All she could see was his affectionate gaze and all he could hear was the sound of his breathing, but it was still strangely alluring. She clenched her fists, her knuckles turning white.

"You said you can promise me that I would always come first, but I can't promise you the same thing."

Reinhart stared at her, his face unreadable. The fact that he hadn't spoken up yet meant that he was willing to listen.

"The most important thing to me right now is living a peaceful life. As we continue to live our lives, something that calls for more of my care and attention than you might appear."

"There won't be anything like that," Reinhart replied firmly as if Valeta had said something ridiculous. His matter-of-fact response cut through her noisy thoughts like a knife.

Valeta stared at him, dazed. "What...?"

"That's never going to happen. You don't need to worry about something so useless."

Reinhart pressed his lips to her thin fingers. He'd act as weak as he needed to whenever he was around her. He'd do anything to keep her attention on him. He'd make it so she was never able to ignore him.

"If I am dear to you now, then I will always be dear to you. You already crossed the line when you were unable to turn a blind eye to me when I was hurt."

"You..." Reinhart cupped her chin in his hand. The gesture was gentle, but forced her to meet his gaze. Valeta pressed her lips tightly together, unable to speak. "I heard everything. That after I collapsed, you turned pale and killed all of those rezir. Do you really think you can let me go? I'm sure I'm always going to be

someone you feel the need to protect. It's always been that way between us. You know just how much I cling to you always. And you think you'll be able to leave me behind?"

*You of all people?* He didn't say it, but his confident tone suggested he didn't believe it for a second. Valeta had nothing to say. She felt like he'd pierced through all the noise and straight through her soul. It was all true. Nothing he'd said was incorrect.

"You're the only person in this whole world who has ever protected me and that will always be so."

She had seen him for the child he was. She had treated him as though he was just like everyone else. She'd believed he would be hurt if someone was cold to him. She'd never doubted that he was capable of feeling emotions just like any other person. Valeta was the one who had made this true.

"Protect me. Now and forever. And I will protect you, too."

It was almost like he was threatening her, but also probably the best thing he could have said to cut through all her worries.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 147

Valeta eventually sighed deeply.

"I don't want to do it today."

"That's a shame. I really wanted to see you crying from pleasure."

"I don't cry?"

"You wake up with red eyes and a hoarse voice every morning. I'm confident I can work my usual magic again tonight."

Reinhart's fingers skimmed across her body, brushing over her most intimate area. Valeta bit her lower lip as the sensation sent chills down her spine. She could already feel heat pooling in her stomach. He used his free hand to run a gentle finger across her lips.

"Don't bite me now. The smell of blood just excites me."

"What are you, some kind of beast?"

"Oh no, I've been caught," Reinhart laughed with mock disappointment.

Valeta sighed.

Seeing the look on her face, Reinhart collapsed on top of her, his excitement fading.

"Oh right, did you know that the rezir has become a real disease now?" she asked.

"Yes, the Magicians' Tower have been debating whether or not to classify them

as monsters or not. Since people turn into monsters once infected."

Reinhart continued to grumble about the creatures as if they were nothing more than an annoying litter scattered about. The problem was that the rezir had spread all throughout the country, making it difficult for the common folk to wipe them out.

"He made such a mess of things," Valeta said.

Although Largris had summoned the rezir to avenge Eliza, he'd only created more problems for the empire and then dodged having to clean up his own mess by dying. For Valeta, it had been a simple task to figure out the principles behind the rezir, once she'd been able to study the sorcery circles Largris left behind. The rezir rose from a combination of corpses, the victims of the roste, and a sacrifice of the survivors intact souls.

A soul belonging to someone who had already died from the roste, no matter how recently, could not be sacrificed. The majority of the souls sacrificed powered the spell, while the remaining few were torn apart and distributed among the lifeless bodies, giving them the power to move once more. That's how the rezir were created.

The problem was that the surviving rezir continued to evolve. If their blood or even saliva entered a living person's bloodstream, then they became infected. In other words, a single bite was enough to spread the infection, which was creating even more problems. These newly infected rezir were different. Perhaps it was because their souls were still intact when they were bitten. Unlike those created from the fragmented souls, they were more intelligent and maintained the talents they'd cultivated while alive.

For example, if a skilled swordsman became a rezir, they would lose all reason and wander around in search of human flesh and blood, all while retaining their swordsmanship skills. With these rezir in particular, their physical skills were

ingrained in their bodies almost like muscle memory, so they were formidable opponents even if they lacked intelligent thought.

*There aren't a lot of rezir who have these abilities at the moment, but... Five years from now, when Terion was old enough to be considered an adult, these evolved rezir would likely be so common that dealing with them would become the new norm. And that will give rise to mercenaries and an age of epic tales...*

Originally, these rezir were supposed to appear much later in the story. The emperor was supposed to die at Terion's hands, but it seemed like he had already been doomed to eternal life, dropped into the middle of some distant sea. Basically, everything was a jumbled mess. To defeat the rezir, the chunk of soul lodged inside their body or the brain needed to be destroyed, but there were so many of them at this point that it was almost impossible.

"If there was a way for us to stay together forever, would you do it?"

"Forever?"

"Magicians have long lifespans, three to four times as long as ordinary humans. Are you willing to live that long alongside me?"

Valeta was silent in response to Reinhart's question. She turned the question over in her head, but in the end, she didn't have an answer to give him.

\* \* \*

"Long time no see, Viren."

With Caspelios' help, Valeta snuck out of her room without Reinhart's knowledge and went down to the eighty-second floor, which was only possible

because he was deep asleep. Even at this early hour, Viren was already up and tending to his herbs.

"You're here! I've been waiting for you, Valeta!"

*He's not bothering with formalities anymore.* She had always felt a sense of disconnect between the magician's youthful face and his mature way of speaking. Valeta found herself addressing him more respectfully because of it. She looked around the room, taking in the smell of the herbs, and nodded. Viren wiped his hands against his white clothing to rid them of dirt and approached Valeta. He looked her up and down.

"You look like you lost weight. Have you been eating?" he asked.

"Mm, yes."

"Meals are important. You know that right? Alchemists are weaker than magicians, so you have to make sure you eat well."

Valeta nodded reluctantly. Was it just her imagination or was she accumulating people who liked to nag at her these days—Carlon Delphine, Dreux Leon, and now Viren.

*Mew! Meow! Mew!*

She heard excited cries growing louder and louder. Before long, something heavy collided with her foot. She laughed as she reached down and petted the snowta, who had grown longer than her arm in the past month. *Who would've guessed that it would grow faster the more it purified things?*

Before she knew it, the snowta had grown to reach her knee. It must've done so while purifying the sorcery circle in Valeta's hand, along with all the souls of the rezir during the attack on the castle. Because it was now so big, it was hard to bring the snowta around with her, so she'd asked Viren to look after it until she

had a home of her own.

*But why is it still crying like a baby?* She had assumed it would begin to sound more like a beast by now. She smiled as she rubbed the snowta's belly, the creature mewling in its deeper voice.

"This is the latest potion I developed! Will you take a look at it for me?"

Viren's eyes sparkled as he handed Valeta a bottle. She tilted her head as she observed the potion. It had a peculiar green tint to it, unlike the one he'd presented to her before.

"What kind of potion is this?"

"A healing potion! One that you can rub into scratches. You don't need an entire bottle like you do when using alchemy potions, and it keeps for a long time."

Valeta opened the bottle and took a whiff. She was surprised. It seemed like an ointment, though one she had never thought of creating herself before. She nodded. "This is a good idea. I feel like it would be good to keep a couple of these on hand in case of an emergency."

"Do you really think so?"

Valeta nodded. It was a type of medicinal potion she had never thought of before. It could be useful in many ways if they were able to commercialize it. They'd have to be careful when pricing it, but... She narrowed her eyes as she caught a whiff of a tangy orange scent.

"I'm getting a hint of opulus... Is that correct?"

"That's right! You're amazing."

"It's got a very distinctive scent. But I heard these are hard to cultivate and generally expensive, no?"

Viren straightened up, tilting his head back. He looked proud of himself.

"I grew them here myself," Viren said.

"I know that, but... It will be hard to sell these. We should be selling to the public, not nobles since they waste money hoarding expensive potions for no reason."

Viren nodded in agreement, not looking at all upset for some reason. Valeta slowly thought the problem over. The opulus plant was more effective the longer it was in contact with the affected area. In other words, it wasn't that his idea was bad... The issue was the price.

"We should consider using a plant that's less expensive and easier to acquire... What about cicerin? I think its properties are similar enough."

"But isn't it less effective?"

"On the contrary, I think this is a little too effective. I think we can sell the opulus version as a premium product, but we should offer cheaper alternatives, too."

Viren nodded again. He thought this was a good idea, too.

Valeta returned the bottle and continued. "Anyway, I think it'd be more worthwhile focusing our energy on taking cheaper herbs and refining them a little to increase their purity."

"I see, I see."

"That way, you can keep the price down and provide a wider range of options. You'll be able to produce more instead of dealing with limited quantities and having to price things accordingly."

"Understood. I'll keep that in mind," Viren nodded, pulling out a notebook and

pen to jot down his thoughts.

After the attack on the castle and she and Reinhart had subsequently defeated the rezir, Viren had lowered his guard around Valeta. In fact, it was safe to say he melted like ice cream around her these days. Whenever she came to the Tower, he sought her out for advice. Whenever someone badmouthed her, he would immediately put them in their place. She didn't have to get on his good side if she needed a favor from him.

*It's not like he's annoying to have around.* He was quick to pick up new things and didn't bother her with a lot of unnecessary questions. They were always well-thought-out, as if he had spent time formulating them beforehand to get to the answer he needed quickly and efficiently.

"Come to think of it, have you eaten yet?"

"No, not yet."

"What are you doing here, then? This works out though. Let's go. I haven't eaten anything yet, either."

"What? But where...?"

Viren grabbed Valeta's hand and waved his free hand through the air. A magic staff that was twice as long as the boy appeared, floating in midair.

*How is he going to wield that?* Her question was soon answered. The staff gradually grew smaller as it drifted to his open hand. Soon, it perfectly matched him in size. He tapped the staff against the ground once. Before she could do anything to stop him, their surroundings transformed. The gentle aroma of herbs vanished, replaced by the mouthwatering scent of food.

*A dining room? Did the Magicians' Tower always have a dining room?* Valeta blinked as she looked around the dining room teeming with robed figures holding trays.

She turned to Viren, about to ask if the Magicians' Tower had always had a dining room when she saw something.

Her jaw dropped.

"What the hell?"

She was unable to prevent the curse from slipping through her lips.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 148

Valeta's breath hitched. She gaped up at Viren... or rather at the man who used to be her small companion. He tilted his head, causing muscles to bulge in his thick neck.

"What's wrong, Valeta?"

"Who... are you?"

"Oh, you're surprised by my appearance. I have no choice but to go about like this in the dining room. I can't reach the counter where they distribute the food otherwise. Plus, use of magic is banned in the dining room."

Viren had never given so much as a hint that he was such a muscular man. *What the hell did he do to his body? Photo editing software could never*, Valeta thought as she stared at the man's bulging muscles. She struggled to wrap her mind around this turn of events. Where did the cute little kid go? Even his green eyes seemed somehow muscular. The only thing that hadn't changed about him was his hair.

"I was born this way. I don't like my body, either."

The muscles in his arms and legs were unnecessarily large and thick. He looked roughly ten years younger than Balteer Baroksis, but his manner of speech made him seem twenty years older. Valeta decided she didn't want to think about it.

*This is catfishing...* She shook her head. *He must just have... a complex or something.* This was the only explanation she could think of for why he would choose to look like an adorable child. Valeta clenched her jaw, averting her

wavering gaze.

“Miss Valeta?”

“Ah, Balteer.”

She turned her attention to the man approaching them, not even wanting to look at Viren anymore. She felt more at ease seeing a familiar face.

“Ah, Mr. Viren. You’re here, too? Don’t you normally take your meals in your office? What brings you here?”

“Oh, Bal? Well, I couldn’t have Valeta eating nothing but bread, so I brought her here.”

Wait, Mr. Viren? Viren was older than Balteer? Valeta caught herself, quickly closing her gaping mouth. She was sure that nothing could surprise her anymore, but she was wrong. She caught sight of Silon and Kurt in the crowd of magicians watching them from behind Balteer.

Upon making eye contact with her, the two of them approached as well. It seemed that everyone gathered around the same time for breakfast in the morning. She felt silly for not even knowing there was a dining room until now.

*Reinhart’s been really taking care of everything, huh?* He had always just conjured her meals whenever she was in the Tower. She had been busy settling matters around the empire, so this was the first time she was seeing the other magicians since the banquet.

“Miss Valeta?”

“Oh, hello. Silon, Kurt,” Valeta said, a beat late in responding.

Their fellow magicians trailed after them wearing curious expressions.

"Hm? Isn't she that socoro?"

"Socoro? You mean, the head's socoro?"

"My goodness, what an honor! Can I shake your hand?"

"What...?"

Valeta, who had been smiling awkwardly at the gathered magicians, faltered when one of them produced a hand from the many folds of his robe and held it out for her to take.

Didn't they hate socoros? *I thought I wouldn't be welcomed here*, she thought. That's why she'd tried to foster a friendship with Viren first. She'd thought that getting close to someone in the Magicians' Tower would come in handy if she ever needed to infiltrate their ranks.

"You were amazing at the banquet. If you weren't the lord's socoro, I would've proposed to you myself, right then and there!"

"What...?"

"I heard that you made the alchemy symbol yourself. And it took you next to no time at all, too!"

Many of the magicians who were already seated and eating their meal began to peer over at them. To her, they resembled thieves poking their heads over a wall, trying to steal a glance. Kurt and Silon positioned themselves in front of the bewildered Valeta, shielding her from sight.

"I'm sorry. A lot of the magicians have grown curious about you after all that happened. But what brings you here, Miss Valeta?"

"Oh, I just had something I wanted to give to Viren..."

Valeta glanced at the man in question, who smiled graciously, before turning back to Silon. Silon grinned, bemused by her nervousness, and her face flushed.

*I can't believe I ever called that man a kid...* She realized that this was why Silon had seemed so freaked out by her interactions with Viren. He probably thought she was crazy. Valeta took a deep breath and held it for a moment as she ran a hand down her face, but the blush in her cheeks refused to fade.

"And the lord?"

"He was sleeping, so I just let him be. Cas—I mean, Pel always helps me get about the tower if I ask him to take me somewhere."

Silon nodded. He smiled, turning and leading her to the buffet. Handing her a plate, he encouraged her to take as much as she wanted.

"Wow..." There was a wide variety of food, many of which she had never seen before. "Can I come back for seconds?"

"Of course."

Valeta started to pile food on her plate. She wanted to try a little bit of everything. It all smelled so delicious. She carefully took small bites of everything that looked interesting. Before long, her plate was full. She eyed the food she was unable to get to with some disappointment. When she looked up, she realized that Balteer, Viren, Silon, and all the other magicians were staring at her.

"Wh-what?" she asked.

"No, it's nothing." Silon shook his head. He couldn't explain that they'd all become invested in her food adventures because she looked so serious. She shot him a curious look, but eventually turned and walked to where Kurt was already sitting.

"Thank you for the food."

The magicians were watching and smiling contentedly when they suddenly felt a murderous aura radiating from above. They all immediately froze in their seats, then began looking around, eyes narrowed.

"Ahhh!"

*Crash.*

Everyone's heads whipped around to see who had fallen out of their chair. Just as she was about to take her first bite of food, Valeta looked up.

A ghost stood in the entrance, wrapped in a blanket.

"A-a-a-a ghost!" a magician cried. The murderous aura was emanating from within the blanket, so thick that everyone found it impossible to move.

Valeta sighed when she caught sight of the figure covered from head to toe in a comforter. She was the only one to keep their cool in the face of such terrible murderous intent. She narrowed her eyes in displeasure, but that was her only reaction. Valeta stood and went to the entrance, reaching out and placing her hand against the figure's forehead.

"Isn't it hard to breathe under all that?"

"What... are you... doing here?" the figure asked, his voice dreadfully low.

Valeta shrugged as if to say it wasn't a big deal. Reinhart stared at her, his red eyes drooping shut with drowsiness, as if he wasn't completely awake yet.

"You were sleeping, so I thought I'd grab a bite to eat. I didn't know there was a dining room."

"You could've just told me..." Reinhart mumbled as he rested his head on her

shoulder, evidently relieved.

Hearing him sigh deeply, Valeta reached out and took his hand. "You were fast asleep. I didn't want to wake you. Now that you're here, do you want to eat some breakfast together?"

"Mmkay..." Reinhart nodded, still half asleep.

Valeta gently led him through the dining room, uncaring that he was still swaddled in the blanket. His bare feet suggested that he had fled their room in a hurry in order to find her. *Is it because I didn't answer his question yesterday?* It had been a long time since she'd seen him so anxious.

She sat Reinhart down next to her.

"Stay here. I'll bring you some food. And stop scaring people."

Valeta glanced at her now cold food, sighed, and went back to the buffet. She made up a plate of unseasoned fish, meat, and plain vegetables with no dressing or sauce. Even though the room was full of people, the only sound that could be heard was the clinking of utensils against her plate. Everyone was as silent as a mouse, their eyes locked on her. She was like an animal trainer who had tamed a ferocious beast. Valeta set the fully loaded plate in front of Reinhart.

He looked down at the food, his eyes shifting to stare at Valeta's.

"What? Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No..." Reinhart said with a shake of his head, sounding more awake.

Eying the blanket he was still wrapped in, Valeta sighed.

"Are you going to eat like that?"

In response, Reinhart snapped his fingers. The blanket disappeared instantly,

replaced by a perfectly respectable robe. He slowly reached for his utensils. As he began to gracefully pick at his food, the murderous aura pressing down on the room's occupants began to fade away.

"Why didn't you just have breakfast in our room?" Reinhart asked after he'd eaten half the contents of his plate.

Valeta caught sight of Viren flinching out of the corner of her eye. She rested her hand on her chin and shrugged. "I just wanted to see what the dining room was like."

"Hmm..."

Valeta finished her plate, took a few sips of water, and then rose from her seat. Everyone followed her with their stares, faces stiff and eyes round.

"Let's go."

"Yes."

Reinhart hung back as Valeta made for the entrance. He followed, but not before stopping behind Viren. Reinhart's hand landed on the man's muscular shoulder, squeezing the bone with a crushing grip.

"Ngh..."

"Shh." Reinhart hushed Viren. With a smile, he bent to whisper in Viren's ear. At a distance, it just looked like the men were having an amicable conversation.  
"Let's not do anything so presumptuous again. You want to keep all your fingers, don't you?"

"Understood, my lord."

Reinhart patted Viren on the shoulder and strode to where Valeta was waiting. He wrapped his arm around her waist.

"Let's go."

She examined him closely before answering, "Okay."

Valeta nodded slightly at Viren, then closed her eyes. This was a habit she'd picked up to prevent herself from getting motion sickness whenever Reinhart activated his teleportation spell. She used to be scared of closing her eyes. Maybe because she could feel Reinhart's arm wrapped securely around her waist, she didn't feel so scared anymore.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 149

\* \* \*

“We’re here.”

After being briefly plunged into darkness, the world was bright again. She turned her glare on Reinhart, who had already flopped down on the bed.

“What?”

“Stop scaring people like that.”

“Drat, you caught me,” Reinhart muttered, narrowing his eyes at her.

“You don’t come off as all that friendly in the first place. I’d be pretty impressed if you were somehow oblivious to how everyone around you tenses up every time you open your mouth.”

“How marvelous.” Reinhart smiled. He didn’t seem at all troubled to hear people found him intimidating.

Valeta was struck speechless. Even though she was used to this behavior, she still had no idea how to respond to him at times. *It’s not like I can even tell him to stop, either.* She felt like he would explode like an over-filled balloon from all the emotions he no doubt kept pent-up inside. Valeta had a lot of concerns when it came to Reinhart. Didn’t they say sensitive creatures could die if they became too stressed?

“You’re so cruel for disappearing without telling me.”

"I didn't even go that far. I don't have magic. How would I have left the Magicians' Tower? Summoning Gene to break me out is far too much trouble." As Valeta defended herself, Reinhart merely pressed his lips together and refused to look at her. She sighed. "I'm going to the imperial castle."

"The imperial castle? When will you be back?"

"I'll have Gene fly me back here. You don't have to come."

Reinhart nodded, his face twisted into a frown. It was obvious just by the look on his face that he didn't like it. Her eyes narrowed.

"How do you plan on doing it?" Reinhart's eyebrows rose in surprise. Noticing the confusion on his face, Valeta clarified. "You said that there was a way to live forever. How?"

His eyes widened, and then he smiled faintly. Somehow, his expression was both bittersweet and mysterious. Valeta gestured with her chin, pressing for an answer.

"I came across the solution while reading through some ancient texts. Apparently, magicians are capable of something called imprinting. They can share their longevity of life if they imprint on one another's hearts and drink each other's blood."

Valeta's brows knitted together. She had read about something similar in a novel once. A dragon's partner would do something similar to live with their dragon forever. Perhaps the same was true for magicians. *It'd extend our life together by three or four hundred years.*

It was rare that humans lived past the age of a hundred years, at most. Living for three or four hundred years was beyond her wildest imagination. She hesitated at the idea of living long enough to watch everyone she knew die.

"You know that black magic is derived from sorcery, right?"

"Yeah."

He explained. "Imprinting seems to be a form of black magic that faded into obscurity long ago. No one practices imprinting anymore because there is a risk that if one person dies, the other will, too."

There had been nothing about sorcery in the original novel she had read in her former life. So, it followed that black magic was never mentioned, either. The book hadn't gone into much detail about what was considered magic or what form magic was even used to deal with the events of the novel.

Everything had already happened by the time Terion left Dreux Leon's house to start his journey as hero. There was no telling if he ever learned that there was sorcery at work. It wasn't mentioned, and there was nothing ever said about Valeta after her death either. It was questionable whether Reinhart had discovered that.

"You want to imprint with me?"

"I told you, Master. I want total control over every part of you, even your death."

Reinhart did nothing to conceal how possessive he was. Instead, he calmly confessed exactly what was going through his head.

Valeta thought quietly for a while. "So, the magician shares their life force, right?"

"Yes. Their partner's life is extended using the magician's magic, but it doesn't matter which of the two dies. If someone were to kill you, I would die. If someone were to kill me, you would die."

This all sounded exactly like what Reinhard wanted. In spite of herself, his words sent a chill down her spine. Valeta realized she probably wasn't exactly normal,

either. Dropping her gaze to the ground, her long eyelashes cast a shadow over her eyes.

"If you don't want to do it, I won't."

This time, Valeta let out a low, dubious sigh.

He continued. "It's enough for me just hearing you say that you won't run away from me and will remain by my side. If you don't want to imprint, then I will endure."

Valeta remained silent. After a moment's thought, wrapped her robe more tightly around herself. Could she live with him forever? How could she be sure that she wouldn't get tired of him? How could she be sure that he wouldn't just abandon her one day?

"Can the imprinting be undone?" Valeta asked.

"No, it can't."

Even among black magic, imprinting was a powerful thing unlike anything else. The contract, formed by imprinting on each other's hearts and drinking one another's blood, made them one. Unless they were to get a heart transplant, there was nothing that could be done to undo the bond. This was one of the reasons the practice of imprinting had faded into obscurity. It was rare that human emotions were ever so permanent. One had to pay the price if they wanted to live forever... But it was always a big risk putting your life in the hands of another.

"I'm going to the imperial castle first. There are still some things I need to take care of," Valeta said after a while.

Gaze fixed on her, Reinhart nodded. He created a magic circle beneath the girl's feet.

"Come back soon," he said, wearing his usual smile.

At the same time, there was something off about it. Reinhart didn't even try to personally escort her to the imperial castle. Valeta closed her eyes and nodded.

A heavy silence hung between them.

\* \* \*

"Hello, Carlon."

"Valeta! I heard you didn't return to the manor last night."

"I'm sorry. Reinhart showed up and asked me to go to the Magicians' Tower with him."

She smiled awkwardly. Her manner of speaking was as blunt as ever, but she carefully tried to arrange her expression in a way that was less standoffish. Her efforts were often in vain because her cheeks had the tendency to grow stiff, making her expression look fixed.

"I was worried. You should've let me know where you were going, at least."

"I'm sorry. I'll tell the guards next time."

Carlon rose from behind the mountain of papers on his desk, beginning to prepare some tea, after gesturing for Valeta to take a seat on the sofa.

She bowed politely to the duke and sat.

"You don't look well. Did something happen?"

"It's just... I'm trying to imagine what it would be like to live a long life."

Carlon's eyes narrowed, then he shrugged. Sat in his new office at the palace, there were dark circles heavy under his eyes.

"Are you saying that you found a way to live for a long time?" He sighed.

"Valeta, does it have to be him? It seems to me that you're choosing the worst option when you have so many others laid out before you."

Valeta smiled awkwardly in the face of Carlon's blunt appraisal of her situation. It was clear from his tone that he was not in a good place. The only reason the imperial castle was still standing at all was due to his alchemical ability. Now that the alchemists were able to find their own way out in the world, she'd heard that the alchemist association was slowly disbanding.

Carlon Delphine was only temporarily in charge of the empire, so he couldn't do anything in regard to the affairs of law and state.

"And Miloyd is still...?"

"Yes. His body is completely healed, but he still hasn't opened his eyes yet."

"Can I see him?"

Carlon pressed his lips together. A deep frown settled on his face. The duke stared at Valeta, then sighed, unable to figure out what she was thinking.

"He wronged you badly. If there were literally anyone else in line for the throne, I would have supported them instead of the crown prince."

As if it wasn't already bad enough that the emperor had killed off anyone who had imperial blood running through their veins. They were now reaping the consequences of this.

At Carlon's icy words, Valeta averted her gaze awkwardly. His attitude toward

the crown prince had completely changed after he found out the details of how the emperor had been toying with her and what the crown prince had done with the bead. Dreux Leon had to suffer two weeks of a drunken Carlon complaining about it before he finally got himself together.

"While it's true that he made a mistake, I know that he's going to make a great emperor because he has a strong sense of justice," Valeta said.

Carlon didn't reply. This had certainly been true of Miloyd in the past. Surely he'd continue to be the same in the future, too? A lot of things had happened, but they wouldn't change his entire personality, surely. Carlon Delphine probably knew as much, too. Overlooking the bead incident, he knew well that the prince practically embodied justice.

"If I don't like him, I don't like him. After hearing about what he did to you, I don't think I'll be able to support the emperor ever again."

"I'm not telling you to support him. It's not my job to win you over. That's something Miloyd has to do."

Valeta didn't have any sympathy for him. She just wanted to wrap up her business with him. And regardless, it was her and Reinhart's fault that he was in this state to begin with, so she felt even more compelled to wrap up any loose ends.

"I consider ignorance to be a sin. That's why he isn't suited for the throne," Carlon said sharply.

"You think?"

"Valeta, you may have grown up with your eyes and ears covered, but you didn't turn out like the prince. You are where you are today because you tried your best to learn from your mistakes so you could carve out a future of your own."

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 150

Valeta didn't know how to react to Carlon's praise. She was rarely praised growing up, so she didn't know what to say when people complimented her.

"He'll have to figure that out for himself. He'll open his eyes and see the truth of the world. Maybe he's not waking up now because he doesn't want to face that truth."

"If that's the case, then it's a cowardly thing to do," Valeta said, stirring her tea.

Honestly, she'd had the same thought as Carlon. She had given Miloyd another potion, and a doctor had come to tend to him several times with no success. This meant there were two possible reasons why he had yet to open his eyes. The first was that he was unable to because the shock to his psyche was too great. And the second possibility was that he was already awake and just pretending to be asleep.

*I'd be less disappointed in him if it was the former,* Valeta thought. But if it was the latter, she would be able to talk to Miloyd and get this all over with, so it didn't matter in the end if he was a coward.

She took a sip of her black tea and sighed.

"What about Eliza, Largris, and Desilian?"

"Eliza and Desilian will be buried on imperial grounds. We plan to have a tombstone erected for them."

Valeta was about to take another sip when she suddenly froze.

Clack.

She set down her teacup and looked at Carlon, who fell silent for a moment. He looked away from her, clearly troubled but met her eyes again eventually.

"Largris... I mean..." He set his jaw, shaking his head. "Largris was the perpetrator of the horrific incident with the rezir. He's already dead, but... the people's anger is great... His body will be hung from the castle gates for seven days. Then, his limbs will be ripped from his body and fed to the beasts."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, the outcry against him has been loud. In addition, it was a unanimous decision made by the nobles. They left no room for discussion."

Valeta merely nodded as she listened. It's not that she necessarily even wanted Largris to rest in peace. He probably didn't want it for himself, either. He'd been the one to curse the emperor using his own life as payment.

*It was his decision in the end.* There was Eliza, who had still always thought of others after losing everything. Then there was Largris, who dreamed of taking revenge by taking other people's lives and using them to cast a taboo curse. And then there was the emperor, who had acted selfishly until the very end. The three of them had once been happy, but she couldn't say that had been the case in their final years. It went without saying that out of all the possible outcomes, this one was probably the worst.

Eliza and Largris were both smart people. There's no way they had done what they'd done without considering the consequences. No, the reason Valeta was so sad was because this could very well have been her and Reinhart's future.

"He doesn't deserve your sympathy. He may be dead, but he still shouldn't have done what he did."

"I would never sympathize with him. I was just... I was just thinking that if Reinhart and I made a wrong turn, our relationship could've ended up like theirs."

Reinhart would have played the part of the emperor. As for Valeta? She didn't know whether she would have been Eliza or Largris. Either way, she wouldn't ever have tried to end her life like Eliza had.

"What about Eliza and Desilian's funeral?"

"Given the circumstances, we plan to have a quiet funeral a week from now. Will you come?"

About to agree, she stopped. Valeta had only spoken to them a couple of times, but she'd already formed some small form of attachment to them.

After a moment's hesitation, Valeta nodded.

"I'll go."

"I'll let you know the time and location."

"Thank you for always taking care of me."

"Don't mention it. I should be the one to say thank you since we're still getting along so well."

She shrugged in reply. She rose from her seat. If Miloyd had yet to wake, she was going to leave the imperial castle.

*I should tell Carlon about breaking off the engagement. Reinhart would actually destroy the imperial castle at this rate. She wasn't just saying that either. Reinhart would storm in, magic blazing, and turn the castle to rubble. Come to think of it, when will he awaken into a transcendent?*

It didn't seem like it was time just yet, given the situation. According to the original novel, Reinhart wouldn't have his awakening for another seven years, but there was no telling what would trigger it. Was there some special item or circumstance in the world of magic that triggered a magical awakening?

*I want to see his silver eyes.* When transcendents used their powers, their eyes turned a pure silvery color. She was curious what Reinhart would look like. Valeta brought a hand to her mouth and groaned. *It would look stunning...* Silver light and silver eyes. Wasn't it just like something out of a dream? She rubbed her face.

"Are you going to see Miloyd?" Carlon asked.

"Yes, if that's okay with you?"

"It is. Please take Sir Kien with you. I'd take you myself, but as you can see..." Carlon stared at the mountain of documents on his desk with sunken eyes. It seemed that the paperwork regarding the damages and supplies was never-ending in the wake of the disaster.

"No, it's all right. I understand that you're busy."

"Thank you. Also..." Carlon put his hand down on his desk. "No matter what you choose to do, remember to put yourself first. You don't have to think about other people. You don't have to consider that guy, either. If he's forced you in some way, then kill him."

"What?"

"If he has managed to suppress his instincts and has given you a choice, then I want you to think carefully about what would bring you the most happiness, Valeta."

Her eyes widened slightly. Carlon nodded, satisfied that his words had struck a

chord.

"You need to know that you have that right," he said firmly.

"Thank you..." Valeta said.

"Not at all."

Carlon smiled at her. She watched the duke disappear behind his mountain of paperwork before leaving the room. A familiar man was standing in front of Carlon's office—Kien.

"It's been a long time."

"Long time no see, Miss Valeta," Kien replied after a moment.

"Yes. How have you been?"

"Well, thank you."

Silence stretched between them. It was clear that he had something he wished to say given that his expression was somehow even stiffer than usual. Seeing him struggling with himself, Valeta initiated conversation between them first.

"It's a nice day. Have you been busy lately?" she asked.

"A little. I've been assigned all over the place. We're shorthanded, you see."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Silence fell again. Valeta paused, giving him a chance to speak, but he didn't take it. So, she gave up. If he didn't want to talk, then so be it. She didn't want to waste her time making other people uncomfortable.

"The last time we met..." The gruff knight finally spoke up when they came to a stop in front of the crown prince's chambers. Instead of entering the room, Valeta turned her attention to the man standing behind her. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding. I acted like a fool, just believing what I saw. I'm sorry for mocking you, too."

"Oh, that's what you wanted to say? It's all right. I didn't take any of what happened personally. Reinhart took things too far, I think."

She had nothing to say when Reinhart had turned Kien into a statue. In fact, it had been Valeta who had pushed for it.

She shrugged.

Kien clearly had more to say. "Still, I'm sorry. I'm ashamed of myself as a knight for defending the imperial family."

He bowed deeply, and Valeta fixed him with a troubled gaze, before finally nodding.

"I understand. I accept your apology, so please stand up straight. You don't have to worry about it anymore, and I sincerely mean that. I'm going inside. Please wait out here."

"Yes, thank you."

There was nothing to apologize for. Valeta was of the opinion that this man had plenty of things to worry about without getting hung up on this, too. She stared at him for a long moment, then shrugged, letting the conversation die. Walking past the knights guarding the door, she entered the prince's room.

Sunlight poured in through the many windows. Miloyd was sleeping peacefully, unaffected by how bright it was. She dragged a chair to the side of the bed and sat down. This was the third time she had come to see him. The first visit had

been to check on him, the second was with a doctor in tow. And today would be her last.

She sat there for a long time, just looking at the prince.

"Miloyd. I'm here to say goodbye. I won't be coming back. I'm done with the imperial castle," she said as she looked around the comfortable room. Valeta had known Miloyd for a long time. She had known him as long as she had known Reinhart. It would be a lie to say she had no sympathy for the man. "The empire is more or less stable now, thanks to Carlon and Dreux. The dukes had to step up because you weren't there. You're supposed to be the one on the throne, but seeing you running away like this? I had no words for how much that disappoints me."

Valeta very much doubted that Miloyd was still unconscious. He had always exercised regularly and was mentally very strong. *He was one of the only normal ones in all this madness.* Though, she'd never imagined that he would turn out the way he had.

"If you're awake, then listen up. I told you once that I'd be your friend if you became a good emperor," Valeta said, recalling the conversation they'd had not that long ago. The promise she'd made that day was a mistake. She never should have said it. Valeta was determined to speak her mind now, "I don't think we can be friends. I thought about it, and just the idea upsets me."

He made no response, but it didn't matter. These were the last words she intended to speak to Miloyd, whether he heard them or not.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 151

"I was going to take advantage of a loophole to take over the county, but I decided against it. I'm sick and tired of playing nice with the imperial family."

Valeta had decided she was going to give up on the title earlier that morning. As for the reason...

She lowered her gaze, her long lashes shielding her eyes from sight. Finally, she said, "Become the emperor, Miloyd. You grew up so comfortably in your father's care, like a plant in a greenhouse, so it's high time that you played the role you were raised for. You might say that you didn't know what was going on, but that isn't a good enough excuse."

He wasn't allowed to say that he was ignorant to the truth. Only average citizens, people who never got the chance to learn, were allowed the luxury of ignorance. A noble who was born to rule over other people was not allowed to live with their head in the sand.

"Your position is such that you have to know, you have to question what's going on around you. You can't put your hands in the air and say *I didn't know*. I honestly hate it that you're just lying there with your eyes closed."

Her merciless criticism went seemingly unheard by the man who could very well be still unconscious. She was actually getting mad, seeing him just lying there so peacefully with his eyes closed. Watching him sleep when the situation was so dire didn't feel good. He was the last person in the entire empire who should be allowed to avoid his duties at this point in time.

"Honestly, I never really liked you from the moment we first met. I hated how sure you were that I could be happy one day when it was obvious that you'd

never experienced unhappiness growing up.”

She knew that he wasn’t a bad person, but that was all she had to say about him. She would never be able to confide in him or expect anything more from him. Whenever she looked at him, all she could think about was how they lived in completely different worlds.

“I’ve never once smiled in your presence, nor have I ever praised or complimented you. So why were you so sure that I was happy?”

She had finally asked the question that had been burning her up inside. Miloyd had firmly believed she was happy in the care of Count Delight. He probably only believed this to be true because he himself was happy, but the boy who was meant to take the throne one day shouldn’t have been so blind. Not everyone was happy, and the emperor had to be capable of understanding their unhappiest subject’s feelings.

“You never bothered to open your eyes and learn the truth. Even now, you’re still trying to run from it.” Valeta sighed deeply. Running a hand down her face, she clicked her tongue. She had only one reason for wanting to see him—settling things between them once and for all. “I have only one thing to say. We’re breaking up. I was hoping that you would wake up so you could prepare the papers to break our engagement, but...” She turned her head. “You insist on behaving like a cowardly villain until the end.”

She slowly breathed out. He had hid behind the emperor like a coward when he’d confessed, using his father’s power to keep her in his hands. Now, he was running away from reality. She felt nothing for him but disappointment.

“You’re not the only one who’s sad and upset. You’re acting like you alone had to endure your entire world crumbling around you. Do you honestly think you’re the only one who lost your family? There are people out there who were bitten and torn apart by their sick family members. Don’t you think they, too, felt

betrayed?" Valeta was beyond frustrated. "You don't want to confront the emperor's betrayal. It doesn't matter how much you idolized or loved him, you still have to get up and take the throne."

Miloyd had to face reality. The man he'd idolized—the same man who had torn open his stomach—was gone. Valeta would never have asked him to get up immediately after what he'd gone through, sleeping for an entire month was ridiculous.

"If you can't handle that, then wake up, abdicate and take yourself somewhere none of us have to look at you ever again, Miloyd. Then someone else, like Carlon or Dreux, can take the throne instead," Valeta snapped coldly.

It was time that he paid his dues after living such a blessed life. If he really had no desire to live, he wouldn't have lasted this long.

"If you don't have it in you to do that, then live. You don't have any other choice. You can't pretend to be asleep forever."

If he hadn't wasted away already, it was probably because he didn't want to die. Valeta's eyes found Miloyd's scrawny arm, which had grown skinny in the month he'd spent bedridden. She leaned back in her chair and tilted her head.

"Cry, scream, and rage all you want. But live. If you ever do become the emperor, maybe I wouldn't mind sitting down and having a drink with you one day." With that, Valeta rose from her seat. She looked down at Miloyd, still lying there with his eyes closed, not moving an inch. "Thanks for liking me, but... The next time you find someone you like, don't confess to them the way you did to me. It wasn't kind of you, and it made me feel like sh\*t."

Miloyd's fingers twitched, but Valeta missed it because she was looking elsewhere. She continued speaking as she returned the chair to its original position.

"Miloyd. I've contracted a disease because I was bitten by a rabid dog. Thanks to the side effects, I'm expected to live a long life. So, you have until the day you die to apologize. You can do it whenever you like between now and then."

There was plenty of time for him to get his sh\*t together and apologize. There were many people he owed apologies to. An emperor who was as firm as a rock was useless. One might as well be dead if they refused to learn, grow, or change. The confused and upset nobles would tear him apart immediately if he didn't adapt. The prince would have a long and hard road ahead of him, picking up the pieces following his father's violence and forceful oppression.

Valeta hesitated by his bed. Frustrated, she rubbed her hands over her face, sighing deeply a few times before finally saying, "But..." Her voice caught in her throat. "I'll say this first." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Miloyd."

Regardless of the tongue-lashing she'd just delivered, she was the one responsible for ruining his happiness. He'd lived in a world that was bound to shatter around him one day. He had to wake up from it, but Valeta had been the one to destroy everything around him without giving Miloyd a chance to prepare.

She had resisted the emperor thanks to her own desire to live and in order to protect Reinhart. No matter what anyone said, she was the one who had disrupted the original timeline in this world.

Valeta slowly closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry I took your father away from you without any warning."

The emperor had been Miloyd's only parent. It didn't matter how evil the emperor was—he had done everything he could for his son. He had probably cherished and loved him... even if he had only raised him as an experiment, curious to see what he would do. Either way, the emperor was the only parent he'd ever known, and someone he adored and respected. Even in the face of

danger, the first person Miloyd had looked for was his perfect father.

*I destroyed your world.*

She'd done it to secure a safer, more comfortable world for herself, a world where she wouldn't have to die. She was the only one responsible for changing the storyline—it was inevitable that doing so would change other people's lives as well.

Miloyd was supposed to eventually cut down the emperor himself, but he was never given the chance. Instead, he had lost everything. Maybe Terion would never become the hero he was meant to be either. It was possible he would never meet the female protagonist, the girl of his dreams, and live happily ever after in a brand-new world.

"When your time is over... I'll still be here. I will watch over you until you die."

With that, she looked around the room one last time then left. The door shut behind her with a gentle click. As Valeta's footsteps faded down the corridor, Miloyd's fingers twitched again. Then, he slowly opened his eyes.

His blue eyes were wet with tears and bluer than the sea. A single tear escaped and ran down his cheek. He wished that everything that had happened were nothing but a bad dream, but unfortunately it was all reality.

That afternoon, word spread throughout the empire that the prince, who had been hovering between life and death, had woken up. A couple of days after that, Carlon notified Valeta that he had received documents regarding the annulment of her engagement with the prince.

\* \* \*

"Huh? Miss Valeta!"

"Hello," Valeta said a little awkwardly.

She had received permission from Dreux to visit, so it hadn't been hard to gain entrance to his estate. She had worried how she was going to face the child when she finally saw him. His excitement had taken her by surprise.

"Miss Valeta! I missed you! How have you been? Mister's been telling me about you."

"Mister...?" Valeta repeated.

"Dreux!" Terion replied. "Mister said that I could just call him Dreux, but it's not that easy..."

They had only been apart for a few months, but the child had completely changed. She had told Dreux that she wanted Terion to come live with her... But now that the boy was standing before her, she wondered if she was making the right choice.

*He looks well.* Valeta reached out and ruffled the boy's hair. His hair had grown a lot in such a short time, and that wasn't the only thing that had changed about him. When they had first met, he was very scrawny. Now, he seemed to be putting on some muscle and weight. Was he working out? He seemed to have an excess of energy.

"I heard that a lot has happened... Are you okay?"

"Yeah, thanks," Valeta replied awkwardly.

She could still remember the look on the little boy's face whenever she treated him coldly in an effort not to be affectionate toward him.

"Ah! Come in. D-do you... like snacks? We have some really delicious cookies..."

Um... If that sounds good..." Terion stammered as he led Valeta into the drawing room, his eyes watching closely for her reaction. She watched as he tilted his head, anxiously waiting for her answer. It was obvious what he wanted to hear.

"Yes."

"Okay! I'll ask the attendant to bring some! Please, sit right here!"

Valeta took a seat on the sofa as the boy scampered off.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 152

Terion ran back into the room before long, panting. Valeta observed the boy's red face closely. *This is probably what guilt feels like*, she thought.

"I talked to Dreux recently. Did he... tell you?"

"Yes! He said that I could go live with you!"

"Yeah, but it wouldn't be only with me," Valeta said. "You'd also be living with that silver-haired man and a snowta, too. With you, it'd be the four of us."

Terion's eyes lit up as he nodded his head vigorously. His bright smile pricked at Valeta's conscience. She hesitated, wondering if she should have never suggested it.

"It might be uncomfortable though," she said. "I think it might be better for you if you stayed here."

"Oh... Do I make you uncomfortable?" Terion asked.

"No, it's not you. Actually, I'm afraid that you'll be uncomfortable. You know what that guy's like. And I'm not very affectionate, either..." Valeta explained slowly.

Although Dreux was gruff, he always took people's feelings into account. There were also lots of flowers, a beautiful garden, books, and many attendants, all together forming a good environment for Terion.

"We can't stray too far from the Magicians' Tower, but we might live outside the capital, somewhere isolated."

"I can walk! Mister said that I can continue my studies here! And... And... Uh..."

The child stuttered, working himself into a panic. His eyes flicked around the room. "Mister said that in three years time, he'd write a recommendation letter for me to the Academy so that I can become a knight-in-training! Of course, I have to pass the entrance test, but..."

"I'm not trying to pressure you or anything," Valeta said. "I have a lot of money... and I'm going to see what I can do with the county. If it doesn't work out, I can always sell potions."

"Then why..."

"Because I'm worried about you. As you know, I'm not very talkative and Reinhart's an intimidating guy. If you live with us after living here, I'm afraid that you'll be uncomfortable."

Valeta did her best to explain in a way the child would understand. Terion was glowing from how well cared for he was. He had a compact face with a delicate nose, high-bridged and straight. Even though he had grown up neglected, his skin was clear and healthy.

He would be popular everywhere he went.

"But... I like you, Miss Valeta. I heard... I heard that you could've ignored it, but you still came into that dark dungeon and saved me."

The child fumbled over his words, but he was undoubtedly being honest. Valeta looked at Terion with confusion. She didn't know how to interact with kids. She felt like they would break from a single touch.

"Also, that... the head of the Magicians' Tower helped, too. He's scary, but... I don't hate him."

However, Terion seemed made of stronger stuff than Valeta had feared. Terion saying that he was fine with Reinhart because the magician had helped him was

a passing grade in Valeta's book.

"That's true."

"That's why I'm okay with it! You're the one who saved me, Miss Valeta. I want to live with you both if you're okay with it," Terion said shyly, his cheeks turning red. The boy was truly made of the stuff of protagonists, Valeta supposed, given that he was able to accept someone like Reinhart. They say that sandalwood is fragrant even as a tiny seed. She thought Terion must be a very sturdy little seed.

"It's comfortable here, but I don't think of it as home. It feels like a temporary lodging. So..."

"Okay. Let's live together. I just wanted to ask your opinion first. I didn't want to pressure you," Valeta said.

Terion beamed and nodded, giggling. Valeta eyed the boy curiously, wondering why he was so excited, then rubbed her neck awkwardly.

"Um! Please tell the Tower head that I've been practicing with my sword! Tell him that I'll work hard so I can protect you one day!"

"What...?"

Valeta regarded Terion closely for a moment. Reinhart must've said something strange to the child. She nodded, then rose from her seat, but not before taking a bite of one of the cookies Terion had offered her.

"I'm going to head out now. I'll contact you once everything is ready," she said.

"Yes! Thank you for coming to see me. I didn't think you'd come back for me. That's why I was really happy when I got your message."

Valeta reached out and patted the boy's hair. He smiled sheepishly, trying to

hide the blush that rose in his cheeks, and bowed. With that, she left Dreux's manor.

*All that's left is... Reinhart.* Talking to him was the last thing she had to do. Valeta looked up at the darkening sky and sighed. The sun had already started to set by the time she'd left Duke Leon's manor.

"How long are you going to follow me around, Reinhart?" Valeta asked, a hint of dry amusement audible in her voice. "How long have you been listening?"

She blinked.

In the span of an instant, she suddenly felt Reinhart's presence behind her. Her lips parted when she felt his breath on the back of her neck.

"From the start," Reinhart replied. "You don't trust me?"

"I just don't like letting you out of my sight." Valeta turned around to face him. She held out her right hand. Reinhart looked down at the outstretched limb.  
"Then you probably heard everything I said."

"Yeah."

"I've been bitten by a rabid dog, so now I'm growing rabid, too," Valeta said softly. "I think whoever did this to me now has to take responsibility for me for the rest of their lives."

Reinhart's red gaze wavered. He slowly blinked and clenched his fists. He clenched and unclenched them over and over if he couldn't quite believe his ears. As he stared at her, his expression said he wanted nothing more than to swallow her whole.

Valeta's eyes met his red ones as she said, "You want to imprint on me?"

"You'll probably regret it."

His eyes flashed as he said this. If she refused him, she knew he would find a way to make her do it anyway. This much was clear from the tone of his voice. She knew she would just spend a lot of time worrying uselessly, going back and forth in her decision if she took her time. Whenever she made plans, they never worked out. That's why she decided not to overthink it this time. If they grew tired of each other after a hundred years, they could just live their lives separately.

"We're going to live three to four times longer than the average human. All I want to do right now is take a disgustingly long break, so I'll revisit that thought after a hundred years."

Reinhart squeezed her hand tightly until his knuckles turned white, but he said nothing.

Valeta tilted her head. "You're displeased?"

"No, I like it so very much that I want to kill everybody."

"That's a pretty intense confession..."

Exactly how much did he like her answer that it was causing homicidal urges in him? Valeta was so lost in thought she didn't realize that her surroundings had changed. She made a face, wobbling as her feet set down in her new location. She hadn't even gotten the chance to brace herself.

"I can't promise that you'll always come first..." Valeta looked around the sky room, which felt more like home to her than Delight Manor, despite all the years she'd spent there. "But you'll always be very dear to me."

She knew that she would never get rid of Reinhart. She'd spent more than ten years trying to push him away, so she was sure she was already half out of her mind.

"You're not going to bother Terion, right?" she asked.

"I told you, Master. I'll never lay a hand on anything you choose to take under your wing."

*I can still terrorize him under the guise of training, though.* However, Reinhart kept this thought to himself as his hands cupped the back of her head. He leaned down. Valeta closed her eyes when she felt the man's breath against her lips. His tongue slipped into her mouth as she awkwardly allowed him entrance.

"Haa... Should we make a contract?"

"Right now? Here?"

Reinhart smiled as he held out his hand to her. A white magic circle, or something that looked like it, hovered above his palm.

"Yes. I'm going to engrave this circle on your heart. It'll be okay. It will cover the seal that's already over your heart."

*Come to think of it, I do still have that.* She had hidden the necklace somewhere, somewhere so obscure that even she had forgotten where she'd put it.

Reinhart unfastened Valeta's robe, letting it fall to the ground with a soft rustling sound. He slowly pressed the magic circle against her chest. At first, the magic circle felt cold against her skin. Then, she felt the cold sinking deeper until it reached her heart.

Reinhart did the same magic on himself and smiled. He removed his robe, scooped her up in his arms and then carefully laid her down on their soft bed.

"Thanks for the meal," Reinhart said apropos of nothing with a smile. He pressed her thighs together and climbed on top of her. His legs straddled hers, clamping down and preventing her from moving. Then, he lifted a finger and traced a line down his collarbone.

Valeta had watched all of this impassively, but her jaw dropped now. His finger left a red line in its wake, which quickly began dripping blood. The red liquid streaked down his snow-white chest.

Shocked, Valeta tried to grab at him, but there was nothing to grab without smearing the blood everywhere—Reinhart had already taken off his top and thrown it to the floor. She had no choice but to grab his shoulders.

“Are you crazy? Why would you do that to yourself?!”

Reinhart smiled as he straddled Valeta, who had grown pale. His bright smile was one of sheer joy. “Lick it, Master.”

“What...?”

“You need to lick it all up without leaving a single drop,” Reinhart said.

Valeta’s face immediately turned bright red. She could sense the innuendo laced in his words.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Chapter 153

Valeta squeezed her eyes shut, overwhelmed by the man's seductive voice. She slowly opened them again.

"Lick me as much as you want with that little pink tongue of yours."

Reinhart leaned over and presented his bloody collarbone to her. Valeta's mouth opened and closed as she struggled to formulate a response. Blood continued to drip from his wound, staining the sheets. She frowned as she watched the drops of crimson liquid blossoming like red flowers on the sheets and grabbed Reinhart's shoulder. His eyes widened as he tilted his head, and his silky, silver hair shimmered in the dim light with his every motion, catching her attention.

"Let's switch."

"What?"

"Let's switch. I want to be on top," Valeta said, avoiding his eyes.

Her cheeks were flushed bright red once more. Reinhart tucked her against him, tipping over and switching their positions with a smile. Now with Valeta on top of him, he tugged her downwards so he could kiss her.

"Now, lick it all up."

Valeta swallowed. She looked down at his bloody torso nervously. Then, she leaned over him and took a tentative lick. The almost inaudible slurping sound she made resembled a cat lapping up milk. Her shoulders twitched, but she continued to carefully lick at Reinhart's collarbone with her eyes squeezed shut.

Reinhart's breath hitched as he felt her warm tongue sweeping over him as she

quivered with nerves, or excitement. Valeta moved slowly at first, as if she was embarrassed, then she developed a rhythm.

Reinhart chuckled to himself as he watched her lick all over his chest, eyes scrunched closed in embarrassment. She was just too cute. He stroked her hair as she licked him. Every so often, Valeta's ears would turn a brighter red as she caught the embarrassing sound of her tongue lapping at him, her gasps for air filling the heated room.

Starting from his collarbone, she slowly worked her way down, her tongue lapping at his chest over and over again. Reinhart could feel heat pooling in his loins as he watched Valeta hovering over him, her head bobbing, her tongue working over his body.

“Haa...”

His fingers twitched. He wanted to touch himself—if he didn’t get some relief soon, he felt like he was going to explode. Instead of taking himself in hand, he gripped the sheets tightly, his knuckles turning white. Before long, the blood that had once been gushing from his wound slowed to a mere trickle.

Reinhart sighed quietly as Valeta’s tongue traced over his ribs. He didn’t want to make her any more nervous. He watched closely as she carefully licked around his wound. As he caught sight of his blood on her tongue, he wanted nothing more than to throw her to the ground and ravish her.

Valeta took one last lick, before slowly retreating. She tried to sit back, but Reinhart held her head down gently.

“Master...”

His dazed murmur sounded almost dangerous. Valeta looked up. Reinhart straightened up a little and tugged his pants down.

"It spilled down here, too. Lick it. Please, Master?" Reinhart begged, spreading his legs slightly.

Sure enough, there was a single drop of blood on his inner thigh. The problem was... that it was precariously placed. Valeta gave Reinhart a look. He blinked innocently back at her, tilting his head a little as if to say *What's wrong?*

His face was slightly flushed. She shuffled down, bringing her face to his pale thigh, trying to ignore the bulge inches from her face. Reinhart gritted his teeth as he watched her lower her head. Her tongue darted from between red lips.

Valeta stuck out her tongue as far as it would go and lapped up the speck of blood in one long lick. Then she quickly sat up, putting distance between her face and his groin. Her legs had grown stiff, making it hard to move. But Reinhart quickly flipped her over again, returning them to their original position.

"It's my turn now, Master," Reinhart said, nipping at her lips as he straddled her waist.

Valeta swallowed. She held her breath, expression nervous.

"Cut me from here to here," Valeta said as she drew a line across her collarbone.

Reinhart followed her finger with a curious look in his eyes. He smiled. "It's fine. I'm fine with biting your neck. Or even the tips of your fingers. That's more than enough for me."

"It has to be the same. Isn't that what imprinting is, then?"

Reinhart's eyes curved, forming the shape of crescent moons at Valeta's firm response. He sighed. Her loveliness would be the death of him. Pressing his lips to her collarbone, he murmured into her skin, "You drive me mad, Master. I can't stand it."

Reinhart gently traced a line over her collarbone. Valeta flinched, feeling a quick

prick of pain. She furrowed her brow as she looked down at the newly created wound. Reinhart could feel his appetite growing as he watched the blood pool on her chest. He began to suck deeply at her collarbone, his mouth producing wet, obscene sounds.

Like a cat, he bent over her, his tongue lapping at her body. His every move sent jolts of sensation through her. Valeta squeezed her eyes then forced them open again, staring up at the man who was more tempting than a prized whore.

“Ha... F\*ck...”

A curse escaped his lips. He greedily lapped up all the blood that had managed to escape her wound before he could reach it. His tongue carefully traced over the cut.

“I think this is a mistake.”

“What do you mean...?”

“I should’ve just sucked at your neck. This wound has already run dry.”

Valeta stared, having nothing to say to this. As their eyes met, desire dripped from his red gaze. Reinhart quickly captured her lips, wanting to devour the tongue hidden away behind them.

“Mmph!”

She could taste their blood mingling in her mouth—it was a decidedly odd experience. A burst of iron hit her taste buds every time Reinhart’s tongue prodded inside her mouth. She frowned, wondering what was so great about the taste. Meanwhile, Reinhart ruthlessly began to bite at her tongue. He coaxed it into his mouth, saliva dribbling down her chin.

When they parted, Reinhart lapped it up and smiled.

"Ha... Can... Can I?" Reinhart asked, grinding his hips against Valeta's legs like he was a wild animal in heat.

His body had grown hot the more aroused he became. The front of his pants was slightly damp. Valeta nodded slowly. Reinhart buried his face in the crook of her neck and began to nip and suck at her skin. He took hold of her thighs and spread her legs, settling between them. He began to nibble at her earlobe, licking the shell of her ear. All he needed to do was lower his head and her secret place would be right there, spread out like a feast before his eyes.

"Ha... Here..."

He stared down at her pretty face. Overwhelmed by sensations, there were tears pooling in her eyes. He wet his finger in his own mouth.

"And here..." He forced his finger between her lips. "And here, too..." Another finger brushed over her entrance. "I'm going to eat you like a dog. I'll kneel at your feet and obey you for the rest of our lives."

Reinhart grabbed Valeta's hand and placed it on top of the proof of his desire.

"Ah!"

He felt warm beneath her palm, like she was touching a rock left to warn in the sun.

"Valeta," Reinhart said, mouthing at her smooth neck.

"Ngh..."

"Master."

Valeta began to tremble. She forced her eyes open, eyes locked on Reinhart. A shiver went down his spine. His master's usually indifferent eyes were clouded over with pleasure. It was an expression only he was allowed to paint across her

pretty face. His stomach clenched at the thought. He hid the depths of his darkest desire behind a kind smile as he captured her lips.

“Will you touch me?”

A low sound escaped her lips.

Reinhart smiled at Valeta’s half moan, half question. He squeezed the back of her hand, which was still pressed against him. He moved their hands together slowly as he grew bigger in their combined grip.

“Show me all the deepest parts of you. I want to see all of you, including everything inside your head...”

His whimpered demands came out sounding like a groan. Valeta was dazed and feverish—all she could do was surrender to him.

“I want to devour you, down to the very last morsel.”

He was joyous when their lips met, Valeta’s tongue moving against his with equal enthusiasm. With her lips still locked with Reinhart’s, she squeezed him.

“Ngh...”

Unable to resist, Reinhart took Valeta’s ankle, skimming his fingers over the knobby bone. She gasped and released her hold on him. Reinhart leaned over and buried his nose in the girl’s neck. He could smell the faintest trace of soap coming from her skin. The barest whiff of her soft flesh made him hungry.

He slowly leaned back. Baring his teeth, he bit down hard on Valeta’s ankle.

“Ngh!”

Valeta’s hips twitched upwards, surprised by the unexpected pain. He bit at her skin, his tongue snaking out to trace over the bone. Everywhere his mouth met

with her flesh, he left teeth marks. Before long, the bites turned bright red. He left marks all over her, starting at her ankle and traveling to her calf, then from her calf to her thigh. It was as if he was leaving his brand all over her, laying claim to her.

Taking her knees in his hands, he slowly pressed into her. His swollen desire twitched. Reinhart loomed over his master, folding her in half. She felt a dull ache, and then they were fully connected. She panted, and Reinhart waited for Valeta to catch her breath before moving again. Even as he waited, he ran his hands all over her body, touching her everywhere, intense and possessive as was his way.

Valeta slowly nodded. Permission to move granted, Reinhart drew back his hips and he began to slowly move. Every time he gave a hard thrust, she saw sparks behind her eyelids.

Reinhart captured her lips again as his large hands cupped her breasts.

“Haa...”

“Huu...”

Finally, Valeta saw white, her toes curling under her. As they came down from their climax, Reinhart wrapped his arms around her limp body. He pressed a soft kiss against her shoulders.

“You’re mine now,” he said as he looked down at the pale light shining from her chest.

She couldn’t see it, but Reinhart could. It was the magic circle that now spun around all the way around her heart, a bright spiral encasing it.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

Valeta meant to respond to his murmuring in her ear, but she was too tired to

resist slumber. She fell into a deep sleep within seconds. Still inside her, Reinhart kept her close, desperate to feel her warmth against him as always. He snapped his fingers, closing the curtains so that no light could make its way in come morning, and wrapped a blanket around them so they would be warm as they slept.

Reinhart then slowly closed his eyes. The imprinting magic that was now engraved on their very hearts glowed well into the night.

## EPILOGUE

"Do you have to go, Miss Valeta?" Kurt asked quietly as he approached Valeta and her meager collection of possessions.

After she and Reinhart had imprinted on each other, the denizens of the Magicians' Tower had started to treat her completely differently.

"Just for the time being, I suppose," Valeta replied.

"Then... When do you think you'll come back?"

Valeta was suspicious about why he was asking all these questions. Typically, Kurt was the type to retreat after only a single question. She chuckled, able to guess at why he was behaving this way.

"Did the other magicians put you up to this?" she asked.

Kurt stared up at her for a long moment, then replied simply, "Yes."

"The magicians are very sad to see you go."

Valeta laughed to herself as she caught the slightly embarrassed expression on Kurt's face. She could very easily picture the magicians swarming Kurt, begging him to ask her for the answers to their questions. It was too cute.

"And..." Kurt hesitated for a moment. "I'm a little sad, too."

Valeta blinked. "Our house isn't like the Sky Room. It's open to anyone, so you're more than welcome to drop by anytime you like," she said. "Well, as long as it's not too late at night."

Kurt nodded, pleased by Valeta's offer. She laughed softly, scratching her cheek awkwardly. The magicians had initially been very guarded against Valeta,

perhaps to protect themselves. Still, all the walls put up between Valeta and the magicians had dissolved after they discovered that she had suffered a similar upbringing to all of them.

*Come to think of it, Terion's a magician, too.* She didn't realize how comforting she would find it to know that he was going to live for a very long time, too. She didn't imagine it would feel good to watch someone you care about die first.

"Are you ready, Master?"

As soon as Valeta finished packing, Reinhart appeared with the snowta in tow. Reinhart was holding the now rather large creature by the scruff of its neck like it was light as a feather. However, it was obvious the dangling snowta was greatly displeased by this treatment.

*He's probably using magic.* She could see the veins bulging in Reinhart's forearm. It was impressive that he was able to become so strong when needed without ever having to work out, but Valeta wondered if it was a good idea for him to use his magic like this all the time.

"Yes... Terion said that he'd meet us there. Also, are you ever going to stop calling me 'Master'?"

"Hmm... I don't know. It excites me," Reinhart said with a smirk as he set the snowta on the ground. He reached out and took her wrist, slowly caressing it with her thumb.

Valeta frowned. She wasn't sure what kind of excitement he was referring to. "It's not like it's appropriate to be excited all the time, so maybe you should just call me by my name."

"So what you're saying is I'm allowed to call you 'Master' when I want to be excited."

Valeta had nothing to say to this. Reinhart laughed at the girl's stunned silence, ducking to press a kiss to her shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her waist, using it to pull her flush against him.

"As you wish, Valeta."

She didn't respond. The sound of her name rolling off his tongue in his sweet, low voice made her frown. This new form of address seemed just as dangerous as the last. Her eyes grew wide with embarrassment.

"Oh no. Is calling you that too sexy?" he asked.

"Your face is too sexy."

"But I can't go about with my face covered all the time. You'd best just get used to it, Valeta."

She really should have given this imprinting thing some more thought. She still couldn't believe that she'd agreed to spend the rest of her life with this man. Valeta got the feeling that he would only become more handsome with time. She didn't know if she could survive that.

"Maybe we should consider living separately?"

Reinhart paused. "What?"

Valeta's teeth clicked, as she abruptly shut her mouth upon hearing Reinhart's chilly response. She dismissed her own words with a shake of her head. Neither of them said anything. Exhausted, Valeta furrowed her brow.

"I can call you 'Rein,' right?"

Reinhart said nothing, but his eyes widened slightly. He smiled and nodded. Valeta could call him anything she wanted, and Reinhart would have been content, but...

"I like it," he breathed.

His low voice was warm with happiness and pleasant to Valeta's ears.

"Rein..."

His expression grew soft as he whispered the name to himself several times. Valeta squeezed Reinhart's hand, then leaned over and stroked the snowta's head.

"I've been thinking I should give you a real name. What do you think about Gustas?"

Meow?

"Yeah. Apparently, it means 'someone who protects' in the ancient language. And you protected me so... Does that sound good to you? The name itself is a little old-fashioned, but the meaning's nice, so..."

The snowta started meowing enthusiastically. Valeta tilted her head when the snowta, now the size of an adolescent tiger, rolled over on its back.

"You still sound like a tiny pup, though. I thought your growls would get deeper as you grew."

Valeta stared at the snowta. The snowta stared back, blinking at her.

"Well, I guess taking your time to grow up isn't a bad thing."

She wasn't sure what the developmental milestones of a snowta were meant to be, but as long as it was healthy, that was all that mattered. Just the stark difference between its growing body and tiny voice caught her off guard at times... She glanced at Reinhart only to find him giving her a meaningful look.

"I was thinking about shortening it to Gus."

She was terrible at coming up with names. This one she'd found in a dictionary of ancient languages. Now that they were going to live together, she couldn't call it 'snowta' forever.

"Does it sound okay?"

"It sounds good, Valeta."

She looked down at the snowta and saw that it was staring back at her with serious eyes. It looked a little disconcerted.

"I don't think it likes it."

"No, it's not that. I think it's more concerned about being a late bloomer."

Valeta nodded in agreement, straightening up. Reinhart glanced at the snowta and smirked.

"I'm going to collect the rest of our things," Valeta said.

"All right."

As soon as Valeta was preoccupied elsewhere, Reinhart leaned over the snowta and petted it.

"You really love acting like a baby, huh?"

The snowta bared its teeth and growled in response to the magician's teasing voice. Whenever it was around Valeta, the snowta still mewled like a kitten. However, this was a deception on the animal's part. It revealed its true nature before Reinhart, with a growl as deep as a well and befitting a beast of its size.

"Oh dear. It seems like Master is coming back. Best that you go back to your chirping."

"What are you doing, Rein?"

"I was just trying out the snowta's new name. I wanted to get a feel for it. Isn't that right, Gustas?" Reinhart said with a congenial smile.

The snowta whined in response. It rubbed its head against Valeta's legs, hiding away its real growls. Valeta stroked its snow-white fur and smiled.

"Let's go, Valeta," Reinhart said.

"Ah, okay. We'll be off now, Kurt."

"Yes. Silon and Balteer are both busy and regret that they're unable to come to see you off today. They'll probably come visit you soon."

Valeta nodded in understanding. Reinhart snapped his fingers, clearing the room of all its furnishings. Then, he stepped back and held out a hand to Valeta. She reached out to Reinhart, who was now standing in the middle of a magic circle, taking his hand in hers.

A bright light swallowed both of them and the snowta, and their surroundings changed in an instant.

\* \* \*

"I'm back, sister."

"Oh, welcome home."

Valeta entered the room with Reinhart clinging to her waist. Over the past two years, Terion's baby fat had melted away, giving way to an angular jaw.

Valeta stared at the boy's quickly growing muscles. She still hadn't gotten used to them despite seeing him all the time. She still thought of him as the little kid

who always clung to her skirts. He had grown a lot taller over the last two years, as well. A few more years and he would be nearly the same height as Reinhart.

“How were your lessons?”

“Good.”

“And they weren’t too hard?”

“No. I mean, parts were difficult, but mostly they’re a breeze.”

Terion had entered the Imperial Academy that spring, securing his position with Dreux Leon’s recommendation. The Academy was located on an island that was a month’s boat ride away and that was only after the month-long carriage ride from the capital to the port.

Although the island was technically part of the empire, it was also considered an independent state where equality was emphasized. In other words, admission was based solely on academic merit rather than status or rank.

However, members of the imperial family, in addition to royalty from other countries, were always automatically accepted. The reasoning seemed to be that those who would one day be the leaders of large countries needed to be educated.

Originally, the plan had been for Terion to attend the sword fighting academy located within the empire, but he tested for the Imperial Academy at Dreux’s suggestion, and soon after, he received his acceptance letter. That had been last winter.

However, something of note occurred...

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Chapter 155

Actually, Terion was the first child with magic who had ever wished to study at a socoro institution. There had been a flood of concerned nagging from the magicians of the Magicians' Tower when they heard that he wanted to attend, but Terion was adamant. In contrast to countless magicians before him, Terion successfully enrolled in the spring and had been attending the Academy for two months.

The Academy was located in a remote area, so for many of its students living in the dormitories was common. Of course, it wasn't required. In reality, the noble and royal students or even those from wealthy merchant families used teleportation scrolls or paid to use teleportation circles to commute to and from school. And since Reinhart was the head of the Magicians' Tower, Valeta was going to covertly ask Kurt and Silon if they had any spare teleportation scrolls, but Reinhart had taken things a step further. He took it upon himself to escort Terion to and from school every day. Of course, it literally only took a minute out of his day, but...

*I never imagined he'd step up like this. She thought it was good enough that he was strangely fond of Terion, but... It seemed like he was also teaching him magic, too. Reinhart had said, "What's the use of being born as a magician if he ends up being better with a sword?"*

*Even though he was the one who suggested that Terion learn the sword, Valeta thought. Regardless, the Academy was practically a small country that didn't abide by anyone else's laws, and that included the empire's. It was essentially a small country populated by only the students. Once a week, Reinhart took a break from taking Terion to and from the Academy, and today was one of those*

days, judging by the teleportation scroll still clutched in his hand.

Terion set his sword down and laughed at the familiar sight of Reinhart attached to Valeta like a limpet.

"You're giving Valeta a hard time again, brother."

Reinhart's eyes narrowed as he continued to cling to Valeta's waist.

Terion averted his gaze with a sigh. He pursed his lips and mumbled, "...I mean, big bro."

Reinhart laughed as Terion barely managed to get the affectionate sounding words out, his face turning red. He slowly extracted himself from Valeta, glancing at the boy before he slipped into the kitchen.

Valeta sighed as she collapsed on the sofa.

"What did you do today, Valeta?" Terion asked.

"I was going to write some more of my book, but I couldn't write a thing with that guy pestering me all day."

"What? How could you say such a thing? I know you enjoyed it." Reinhart's voice called from the kitchen. It was obvious from his smug tone that he was smiling at her sharp words.

"Oh..."

Terion had a vague idea of what they were talking about. He averted his gaze and laughed awkwardly to himself. Over the past two years, the child who had always been good at reading the room was now so good at it that Reinhart often complained about it. Of course, once he'd stubbornly decided on something, it was hard to get him to change his mind.

"It's almost your break from school, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I don't know what to do for my assignment. They want me to volunteer at an institution on the island and keep a journal of our experiences, but..."

Terion sighed and looked down at the carpet in thought.

Furrowing her brow as she examined the boy, Valeta said, "An institution?"

"Yes, but you and brother..."

At that moment, Reinhart emerged from the kitchen with three steaming cups.

"I mean, you and big bro are..." Terion swiftly corrected himself.

He pouted, not wanting to come out and say that they didn't have any connections he could call upon. Reinhart set a cup down in front of Terion and Valeta before taking a seat next to her. Terion's cup was filled with hot chocolate, while his and Valeta's contained a sweet citrus tea.

"The Magicians' Tower doesn't count?"

"It can't be..." Terion glanced between the two of them. "...our parent or guardians' home institution."

Valeta pressed her lips together. Reinhart narrowed his eyes. Sitting on the sofa with his legs crossed, he elegantly sipped at his tea, then set the cup down and began stroking his chin. His eyes curved with his smile.

"Would a dungeon be okay?"

"A dungeon?"

"Tartarose. Officially, it's managed by the watchdog. Although it's technically under the Tower's jurisdiction, it's still considered to be a separate organization,"

Reinhart said, voice languid.

Tartarose was located under the Magicians' Tower and the island in the sky, and was a dungeon that had been built to contain any criminals who were likely to live for a very long time.

"Isn't that rather dangerous?"

Valeta was surprised by Reinhart's confidence as he suggested the prison. She knew that he was out of his mind, but she didn't think that he'd be insane enough to send a *child* to such a dangerous place. No matter how long she lived, she'd never understand this man.

"It's all right, Valeta. Nothing will happen. I know it doesn't seem like it, but the watchdog is a very powerful man," he reassured softly with his usual smile.

Terion's eyes were already beginning to sparkle.

*Of course, he's excited about it,* Valeta thought. She sighed, shrugging to herself.

"Can I go?"

"I feel like you're still going to go even if I tell you not to."

"I won't go if you don't want me to..." Terion said, staring at her with wide innocent eyes.

At first, Terion had hesitated every time he called her sister, glancing at her shyly to make sure she was okay with it. A year had passed since he'd finally gotten used to it. When they'd first started living together, she'd told him to stop calling her Miss Valeta. A week later, he'd picked up the word "sister" somewhere and started calling her that instead.

At first, Terion had addressed Reinhart as "brother," the magician had hated the way it sounded and told the younger magician to call him "big bro" instead.

Despite the very forceful way he insisted that he should be called “big bro,” it was pretty sweet.

“Ask your teacher first if that’s okay. If they agree, then I’ll send you there.”

“Yes! Thanks, big bro!”

“Of course.”

Reinhart ruffled Terion’s hair. Looking at the two of them, Valeta thought, *I’m glad that they get along, but...* Sometimes, she felt like Reinhart saw Terion as a cute pet rather than a human being. Even if this was the case though... it wasn’t like she could do anything about it. She wasn’t overly invested in changing Reinhart’s way of thinking. Nor did she feel particularly inclined to, either. After all, she didn’t want to completely change who he was.

Terion and Reinhart’s eyes met. The corners of the older magician’s mouth curled upward. Terion slowly blinked. Then, he nodded as if in understanding. He turned to Valeta with a bright smile.

“Where’s Gustas, sister?”

“I think he’s out hunting. He should be back soon,” Valeta replied indifferently as she took a sip of her tea.

In the past two years, the snowta had grown so big that neither she nor Reinhart could carry it anymore. In addition, it seemed to have developed animal instincts, so it frequently went hunting by itself. The creature had become so large and majestic that Valeta missed how tiny and cute it used to be. After she became suspicious of the snowta’s baby voice, it had taken less than two months for his meows to grow deep and growl-like. Its little mews were no longer.

“Then I’m going out too!”

Terion threw on a robe, grabbed his bow, and dashed out of the house. Valeta sighed as she watched Terion disappear. He didn't even give her a chance to say goodbye. After the door slammed shut, the sound of the boy's footsteps growing distant, Reinhart turned to Valeta with a smile.

"Well, then. Shall we continue where we left off?"

"What?"

"You're still wet, aren't you? I haven't had a chance to help you get cleaned up," Reinhart asked as he pried her thighs apart with his knee. Pressing Valeta up against the armrest, he rubbed his knee against her heat. "You're still throbbing, aren't you? You want me, don't you?"

"I told you not to say such vulgar— Ah!"

He pressed against her harder, bringing their bodies closer to one another. Valeta tilted her head back, and Reinhart immediately dove in to nip at her pale throat.

"Master," he moaned. "You want to devour me, don't you?"

Shivers ran down her spine. She never could have guessed that those words would come to signal the start of their lovemaking. Reinhart continued to rub against her, and heat pooled pleasantly in her stomach.

Valeta nodded in agreement, taking Reinhart's chin and tugging him closer for a kiss. His mouth tasted like the sweet citron tea they'd been drinking. He smirked, meeting her with equal passion.

"W-wait... Terion might be back soon. We should go to our room..."

"He won't be back for another hour. Don't worry."

"How do you know..." Valeta gasped as he captured her lips again.

Reinhart didn't reply, instead tightening his grip on her hips. He slid a hand under her dress.

"Oh my... I don't know how you were able to keep a straight face, look at the state of you," he said as he slowly rubbed his index finger and thumb together.

Valeta's face flushed when she saw the slick on his fingers. Reinhart's lips curled into a smirk as he nibbled at her earlobe.

"You're so naughty, Master. What if the kid were to see you like this?"

"S-stop... Mmph..."

Valeta gasped for hair, her hand flung out as she tried to ground herself, finally finding Reinhart's wrist and holding it tightly. She raised her hips, a flush spreading across her cheeks.

"Hurry... Get back inside me... you bastard..."

Reinhart laughed, showing all of his teeth. He savored her lusty cry, stripping her of her clothes, then impatiently ripping off his own.

"Your wish is my command, my lovely master."

Their naked bodies met and entwined. Valeta wrapped her legs around Reinhart's waist.

"I think someone like you is far more beautiful than I could ever be, Master," he whispered in Valeta's ear.

He always praised her when they came together so passionately like this. Valeta knew this was him trying and the best he could do when it came to a confession. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

The glow of sunset spread across the sky, before giving way to the moon.

“Big bro! Sister! My teacher said I could go to the dungeons!”

“That’s good news.” Reinhart replied with a smile after Terion burst through the door without even knocking.

Terion and the snowta had returned home late the evening prior. Now, it was the next day and Terion had come rushing back from the Academy, his face flushed with excitement. Valeta blinked from where she was sitting on the sofa. She was still recovering following their passionate lovemaking the day before.

“Would you like some cold water?”

“I’m fine.”

Reinhart knelt and gently brushed the hair out of her eyes.

It was the following day that Reinhart introduced Caspelios to Terion. He must have talked to the watchdog beforehand because the man simply sighed and accepted the child’s presence as inevitable.

Terion’s Academy break started, but after going to Tartarose for only about a week for his practicum, trouble arrived. Valeta nearly fainted when she heard about what had happened. Several felons had gone missing from Tartarose, taking Terion with them.

The only thing they left behind was a handwritten note.

*—Don’t follow us, or we’ll kill the child.*

Reinhart, who had been living a quiet peaceful life, very quickly showed his true colors for the first time in a long time. Valeta was losing her mind, too.

It was only natural that the two would immediately spring into action, their short-lived peace having been shattered.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 1

#### SIDE STORY

Tartarose was a large prison located under the Magicians' Tower, named after the realm the gods were exiled to in the myths of old. None of the magicians who lived on the island in the sky ever stepped foot in the prison. The only people who had ever entered Tartarose were the head of the Magicians' Tower, his watchdog, and the select few chosen to be guards. The prison was where magicians were held, but only the ones who had committed such great sins that death would be a mercy they did not deserve.

Valeta stared at the skull mounted on the black door in front of her. A skeleton's head had been embedded in the center of the door, which had been chained shut. The large, imposing door slowly creaked open. The first thing to hit her was the stench of sulfur. The arm around her waist tightened as she grimaced at the rotten stench. She suddenly felt lips pressed close to her ear.

"I can use magic to block the smell if it bothers you."

"No, I'm fine."

It was strong, sure, but only enough to give her a light headache. She didn't want to seem weak by having to rely on magic all the time. Lowering her head, she rubbed her nose a couple of times. The smell was really strong.

*Rattle. Rattle.*

The grating sound of iron chains reached her ears. Valeta looked for the source of the noise, the throbbing in her head intensifying. A group of cloaked figures passed through the door. The group, accompanied by the sound of clinking chains, stopped in front of Reinhart and Valeta.

"My lord," the clear leader of the group said as he raised his head.

Reinhart crossed his arms over his chest, looking over the group of hooded figures, before wrapping an arm around Valeta's waist once more. Caspelios, who was standing next to him, took a single step forward.

"They're the watchmen. They're not allowed to leave Tartarose and are only permitted to use magic to punish the prisoners."

"I know. I heard that if any of the prisoners have children in Tartarose, those children are taken to be raised as watchmen," Reinhart said, his voice cold.

Valeta's eyes flashed with surprise. She knew that Caspelios had no doubt been the one to design things this way, and it surprised her that he'd come up with such a plan. The hooded figures didn't even raise their heads at Reinhart's harsh words.

Valeta regarded them for a moment before looking up at him.

"Don't take your anger out on them, Reinhart."

"I'm not taking out my anger on anything, Valeta. I'm just stating the truth," Reinhart replied breezily.

He said he wasn't venting, but Valeta knew this wasn't true. As soon as he'd heard about Terion's kidnapping, Reinhart had immediately returned to the Magicians' Tower to chase down the fugitives. By then, it was already too late. It wasn't that Reinhart wasn't capable—it was just that the fugitives had very

quickly covered their tracks.

"I don't know what else I'm meant to say to the watchmen who were stupid enough to let prisoners escape?"

Valeta broke free of Reinhart's hold and frowned. He was definitely lashing out. She sighed, then approached the leader of the shadowy figures. Tartarose had no entrance. One could only enter and exit using a magic circle, and no one was able to use magic inside the prison. The only exception to this rule was through the use of a special ring, but that was a different story.

"Gene, Nereid," she called out.

The two elementals appeared almost instantly in response to Valeta's call. She had to figure out why the prisoners had taken Terion. She hoped that Gene and Nereid would be able to follow their trail.

*"Why do you always call us to these places?"*

*"I'm in total agreement. Who do you think you are?"*

*"Again with the nagging."*

Valeta frowned. Reinhart's eyes narrowed, sensing Valeta's discontent. He glared at the two elementals, who immediately fell silent.

*"Ahem, so... Wh-what did you want?"*

*"Terion disappeared. I was wondering if you could follow his trail."*

*"I can go anywhere there is wind. You're not going to take us in there, are you?"* Gene looked very unhappy. In fact,

he seemed both nervous and reluctant. Valeta couldn't disagree. Even she was getting a headache from the stench. *"We can't pick up any traces of him... or even how much of a trace there is left. It's so full of negative energy and spite that"*

*I don't want to go inside. You know that we're creatures of nature, right?"*

Valeta nodded. She knew very well that Gene and Nereid were connected to the natural world, being wind and water elementals, respectively.

Gene sighed. *"And yet you brought us to a man-made place. Not just any place, but one that's filled with negative energy. It's not good for us. Even if we go in, we'll probably be forced back to the elemental realm within half an hour. We don't want to fall unconscious."*

**"It's dangerous for you?"**

*"Of course! It might not seem the way, but we have to remain pure. I know it's hard to tell just by looking at this old man,"* Nereid said, pointing to Gene.

Was it really that bad? The elementals had never been so resistant to helping her. They had never turned down one of her requests before, either. She was surprised to hear that they'd disappear into the elemental realm to get away.

*"Once tainted, an elemental can't return to the elemental realm. So, we really don't want to go inside. I hope you're not too disappointed in us."*

**"No, I'm not disappointed. You don't have to come if it's too much."**

*"It will be fine as long as we don't spend too much time in there,"* Gene grumbled. With that, he took flight, gliding through the gap in the skull door.

Nereid produced a large droplet of water, about the size of a fist, and held it out to Valeta.

*"Drink this,"* she said. *"It'll keep the toxins at bay for a bit."*

**"Oh, thanks."**

*“Don’t mention it. I don’t want a soft and squishy human like you dying!”*

Nereid certainly has a way with words, Valeta thought as she drank the water.

Reinhart tilted his head to the side, a frown forming on his face. She’d refused when he offered to use his magic on her but readily accepted and drank water the elemental had produced from who knows where. For some reason, this made him feel bad.

“I don’t like it when you cheat on me, Master.”

“What? When did I cheat?”

“Just now. You drank from someone else’s hand.”

“Did the sulfur mess with your brain...?”

“Why do you say such sweet things to me every day?” Reinhart pulled Valeta closer, pressing his lips to her ear. He nibbled lightly at her earlobe. She still had no idea how much it turned her on when she glared at him. “That’s why I’m nothing but a dog before you.”

“You’re always...”

“Can I kiss you?” Reinhart asked as he nipped at her lower lip. Valeta grimaced. It stung. Reinhart’s soft tongue slipped into her mouth, and she was too distracted to stop him.

“Stop, ngh...”

She gasped as his tongue forced its way in further. The feeling of his tongue gently exploring her mouth was an unfamiliar one. She could feel his stare on her even though her eyes were squeezed shut. She suddenly remembered that they weren’t alone.

Valeta bit Reinhart's tongue, hard.

He froze instantly. As she quickly pulled away, he brought his finger to his tongue, checking it for blood. "Are you trying to provoke me? Do you want me to devour you?"

"You know that Terion's still missing, right?"

"Yes, I know. But it's not that big a deal."

Reinhart tapped his throbbing tongue with his finger a few times before grinning. Valeta's face was still bright red as she looked at him, visibly puzzled. If they were anywhere but Tartarose at that moment, he would have pounced on her right there and then. He didn't like that they had an audience though.

He crossed his arms, tilting his head gracefully. "If they don't want to die by my hand, that is."

"What?"

"You know I'd never let someone else touch what's yours, Valeta. If they knew who he belonged to, they would never have dared touch him unless they desired a horrible, gruesome end."

Reinhart took her by the waist. He loved the way Valeta always looked slightly dazed after they kissed. She was so lovely, he just wanted to swallow her whole. He tried to tamp down his growing desire. His mind wandered to what it would be like to lick between her legs right where she stood. It was an enticing thought. He could picture the way her legs would tremble, unable to support herself. He'd hold her steady, forcing her to stay upright. Reinhart licked his lower lip, growing hard just thinking about it. The stiffness between his legs made him groan as he stretched his back.

"You don't have to worry about anything. If the perpetrators are already dead,

I'll bring them back to life, cut off all their limbs, and repeat the process over and over again."

Reinhart reached out to stroke Valeta's hair, his touch indescribably gentle. To think that the terrible words coming from his lips could sound so sweet. *I'm at the end of my rope.* His hand passed from her hair to her cheek and she kissed his palm as he stroked her skin. His eyes widened as her soft lips caressed his palm affectionately, then pulled away.

"I'm putting my trust in you."

As her sweet voice reached his ears, Reinhart's lips relaxed into a smile.

"Yes, of course. Anything for you, Valeta."

They turned as one and walked into Tartarose, the massive door closing silently behind them.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 2

\* \* \*

Tartarose was dark and reeked of sulfur, and navigating through it reminded her of walking in a dimly lit forest. Valeta sighed long and heavy. Night had seemingly fallen in the blink of an eye. She had envisioned that Tartarose would resemble a normal prison with convicts locked behind bars, but she very quickly realized she was wrong upon entering.

Laid out before her eyes was an entire city, but one that had never really developed nor was it capable of much improvement. Everyone wore gray robes, all of them nothing but skin and bones with dark circles under their sunken eyes. They trembled like leaves when they heard the clinking sound of chains. There was even a young child.

*A child? But why...?* Valeta didn't feel bad for them knowing that all these people were criminals, but what crime could a child have possibly committed? This was a city of magicians. There had to be a reason, but she couldn't think of anything.

"Don't get too close."

A large hand landed on her shoulder, stopping Valeta in her tracks. She blinked, slightly dazed. She hadn't even realized she was walking toward the child. She

must've been distracted because the child looked about the same age as Terion. It had been a strange feeling, though, like she'd fallen into a trance for the briefest of moments.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Valeta said, taking a step back. The hand on her shoulder was completely wrapped in a white bandage. It belonged to one of the watchmen. He released her and returned to his post.

Reinhart's red eyes narrowed.

"The wards are all in place, and the watchmen seem vigilant..."

Valeta could see nothing but a large, derelict city. In contrast, Reinhart's eyes flitted around as he commented on things that she couldn't see.

"So why...?"

Reinhart abruptly thrust out his hand.

"Aah!"

At that moment, the child Valeta had been about to approach rose into the air. The terrified child cried as Reinhart held him by his throat, his little feet dangling.

"Why would our precious little puppy run away?" He tightened his grip.

"Ngh!"

"Reinhart!"

"Who do you think you're trying to fool? Hm?" Reinhart said, bringing the child's face close to his.

The child's eyes looked like they were about to burst out of his head. Reinhart bared his teeth as the boy squirmed in his grasp. Valeta sighed deeply, going

over to them. She slid a hand over Reinhart's eyes. The magician sighed, his grip around the child's throat relaxing.

"Did this child try to do something to me?" she asked.

Reinhart didn't say anything for a long time, but finally, he nodded. Perhaps it was because his eyes were covered or because of the warmth of her palm, but the tension in Reinhart's neck seemed to bleed away.

"What did he do?"

Reinhart sighed again. "He tried to hypnotize you."

His voice was a lot calmer now. Valeta looked down at the boy, who Reinhart had by now tossed to the ground. The kid was unable to meet her eyes.

"Feeling calmer now?" she asked Reinhart.

"Yes."

"It's all right. I'm not hurt, and I feel fine."

"I know. I was just worried about you."

Satisfied, Valeta slowly withdrew her hand. Reinhart's eyes, once roiling like the stormy sea, were now as calm and tranquil as a lake. His serene gaze met hers.

"But I have no desire to let his actions slide."

"He's just a child. Leave him alone."

"You know, you have quite the soft spot for children."

He glanced away for a moment, then a mischievous grin came to his lips. He placed a large hand over Valeta's eyes. She tilted her head.

“Reinhart?”

“Keep your eyes closed for a moment, Master.”

“Huh?”

“Please.”

Why did he always behave as though they were the only two people in the world? Regardless, this was an improvement compared to the murderous mood he'd been in the past couple of days. *This isn't a big deal, just do it*, Valeta thought. Putting aside her hesitation, she closed her eyes.

She had barely closed them before Reinhart was saying, “You can open them again.”

Valeta's expression grew puzzled. Something was strange. For some reason, Reinhart's voice sounded oddly... young and distant.

“Why does it sound like you're far away all of a sudden...”

Valeta opened her eyes. Reinhart, who had just been standing right in front of her, had disappeared. Valeta looked from side to side. *Where the hell did he go? I just heard his voice.* About to turn around, she felt a tug at her pants. She absentmindedly swatted at whatever it was, trying to turn again when she felt another tug.

“Huh?”

“What do you think, Master? Aren't I adorable?”

Valeta looked down.

Before her stood a small boy, the top of his head barely reaching her thighs. He had short, silver hair, huge round eyes, and chubby, rosy-red cheeks that were

just begging to be pinched.

"No."

The mini version of Reinhart was all smiles. Valeta swallowed hard. Her fingers twitched. There were no words to express how cute this tiny Reinhart was. He was even wearing a tiny pair of overalls.

"Big sis?"

Valeta's breath hitched.

"I love you, big sis."

This was insane. Valeta knew that a fully grown man was hiding inside that small child, but she couldn't take her eyes off his adorable little cheeks. She wanted to squish him.

"You... Turn back right this instant."

"Do you love me?" the child asked, clinging to Valeta's leg.

She'd scoffed when Reinhart had pointed out that she had a soft spot for children... but maybe he was on to something.

"H-hold on..."

"Valeta..."

His half-moon shaped little eyes were adorable. It's like they were begging for her unrequited attention. Valeta didn't know what to do with her hands.

She just nodded vigorously.

"Okay, can you turn back to normal now?"

"Hm?"

*Fake bastard* was what Valeta wanted to say, but the words got caught in her throat when she saw the child's innocent twinkling eyes. She swallowed hard, looking away.

A wide smile settled on Reinhart's face. *I knew it. She's weak when it comes to children.*

Valeta always insisted that she didn't like children, so Reinhart had chosen to just let it go. But now he finally had proof to support his theory. She didn't know where to look. He didn't think he had ever seen her so red before. The corners of his lips turned up in a smile. Although he was wearing an almost cruelly mischievous expression, it didn't look at all mean on Reinhart's sweet little face.

Valeta was still stubbornly looking up at the sky.

*"Hey! How long are you going to just hang around over here? I told you I don't have much time!"*

"Oh, sorry."

Gene had reappeared, and was now flapping his wings violently in Valeta's face. Great gusts of wind blew at her. Nereid shrank down in size and collapsed in a sprawl on Gene's back, looking exhausted.

"Are you okay, Nereid?" Valeta asked.

*"Do I look okay? I'm not okay by any definition of the word. Ugh... I feel sick... My head hurts."*

"Why don't you just leave now?"

*"I think I will. I don't think I'll be much help. There's no water here anyway,"* Nereid said, clearly exhausted as she

shook her head.

Valeta watched as the water elemental disappeared with a weak wave of her hand. In comparison to Nereid, Gene looked practically healthy.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

*“I’m made of stronger stuff than that weakling. I can hold out longer than her. It hasn’t been that long since she was born, so this sort of place takes its toll on her,”* Gene said with a scoff.

Initially, she had been worried about Gene entering this place, but it seemed like he was doing fine.

“Valeta! Let’s take a look around over there.”

Valeta turned to look where he was indicating, but it seemed like a place inaccessible to humans. She couldn’t see the child anywhere.

“Big sis?”

Reinhart’s tiny hand squirmed its way into hers. Holding onto his little, pale fingers was a weird feeling. Looking down at Reinhart, she gave him a small smile. Thinking on it, he had mentioned that he spent his childhood on a battlefield. What was he trying to accomplish by taking on the appearance of a five- or six-year-old child?

Valeta crouched down. She reached down, wrapping her arms around Reinhart’s tiny waist, and lifted him into her arms. He blinked, utterly dumbfounded to find himself being carried.

“Valeta?”

Reinhart didn’t have a single care for the shocked stares everyone around him

now wore. He peered up at Valeta as if they were the only two people in the world.

"I love you, too," Valeta whispered into the young Reinhart's ear. His small back tensed under her touch. She slowly patted the boy's tense back, until he eventually relaxed in her arms. "Where do you want to go?"

"That way."

Valeta slowly started walking in the direction Reinhart was pointing as he rubbed his chubby little cheek against her shoulder, acting like a spoiled child. He paused in his ministrations only to glare at Caspelios and the watchmen, who trailed along behind Valeta, his gaze as cruel and devilish as ever.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Side Story: Chapter 3

\* \* \*

*I wonder if this is what hell looks like.*

Every step she took was accompanied by the sound of rattling chains. The longer she walked, the more it felt like a labyrinth. Everywhere she turned, there were magicians who had been slowly stripped of their pride and intellect.

“What does someone have to do to get locked up here?” Valeta asked one of the rattling watchmen trailing behind her.

Of course, committing murder was a horrible crime... But it was concerning that capital punishment was considered the best form of punishment in this world. She hadn’t thought that magicians were the type to be hard on wrongdoers.

The watchman listed off a few reasons. “One must kill at least ten magicians or a hundred socoros, research prohibited magic, experiment on young magicians... Things like that.”

“Oh...”

In that case, she supposed spending time in Tartarose was a better punishment than death. But...

“Why are there so many offenders?”

"Time doesn't pass here, Valeta."

"You're joking."

"What do you mean?"

Reinhart wore a despicably bright smile as he blinked his big round eyes up at her. Valeta shuddered, still clutching him in her arms. She didn't have it in her to hit a child. *Ugh, I just want to give him a good rap on the head.*

She clicked her tongue, sighing. "What do you mean time doesn't pass?"

"Time doesn't exist in Tartarose. Time, air, and nature are all frozen like a fossil," Reinhart explained, leaning his chubby cheek on Valeta's shoulder.

Thinking on it, she realized that she hadn't felt a single gust of wind since entering the prison. That meant Gene was enduring a place that had no fresh air.

Valeta glanced in the air to see Gene swooping down to her.

*"I think I have to return to the elemental realm."*

"Really?"

*"Summon me again in a few hours, and only me. This place is too much for the water elemental. If you want to summon a different elemental, make sure it's a ground one."*

"A ground elemental?"

*"Yes, like Noas. He'd be the strongest of us in a dust bowl like this."*

And with that, Gene slowly faded from existence. Valeta watched the exhausted wind elemental disappear, her expression heavy with guilt. *Maybe I shouldn't have summoned him.* But she couldn't use her skills as an alchemist here.

Forensic science wasn't as developed in this world as it was in her previous one, and she couldn't track a person's location using alchemy. Now that her potions sales were booming, the alchemists who were slowly coming out of hiding had been working with the magicians to develop new magic and alchemy, little by little.

These days, it seemed like magicians and socoros were starting to interact with each other more, as well. Thanks to this, a very small percentage of the Magicians' Tower seemed to be more receptive to socoros.

"He couldn't stand bein' here any longer?" Reinhart asked.

"Huh? Yeah..."

Was it because his tongue was shorter now? Why had Reinhart's usual smooth, velvety voice been replaced by a child's high-pitched one that couldn't pronounce anything?

"He must be gettin' weak in his old age."

Valeta didn't dignify him with a response, looking away from his big, round eyes. Baby Reinhart was certainly very cute.

"Right, Valeta?"

And utterly despicable. She hated herself for not being able to scold him. She wanted to pinch the little boy's cheeks, but whenever she thought about the real Reinhart hiding inside him, all those feelings promptly disappeared.

Valeta let out a long sigh.

"Nothing grows in Tartarose. Time doesn't pass here. If you plant a seed, nothing will grow. The only exception is god's gift to humanity—the ability to conceive life," Reinhart continued to explain, adopting a less nasty tone than before. He almost sounded anxious, which was more reassuring than she expected it would

be.

Valeta continued walking, listening to his childish voice as he explained, "Children born to a magician are precious, but their existence is strictly regulated. Killing one is a direct trip to Tartarose."

"That makes sense."

"Even the head of the Magicians' Tower is called upon to attend the hearing, which, as I'm sure you know, makes it a very serious matter."

That's why Reinhart had been unable to kill Terion all those years ago. This meant that the criminals who kidnapped Terion would be in serious trouble once they were caught.

"So, those responsible for kidnapping Terion will be brought back here, right?"

"No, that will not be the case."

This time it was Caspelios who responded, walking a step behind them. His voice was just as grating as ever, but it seemed he was choosing to speak more these days. The magicians began to treat him better after some of them realized that he was one of the original twelve magicians that had created the Tower. Perhaps he was just used to Reinhart's antics now, but he wasn't as grim and dreary as he'd been either.

"What do you mean by that?"

Reinhart was silent.

She looked down at the boy's head on her shoulder. It didn't seem likely that he was going to move anytime soon. He almost seemed reluctant to continue this conversation.

"Once a prisoner commits another crime, there is no mercy. The guard dogs will

rip them limb from limb, and use them as toys.”

At this point, she was resigned to the magicians and their gruesome punishments. It wasn’t her place to argue. Truthfully, Valeta was mad that the convicts had even been able to lay a hand on Terion in the first place.

“Do you know why they kidnapped Terion?”

“Because he’s a child magician. There are a lot of benefits to keeping a magical child around. For example, if something were to happen to the child while they’re within the boundaries of the island in the sky, the Tower’s magic would protect all of them.”

“Protect?” Valeta repeated.

Caspelios nodded.

She got the feeling he was taking her time explaining the situation so that she would understand.

“For example, if a child magician’s blood is drawn while on the island in the sky, it will assume that the child is in danger and immediately trigger a teleportation circle.”

“That’s insane... Are you saying that he’s hurt right now?”

“It’s highly likely.”

Valeta swallowed hard.

Of course, being prisoners she knew with what little morality they had left, hurting a child was nothing to them, but regardless—she would never forgive them if they’d touched even a hair on Terion’s head.

“So, where would the teleportation circle take them?”

"The infirmary at the Magicians' Tower."

"So why wasn't he protected there?"

Caspelios hesitated to answer her question. Eventually, he lifted his hooded head, his peculiar, crimson eyes meeting her violet ones. "I must inform you that the prisoners here are all highly skilled magicians."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Some of their names will go down in history. Some have created countless magical formulas. It wouldn't be all that difficult for them to alter the coordinates as soon as the teleportation circle activated."

Valeta frowned. How had they allowed Terion to be around such dangerous people? Reinhart was one thing, but Caspelios must also have known.

"I fully understand that everyone contained here is very dangerous. So why did you do nothing to protect Terion?"

"I did take measures to do so. He always had a guard with him."

"So what happened?"

"The guard was working with them."

Valeta was left speechless upon hearing Caspelios' response. If Terion's guard had been part of the plot all along, she had nothing left to say. The watchdog had no reason to suspect that there was a traitor among them.

Valeta pressed a hand to her throbbing head. She didn't know if Reinhart was using magic to make it so or if children were just always this light, but her arms had yet to ache from holding him.

"I suppose you can't have known. If you knew that it was going to be this

dangerous for him, why didn't you refuse?"

"The lord..."

"Valeta! I wanna go over there! There!" Reinhart exclaimed, cutting Caspelios off mid-sentence.

Valeta glanced in the direction Reinhart was pointing before looking back down at the child. This was crazy. She resisted the urge to sigh as she felt a surge of irritation in her chest.

"Did you force Caspelios to agree against his better judgment?"

"What? No! Valeta... Don't you trust me?"

*Ugh, he's so despicable.* Little Reinhart peered up at her through his lashes, eyes big and sad.

"If something happens to Terion, I'm never sleeping with you again," she retorted, unable to help herself.

Reinhart's eyes widened.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 4

Reinhart's jaw dropped in disbelief, and he immediately wound his little arms around Valeta's neck.

"You're so mean..."

Valeta sighed. "Quit acting like a child. You..."

She knew he had very little regard for other people, but watching him act so blasé about putting Terion's life in danger made her feel sick. Even though they knew a lot about each other and they'd decided to live together, there were still days when they clashed.

"Valeta." He abandoned the childish voice he'd been using. "You said you trust me. So, put your trust in me."

Valeta sighed again, hearing how serious Reinhart was. Putting her trust in him was a completely different issue when his terrible attitude to human life was at play, though Reinhart didn't seem to think this was the case.

"The wind's stronger here."

"What?"

Reinhart wore a broad smile on his face once more.

"We're here. Put me down."

As soon as Valeta set Reinhart down on his own two feet, he immediately began to busy himself. Valeta watched as the boy ran around, his little legs having to

make twice as many steps for every one of hers. The robe falling from his little shoulders fluttered around him. He was so tiny and cute, truly resembling a doll. Valeta idly wondered what good deed she must have done in her past life, that she now found herself living with a man who looked like this one.

She squatted down, resting her chin on her hand. Reinhart was now examining something on the dirt ground. He stood and toddled over to Valeta and stuck out his small hand for her to see what was clutched in his chubby little fist.

“I think I know where they took Terion. Those idiots left behind some evidence. Good thing we took a look around,” Reinhart said, grinning.

It wasn’t one of his signature smirks, but a genuinely happy little smile. If she thought about it, Reinhart seemed to smile more these days. He only used to smile when he was in a bad mood or sarcastically, but not anymore. Valeta leaned down and scooped the boy into her arms once more.

“Can the watchmen go anywhere they like?”

“No, they can’t. That’s not the only thing restricting their party though. The shackles that they wear are magical. The problem is that they broke free of them.”

Valeta nodded. Reinhart was fidgeting about, doing something from the circle of her arms. She figured he was in the middle of drawing a magic circle and turned to Caspelios.

“Can I ask you another question?”

“Yes,” he said.

“The watchmen are the children of the inmates here, right? Why are they working here?”

“Well—” Caspelios began to explain, but Valeta cut off what she knew was going

to be a boring excuse.

"If it's some outdated belief about how children should carry their parents' sin, then I don't want to hear it."

Sure enough, Caspelios kept his mouth tightly closed.

Once again, Valeta was reminded that he was considered an old-timer even in this strange place. Times were changing, so he should have done some work to acclimatize.

"Or do you think the parents' sins are passed down to the child? These kids didn't ask to be born. Why do you keep them shackled in this dark, terrible place?"

"It's a sin to have a child in this place without giving it any thought," he said.

"Well, that's still the parent's fault, not the child's. Did you think that it wouldn't be painful for the newborn if you took them and punished them from birth?"

Of course, this punishment was two-fold. Who would feel good about their child growing up to be their tormentor? Regardless, it wasn't right. In Valeta's opinion, this wasn't normal.

"Caspelios."

"Yes, Miss Valeta."

"Now that I'm living elsewhere with Reinhart, I don't feel as though I should say anything regarding how the Magicians' Tower is run, but I seriously recommend that you reconsider this."

The watchmen watched quietly from behind Caspelios as Valeta spoke. Like Caspelios, they had their hoods pulled up, hiding their faces. Their only sin was being born in this wretched place. If she was being honest, she hated this close-

minded view on justice.

"Times have changed," Valeta said. "And with it our way of thinking. People are becoming more self-aware. You need to change if you're going to keep up with the times. You plan to continue living alongside the Magicians' Tower, right?"

Caspelios said nothing.

"If the inmates don't have kids, then you need to come up with another way."

She stared the silent watchdog down. She patted Reinhart's head. He was still in Valeta's hold, his tiny arms around her neck.

"Are we ready to keep going yet?" she asked.

"Yes, let's start with this direction."

"Okay."

As soon as Valeta nodded in agreement, a large magic circle appeared on the ground. Reinhart grinned. He stared at Caspelios over her shoulder.

"Think about it," he said as the magic circle swallowed them both.

Caspelios sighed.

\* \* \*

"Where are we?"

"Good question. I don't know either," Reinhart said with a grin.

They were in a large city, but not one either of them had ever seen before. Did the empire even have such a large city? Valeta tilted her head to the side, taking

a step back.

"Shall we check the inn first?"

"Yeah."

Valeta nodded.

They had to find a place to treat as their base of operations first, no matter what they chose to do next. That way, they could split up and have somewhere to meet again. It wasn't long before they came across a building that was very visibly an inn—a rather large one, in fact. Valeta couldn't say that she knew much about the empire, but she had never heard of such a large city before, especially one where there were all kinds of seafood packed into crates being transported back and forth.

The inn was also bustling with people. Most damning of all, everyone spoke with accents that were very different to their own. Valeta rummaged through her robe for her coin pouch and slowly approached the front desk.

"Welcome to the Sea King, the largest inn within the kingdom of Resol," said the clerk in a businesslike manner. She pushed a pile of papers toward Valeta, along with a pen.

Valeta took the pen, but she couldn't hide the puzzled expression on her face. She blinked as she filled out the form with the clerk's guidance. Then, the clerk's greeting finally sank in.

Valeta looked up. "What did you just say?"

"Hmm?" the clerk replied. "Which part do you need clarified?"

"What was this place called again?"

The clerk beamed.

"You're at the largest inn in the kingdom of Resol, the Sea King!" she uttered.

Valeta blinked several times, swallowing nervously. She tilted her head to the side and frowned. "The kingdom... of Resol."

"That's right. Thank you for filling out your personal information."

The clerk retrieved the form and began quickly reading through the information, smiling broadly again. She was professional, if not a bit forceful.

"How long will you be staying with us?"

"Ah... Let's say a week."

"Are you on vacation with your son?"

Valeta's expression grew tense upon hearing the clerk's question. Son?

At Valeta's silence, the clerk's professional smile took on a confused note. Reinhart, too, stiffened in Valeta's arms.

"I'm not her son. She's my sister," Reinhart said with a smile.

It wasn't just any smile—it was the one he wore when he was trying to hide his bad mood.

"Sister? Oh..."

Sure enough, the clerk blushed. Her once professional demeanor was now nowhere to be found. The child was far more captivating than a child had any right to be.

"Yes, she's my sister."

Valeta didn't bother to argue with Reinhart's words. The boy wore a very proud expression.

"Oh, uh... Then what kind of room... We have a suite, a mid-range, and a standard room."

What in the world was a mid-range room? How was it different from a suite or a standard room? She sighed, shrugging to herself. In her opinion, the cheapest room was best, but Reinhart had other ideas.

"The suite."

"Yes, the suite... What? It's twenty-four gold for a single night," Valeta said.

*Why is it so expensive?* she thought. How nice was this suite room supposed to be? She must have only offered the suite as a matter of procedure, since the clerk's eyes grew wide at Reinhart's words.

"My sister has a lot of money."

There was something sneaky hidden behind his sweet smile. What was the point of letting it be known that she had money?

Valeta sighed. "Reinhart, just please shut up," she whispered.

Reinhart merely tilted his head to the side.

*He's truly despicable,* she thought to herself again.

"Would you like the suite for seven days?"

"Yes, that's fine."

Valeta gave up. As soon as she agreed to the suite, the room fell silent. People began to glance at them, and the inn manager, a sharply dressed man in a tailcoat, hurried to them.

"I should've just got a normal room."

"Why? What's the point of having money if you don't spend it?" Reinhart asked, eyes wide. With that, he wiggled to be let down from Valeta's arms and toddled after the inn manager, wearing a triumphant expression on his little face. He looked like a chick following its mother.

"I thought you were going to tease me for being mistaken for your mom."

"I don't like that she called you that," he grumbled.

"Why?"

Reinhart's eyes curved into cheerful crescent moons. The gentle curve of his red eyes was as stunning as always. People graced with good looks could truly get away with anything.

"That's *immoral*, Valeta."

Including saying something as purely ridiculous as this. I had no idea what he meant by this covert whisper.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 5

“Crazy bastard,” Valeta said.

“You should come up with other ways of praising me,” Reinhart replied.

She was keeping pace with the man in a boy's body, walking alongside him. The inn manager was walking slowly so that Reinhart could easily keep up, so Valeta had no choice but to walk slowly as well.

“I hope you enjoy your stay,” the manager said. “If you need anything, please don't hesitate to give the bellpull a tug. One of our staff members will be right with you.”

“Very well.”

Valeta and Reinhart entered the large room together, which featured a king-sized bed and a living room. Clearly, the twenty-four gold a night they were paying was reflected in the room—it was in perfect condition. Even the bedding looked soft and plush. It wasn't much compared to the imperial castle or the Magicians' Tower, but this was the equivalent of a luxury hotel for the average citizen.

“Seems like a nice place. Right, big sis?”

Valeta flopped onto the bed.

“For how long are you going to insist on calling me ‘big sis’?”

Reinhart leaped on top of the bed. He used magic so naturally that if Valeta hadn't been watching him closely, she would have thought he'd jumped on the

bed with no aid.

"When I'm all grown up, how do you feel about me making you cry again?" Reinhart said, his eyes curving with desire.

Valeta wordlessly buried herself under the blankets. It didn't seem like Reinhart had any plans to leave any time soon, and she wanted to enjoy being able to breathe fresh air after being in Tartarose for so long. Resting for a little while suddenly seemed like a good idea.

Reinhart did nothing to stop Valeta from burrowing under the covers. "I'm going to take a look around. Get some rest, big sis."

Valeta didn't reply. She wanted him to stop calling her that. Quietly closing her eyes, she was able to relax because she knew Reinhart was the type of person to get things done. Once he set his mind to something, he would always see it through to the end. This settled her mind some.

She didn't have to shoulder everything by herself anymore, since she now had someone to lean on. Valeta didn't have to bear all the responsibility by herself. She had someone to reassure that she was going to be okay, someone who would run errands for her. She didn't realize how reassuring that was until recently.

"Be safe, Rein."

Reinhart paused, his hand on the doorknob. He turned around with a smile on his face, eyes landing on Valeta, who was buried under the covers with her eyes closed. His gaze softened.

"Yeah. I will."

Then, he quietly left the room.

\* \* \*

*I said that I'd look around, but I don't know where to start,* Reinhart thought. He looked out over the city from his perch on the inn's roof. Valeta was putting her faith in him, so he couldn't let her down.

"I didn't realize that this place was teeming with so much magic."

It wasn't that the inhabitants themselves were magicians—there were magic stones everywhere. It seemed like everyone was using magic, whether to move heavy objects, light a fire, or to keep the buildings warm.

He had heard of the kingdom of Resol before. They had a magical town without magicians. He had heard it was a small kingdom that was rich in magic stones, which they had developed a number of uses for. There weren't a lot of naturally born magicians here, but a lot of people knew how to use magic stones. The people here studied the magic stones and how to use them.

The kingdom of Resol was famous even among the magicians at the Magicians' Tower for their miners and engineers and their ability to process the stones. A fair number of magicians at the Magicians' Tower used stones manufactured by Resol in their magic staffs and wands. Even though they largely hated socoros, even they could appreciate Resol's technological prowess.

"Hm, this isn't good."

Reinhart sighed. It was difficult to pinpoint a single person's magical signature in a place that was so rich in magic. The fugitives were particularly sneaky. They had masked their magic well, making them difficult to detect.

*I knew this would happen.* He didn't know who the mastermind behind all this was, but they deserved a round of applause. He sighed again. Perhaps because he was still in the body of a child everything he did looked simply adorable. However, his eyes were cold and unsmiling. He looked out over the city, utterly

expressionless.

"I'll rip them from limb to limb once I find them."

How dare they cause his Valeta distress? She had suffered through so much and was finally beginning to enjoy life. They were finally happy. He loved the way she was quickly growing comfortable, the way she was finally able to relax and depend on him. Thinking about how all of that had been shattered in an instant made Reinhart impatient.

Every day he was filled with a sense of satisfaction, knowing that he had Valeta in his arms. In a way, shopping for groceries, preparing meals, and raising Terion together was like a vaccine running through his veins.

"I don't mind doing a little large-scale magic, but..."

If he did, all the magic stones in the vicinity would shatter into tiny pieces. If the kingdom of Resol was unable to figure out he was responsible, it wouldn't be a problem. But if they did, it would cause huge issues... Perhaps even an international one. If the imperial palace got involved... Well, that would just be another headache. Now that he had Valeta, he had no desire to make such a big move on his own.

*What should I do?* Reinhart thought. He didn't want to kill anyone without reason, since he didn't want Valeta to hate him. He loved the girl and wanted to protect her, but he had to save Terion, too.

Reinhart's eyes flashed with turbulent emotion as he was lost in thought, ruby red eyes turning silver for a split second. When he blinked, they were red again.

"I guess legwork is the only option."

The kingdom of Resol wasn't very big. Actually, it was ridiculous to even call it a kingdom. Resol was an island country surrounded on all sides by the sea and

had only been around for about a hundred years, despite already having developed a name for itself. Thanks to the magic stones, they were able to fend off pirates and any hostile tribes.

The magic staffs and wands they produced were of the highest quality. Of course, none of them were good enough that Reinhart would lower himself to using them. He'd never felt the need for one. In fact, were he to desire one, he would have no idea how to go about getting one, nor that he'd have to commission one. He didn't want to waste any time. The only thing he had on his mind was keeping Valeta in his arms, even if it was only for an extra ten minutes.

"I guess I'll take a look around."

Did the criminals know Resol was brimming with magic thanks to all the magic stones? They even knew the exact coordinates of the kingdom. Reinhart sighed quietly, jumping off the roof and landing lightly on his feet.

Resol was an island country, but it wasn't exactly tiny. The kingdom of Resol stretched across the entire island. Although it was small compared to most other countries, traveling around the outside of the island would still take at least a week. The kingdom was the only ruling power, so the castle was situated exactly in the middle of the island. It seemed like the towns were arranged in a spiral around the royal castle. This meant that the royal castle was at the end of a long road, which was the safest place for it. The location was wisely chosen.

Reinhart strode down the street, his tiny robe fluttering around him. He had yet to return to his normal size because he liked how sweet Valeta was to him when he looked like this. He liked teasing her, too. Plus, there was one other reason...

"Hm? What's this? A child? Large ships dock in this city, you know? It's dangerous. Go play somewhere else."

"Oh... but I'm lost..."

Nobody would be on their guard against a child.

“How did you get lost?”

“I was looking for my sister. I lost her...”

Reinhart pretended to wipe his eyes with his sleeve. Anyone who knew him personally would have passed out upon witnessing this.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Side Story

### Chapter 6

A woman with a pipe in her mouth scratched the back of her head. She sucked deeply from the pipe, the action appearing familiar and well-worn.

“Oh, what kind of work does your sister do?”

“Oh... She works outside.”

“Yeah, well, that much is obvious.” The woman crossed her arms as she muttered to herself, “Of course she works outside. No one makes any money staying inside all day.”

As if to prove her point, a few large ships were docked behind the woman. Reinhart could see that several crates were being unloaded from them. Judging by all the soldiers, he assumed that the royal palace regulated all the imports.

*Could they be here?* He had assumed they were hiding somewhere off the beaten track. There were a lot of people in Tartarose who were good at hypnosis, like the child he had spared. Either someone had taught it to them, or they had been born with a natural talent for it. There's no way a kid as smart as Terion would have left home of his own free will. If the fugitives had hypnotized Terion and used him, then they could easily deceive other people. He couldn't trust anyone, especially if it wasn't obvious when someone had been hypnotized. Reinhart thought about what he should do next.

He wanted to check inside the harbor. *Come to think of it, no one gave me a description of the perpetrators.* Distracted by Valeta's lovely words, he had barely managed to resist biting her cheek and sucking on her tongue right then and there.

"Hey, you!" The woman called out to a nearby soldier. "This kid says he's lost. Take him back to the main road," she said, jabbing a thumb at Reinhart.

"Understood, Vice Captain."

Actually, it wouldn't have been hard for Reinhart to use magic to look around inside, but he could feel subtle amounts of magic in the environment. Turns out, there was a thin veil surrounding the harbor. A defensive shield had been erected around the harbor using magic stones. If he forced his way in, the magic stones would break, attracting the attention of everyone around.

*What a pain.*

Breaking the stones was easy, but passing by them without a trace wasn't. He'd have to use his head if he wanted to make his move without hurting anyone or damaging anything. Reinhart had never had to practice such restraint before. If something got on his nerves, he usually just destroyed it. If he wasn't happy with something, he simply got rid of it without a second thought.

But he had someone he wanted to protect—someone he wanted to look after. Just the reminder that he didn't want her to hate him made him hesitate. She never opposed him or stopped him from doing anything. He could do whatever he wanted, but he was worried that she would turn her back on him one day.

Realistically, he knew it would never happen, but he still worried. Valeta was a lovely person, the only person in the world who understood him and accepted him for who he was. He couldn't let her go. He couldn't fathom losing her, either. She was an ordinary person, and someone who wouldn't tolerate people getting hurt for no reason. Even if there were times she pretended not to understand or care about people, there were times when she couldn't pretend anymore. He knew that better than anyone else. Reinhart knew that if he caused problems here, she would give him a disappointed look. Maybe she would sigh, even shrug her shoulders and shake her head. Maybe she would

berate him. And then, there was a good chance she would try to tackle this problem on her own.

*No, I need to think of another way.* Valeta had only just learned how to depend on him. She had so easily closed her eyes when he told her to rest. If he told her to get some sleep, she would tell him to stay safe. He didn't want to lose this newfound peace.

"This way, kid."

"Oh! Yes, thank you."

Reinhart grinned. The man seemed to be dressed in too little for a soldier. He was wearing leather clothes and boots, along with a cape. That was it.

*Are they enchanted?* It was hard to see at a glance, but the man's clothing was dusted in crushed magic stones. The outfit was probably stronger than a full suit of armor. The magic stones would serve as a shield against any incoming blade or arrow.

*How surprising.* He could see why the Magicians' Tower coveted the magic staffs made in Resol. The soldier glanced down at Reinhart before slowing his pace.

*What an interesting kid. What kind of parents would let a child like him wander around like this?*

Although the kingdom of Resol was a safe place, a child as pretty as Reinhart was always at risk. He was sure to fetch a high price on the slave market.

*Best get him back to his parents quickly.*

The vice captain had a good reason for not just sending the child away. The probability that something would happen to this child was high. If he wasn't properly returned to his family, it would haunt them for the rest of their lives. The soldier shook his head. The child was so beautiful that in a few years, he'd

be attracting both men and women left and right.

"Mister! Are you a soldier, mister?" Reinhart said in a chipper voice, pretending at obliviousness.

The innocent pitch to his voice made him seem like an ordinary child. Reinhart wasn't the type to cling onto his pride. He was willing to set it aside if it was necessary, so he didn't find it hard to act like Terion in front of a complete stranger.

"Yep. I'm a soldier employed by the royal throne."

"Wow! I want to be a magician when I grow up."

"I see, I see," the soldier said in the gentlest voice he could muster. He didn't want to crush the boy's dream. If one wanted to become a magician, they had to be born with magic. People who were able to use the magic stones weren't true magicians. They were more like illusionists, stage magicians who could perform tricks using artificial magic.

"Do magicians exist, mister? My friends say that they don't..."

Reinhart hung his head. The soldier was visibly flustered. He felt sorry for the little kid. The boy was pouting deeply, resembling a wilted plant.

"Of course! In fact, there are even some new magicians at the royal palace!" the soldier exclaimed.

"New... magicians?"

Reinhart's eyes widened. The corners of his lips turned up in a smile. The soldier nodded quickly, taking the way the boy's eyes flashed as an indication that he was happy to hear this.

"This is a huge secret between us, okay? Not long ago, some magicians arrived

in the kingdom. They're all great magicians, but they said they were driven out by others like them."

Reinhart blinked a few times, before his eyes grew abruptly cold.

"They said they wanted to settle here and use their power to help make Resol stronger."

"Wow... Really?"

"Yeah, well, So, that means magicians are real. Who knows? You might become a real magician one day."

Reinhart smiled wordlessly. He had wondered where the fugitives were hiding, but never expected to find them this way. He suppressed a snort. *Those crazy bastards...* To think that they would roll over and show their bellies in front of the socoro king of a foreign country. He could barely hold back his laughter. He had no love for the Magicians' Tower, but there were a few rules that everyone had to follow.

This was an utterly disgraceful new low. It's not like these magicians were children. They were full-grown adults choosing to bow before a socoro. This was a terrible choice on their part were it to get back to the Magicians' Tower somehow.

"In fact, they had a kid with them, too. You'll be able to do it, too. So, where are your parents?"

"What did you just say?" Reinhart said, his childish voice turning deep and cold.

In an instant, a chill settled between the soldier and the child. The soldier blinked. He stuck his finger in his ear as if he had misheard.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing! My sister is at an inn, a very big one," Reinhart said, smiling brightly at the soldier.

However, the smile didn't reach his eyes. Luckily, the soldier didn't seem to notice.

"Ah, you must be talking about the Sea King. Let's head that way, then."

Reinhart quietly followed the soldier. His expression was cold like ice. As if it wasn't disgusting enough that they were kneeling before a socoro, they were making the child that he and Valeta were raising kneel too.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Side Story

### Chapter 7

*Feeling this way is unpleasant.*

Reinhart never thought he would feel anything for anyone other than Valeta. He had thought that he only saw the kid as no more than a pet that he and Valeta were raising, one that he got irritated with every once in a while.

*The royal palace, huh?* Not just anyone could enter the palace. He couldn't infiltrate the palace using magic, either. If he did, his prey would be the first to notice. Reinhart wanted Terion back safe and sound. He could catch and crush the vermin under his feet at any time, but Terion's safety came first.

Reinhart sighed. Knowing the kid's location was good enough for now. He didn't think he'd find it so easily. *I heard that Resol's a safe place, but security here is as loose as it comes.* He felt like it would be an easy task to extract information out of anybody he liked.

Reinhart slowed his steps.

After they reached the Sea King, the soldier crouched, bringing himself eye level with the boy. "Don't go wandering off on your own again you hear? It's dangerous to be by yourself."

"Yes, mister."

Reinhart tried his best to look innocent. He had no way of knowing if he might need this soldier again. As long as he was able to find a way to enter the palace, it wouldn't be hard to use magic once inside without breaking any stones.

He turned and slipped into the inn. As usual, the Sea King was bustling with people. Trying to think of a way to enter the royal palace was beginning to give him a headache. Instead of returning to the room where Valeta was sleeping, he looked around the inn. There was a collection of densely packed flyers pinned to a bulletin board off to one side of the room. Reinhart cast a simple spell that magnified the text. It functioned as if he had put on a pair of glasses. For the most part, the bulletin board was full of postings looking for hired mercenaries or laborers. *There's not much to work with there.*

Thinking it wouldn't be a bad idea to pose as someone making deliveries into the royal palace, he was disappointed that most of the work entailed working on ships or in the mines. There were a couple of listings for illusionists, but that's all the people here were—illusionists. Reinhart didn't need magic stones. He wasn't particularly inclined to physical labor, either.

"Hmm..."

Just then, a flash of gold paper tucked behind a crude piece of parchment caught his eye. Reinhart shuffled a few steps to the right. He could see the words written on the gold more clearly now. He carefully read the official document, which was lengthy, despite its point being clear. Reinhart's eyes narrowed.

[Recruitment Notice for Royal Staff]

It was an advertisement for maids, attendants, and stable hands. Reinhart stood there for a long time, his arms crossed with a contemplative look on his face.

\* \* \*

"Make sure you change all the vases in the hall, newbie," a passing maid barked at Valeta.

"Yes..."

Valeta poured the old water and flowers into a bucket on the tray and replaced them with new flowers.

"What the hell am I doing here?" she muttered to herself as if only just realizing where she was. She looked like she was talking to herself, but Reinhart, standing in a corner nearby dressed in tailcoats, turned his head and smirked at her.

His signature long hair was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he had short, black hair that barely covered the back of his neck. His ruby red eyes were now a shade of purple. He cut a sharp figure in his black tailcoat, but still somehow looked much less flashy than he normally did.

As Valeta's eyes lingered on him, Reinhart smiled, his eyes curving mischievously.

"Want to take it off me?" he asked.

"Explain," Valeta said, cutting his flirting off.

Reinhart's lips twisted into a little pout. "I told you we need to infiltrate the royal palace. My usual methods would draw too much attention, so we had to find another way."

"And why did that have to be as a maid and an attendant?"

"Um... Because I'm sexy, and you look absolutely ravishing?"

Reinhart's eyes drank in Valeta's maid outfit. She had begun to exclusively wear pants ever since they started living together, so he didn't get to see her dressed in a skirt all that often these days. Her black dress with a white apron tied around her waist was an exciting sight. Reinhart grinned as he thought about all the fun role playing he and Valeta could do in the royal palace.

"It suits you, Valeta."

She paused and looked down at her dress, rubbing the back of her neck.

"You too..." she said after a pause.

"I'd be over the moon if you called me master."

Valeta stiffened. Reinhart's mind always went to the weirdest places. She shot Reinhart another disapproving look before she turned her attention back to the flower vases. He licked his lower lip as he watched her walk away, holding the tray.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry. I was just picking up some trash I saw on the floor," Reinhart replied impassively.

An attendant frowned as he looked at Reinhart's hand and eventually nodded. Reinhart's hand suddenly held a scrap of paper in it.

*I can't tell what he's thinking*, the attendant thought as he regarded Reinhart suspiciously. The man standing in front of him was the most handsome of the new hires. He hadn't made a single mistake during the practical exam. He scored well on the written test, too. His face was always expressionless, his voice equally monotone, yet there was a certain elegance and grace to all his actions. He was an impeccable attendant.

*So why does he make me so uncomfortable?* The attendant couldn't shake the

uneasy feeling he got every time he saw the other man. Maybe it was because he always looked so composed. Or maybe it was because of his curt manner. Whatever it was, the attendant couldn't put his finger on it.

"Make sure there's not a speck of dust in the east wing."

"Yes," Reinhart replied.

"If any of the magic stones are out, swap them out for a new one. If you find any trash, make sure it's disposed of properly in the incinerator. Oh, and make sure you return in time for the dinner service," the attendant said, rattling off his tasks as if he were reading from a handbook.

"I understand," Reinhart replied.

"When you're done with your daily tasks, make sure you put out feed for the horses, and polish the nobles' shoes during lunch. You'll be in charge of that for the time being."

"Yes," Reinhart replied calmly.

Of course, he wasn't really listening. The attendant's spiel went in through one ear and out the other. Valeta was the only thing he was paying any attention to. He was preoccupied with what the girl was going to do next.

Reinhart carefully looked around as he followed the attendant. *I heard that this kingdom was thriving, and it certainly seems that way.*

Magic stones regulated the temperature inside the royal palace. He could feel the magic stones' energy radiating from every corner. Instead of candles, the palace used magic stones as a light source. Not only that, the entire palace was covered in a defensive shield.

*It's sturdy.* Reinhart could shatter the stones if he wanted to, but they wouldn't break with just a snap of his fingers. Every single lock had a magic stone

embedded in it, preventing anyone from picking it. It was impossible to open a locked door if one didn't have the right key. The royal palace was filled with magic stones. He was used to drawing his energy from the world around him. Being stuck in a place surrounded by other sources of magical energy was disconcerting.

"If you have any questions, feel free to ask me or one of the other attendants," the attendant continued. "You met them all this morning, and they'll be more than happy to help."

*Yeah, right,* Reinhart thought as he nodded obediently. He didn't want their help. In fact, they'd be more help to him if they just left him be. *They say you get duller the older you get.*

Or were they pretending to lie low, like snakes coiled, ready to strike? Why were they being so welcoming? All the other attendants had the eyes of losers with inferiority complexes.

"Yes, sir."

"Well... Carry on, then."

Reinhart turned and walked away, his steps neat. He had memorized the way the attendants walked back at Delight Manor. Valeta had a lot of servants who tended to her, so he knew how to act like one.

*I'm more worried about my dear master.* After all, Valeta had grown up as a young lady in a noble house. She'd never had to do such menial tasks before.

Reinhart's eyes grew soft as he thought about her, his cold demeanor melting away.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Side Story

### Chapter 8

\* \* \*

“Letta! You’re still not done yet?!”

“I still have a few more left.”

“You’re killing me here, Letta. Are you stopping to smell the roses? Get a move on! We need to prepare the refreshments! Just put the flowers in the vases!”

“Yes, I’m almost done.”

Valeta began to move more quickly, no longer bothering to meticulously wipe down every single vase. The way water dripped over the sides of the vases when she replaced the flowers had bothered her, but wiping them dry seemed to be causing her more issues.

The head housekeeper was looming over her, arms crossed and glaring daggers at her. Valeta moved quickly, too scared to glance over at the woman. When she finished, she turned to the housekeeper, tray securely in her hands.

“Are you done?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It shouldn’t take so long in the future, understood?”

"I'll keep that in mind."

After the head housekeeper Lily showed her where to put the tray, she took Valeta by the hand and charged down the hallway, almost at a run.

*I thought running was forbidden in the palace...*

"I taught you how to arrange the refreshments, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. I'm glad your head is not as slow as your hands."

Valeta couldn't tell if she was being complimented or insulted. She didn't know how to feel about the situation she was in, and she still didn't understand why she was stuck doing this. *I thought Reinhart would just tear this place apart after he found out Terion was here.*

That's what she had been prepared for. She had already mentally drafted a letter to send to the imperial castle if something went wrong. And if they still weren't able to get Terion back, she had even put some thought into how she would ask Carlon, Dreux, and Miloyd, the newly-crowned emperor, for help.

*I didn't think he was even capable of being so subtle.* Valeta was caught off-guard by how discreet his plan was. For one, going so far as to land a job in the royal palace was frankly ridiculous. Reinhart had approached her, still in child form, clutching a piece of paper in his hands. He had laid the charm on to such a degree that she ended up just nodding along with whatever he was saying.

Just like that, she had fallen into his trap. How was she supposed to have known that he would make her take the royal attendant exam the very next day? Valeta furrowed her brow again.

"You'll be serving the prince now," the housekeeper continued. "The princess might be there, too. He's been in a real foul mood these days, so you'd best be

careful."

"The prince?" Valeta repeated. "But I only started two days ago. Why am I being allowed to serve someone so esteemed?"

Usually, only the most skilled attendants, such as the chamberlain or head maid, served the royal family. They would never put someone like Valeta in charge, even if she were just serving the royal princess. She wasn't even fully trained yet.

"The last few maids couldn't bear it. The prince and princesses are twins, so they're very..." the housekeeper trailed off.

Valeta could guess at what Lily was trying to say. She swallowed the urge to sigh. Basically, she was implying that they could be worse than Reinhart, right?

"Anyway," Lily continued, "that's why we had to hire more staff."

Valeta nodded. The temptation to turn and walk right out the door was great, but Reinhart had promised that he wouldn't spill any blood. She didn't want to ruin that.

*I need to be patient.* After all, this whole experience could be another learning opportunity for Reinhart. She wanted the man to feel and experience a variety of things, things that the various Magicians' Tower heads before him never had.

"Make sure the hot chocolate you give the prince is neither too hot nor cold. And the cookies need to be broken up into bite-sized pieces and hand fed to him directly. Make sure you kneel at all times and make eye contact with the prince. Oh, but don't speak unless you're spoken to! Understand?"

Valeta very quickly got the impression that the prince seemed like a bully who liked to manufacture fault in his victims. She slowly examined the sitting room she found herself in. Before she could say anything, the housekeeper thrust the

tray she was holding into Valeta's hands. After balancing it carefully in one hand, she gave the door two sharp raps.

A young voice drifted through the door, sounding haughty.

"Come in."

Valeta wanted to turn around and walk away the second that annoying voice reached her ears. She wondered if it would make things easier if she began thinking of the prince as Little Reinhart. Squashing down her desire to run away, she opened the door. The first thing she noticed was how colorful the room was. Teddy bears and an assortment of other toys and stuffed animals were strewn everywhere.

"Huh? A newbie?"

"My name is Letta. I started working here yesterday."

"That's a weird name," the prince said.

He had a cute, round face. He would have been even cuter if not for the nasty look in his eyes. With sparkling green eyes and golden hair, he was a visually striking kid, looking to be about ten years old. In fact, the way he was arrogantly leaning back in his chair with his arms and legs crossed reminded her of a young Reinhart.

"What's today's snack?"

Valeta looked down at the lid sitting neatly on top of the serving tray. She, too, wished to know what was inside, but she would have to lift the top to find out. The housekeeper had rushed her into the prince's chambers, so she hadn't gotten the chance to ask.

"You'll know if you open it."

"But I want you to tell me what it is."

Valeta paused for a moment. "You should find out for yourself. It's a surprise."

"I like to know what I'm eating before I eat it."

Valeta couldn't think of anything to say to that, but she also knew she couldn't just say that she didn't know what was under the lid. There was a rich, nutty smell emanating from the tray. She was inclined to say they were cookies, but she would be in big trouble if she got it wrong.

"Today's snack," Valeta said, lowering the tray. Then, she quickly snatched the cover off. A sweet, delicious smell filled the room. Underneath was a play of butter cookies and chocolate muffins. *Well, I would've been half-right if I'd said it was cookies.* She dropped some marshmallows into a cup of hot chocolate and set it in front of the prince.

"Hey. Are you kidding me?"

"No."

"I didn't give you permission to open the lid and pour out the drink."

"You don't want it now?"

"No."

"I understand."

Valeta sprang to her feet. She put the plate of cookies and muffins back on the tray, fished the marshmallows from the cup, and poured the hot chocolate back into the kettle. She figured she could just pour his drink into a new cup when he was ready, there were so many of them after all.

"Ha! Are you crazy or just stupid?"

Valeta was starting to get annoyed. What was this kid's problem? She was doing everything just as he asked.

"My apologies. Perhaps I am stupid. I can do it again if you show me how you'd like it done."

"Well, first of all, you have to kneel!"

"Yes," Valeta said as she got to her knees.

She didn't look scared, nor did she seem like her pride was all that hurt, either. The prince, whose name was Praha, glared daggers at Valeta's blank face.

"And you have to bow before you greet me!"

This wasn't true. He just didn't like the maid kneeling in front of him. And if he didn't like a maid, he grew violent.

*Is this how you greet royalty in Resol?* Of course, complying easily wasn't a problem for Valeta. She knelt, bowing until her forehead was pressed to the ground, before sitting back up. She still had some memories of the mannerisms common in the Joseon Dynasty. In her mind, the kingdom of Resol seemed to subscribe to similar etiquette. Most importantly, she wasn't the sort of person whose pride was hurt when complying with petty demands.

"Now what?" she asked.

"What?"

"What should I do next, Your Highness?"

"That...!"

Praha was speechless. Typically, the maid would be in tears by now or, at the very least, have a defeated look on their face, but this woman revealed not even

a hint of what she was feeling. Was she a rock?

"Pour the hot chocolate while you're still on your knees. And add exactly five marshmallows! And you should present the cookies to me with two hands."

"Yes, I understand."

Valeta quietly went about catering to the boy's every whim. She was busy wondering whether Reinhart was up to trouble somewhere, completely unbothered by the prince's demands.

"A-also, you have to bow again when you're done and wish me a pleasant meal!" Praha spluttered, shaking with agitation by now.

Valeta bowed again, complying with her signature blank expression.

"What's next?" she asked.

Praha gasped, his face turning bright red. He had never met anyone like this maid before. Everyone he met grew immediately sick of him and struggled to hide their feelings. He loved seeing people trembling with shame and embarrassment as they bowed before him.

*Why is she completely unbothered?* This was the first time he had ever been treated with such indifference. He trembled, his fists clenched, jaw slack.

Valeta let out a small "oh" when she noticed his reaction. She broke a cookie in half and popped it in the prince's mouth. The sweet cookie immediately melted on his tongue. Praha's eyes widened with surprise as he reflexively started to chew.

"You!"

"Yes? Would you like another piece?"

Praha glared at the marshmallows floating on the surface of his hot chocolate. It looked delicious, and she probably wouldn't react if he asked her to pour him another cup. But throwing the drink at her would surely make her cry, right? Praha's hand shot out, seizing the cup tightly. Just as when he was about to fling it, Valeta grabbed the cup and clicked her tongue.

The hot chocolate spilled over her wrist, dripping to the floor.

Praha's eyes widened.

"I completely forgot to cool the drink for you, it's too hot. Please wait one moment," Valeta said.

Without another word, she turned and took the lid off the kettle to allow it to cool. Her sleeve was dark, stained with the spilled hot chocolate.

Praha teeth clicked together as his mouth clamped shut, his eyes glued on her sleeve. He could see that her wrist was already turning red. It didn't make him feel good. The boy stuffed another cookie in his mouth, downing the rest of his hot chocolate without a word.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 9

\* \* \*

“Huh? Letta, are you okay?”

“What? Yes.”

“You’re not hurt, are you? He didn’t grab your hair or make you cry?”

Valeta tilted her head upon hearing the head housekeeper’s frantic words. The kid was a little fussy, but nothing that she couldn’t handle. She pressed a cool hand towel to the burn on her wrist. She could have healed it immediately with a simple potion, but she didn’t have any alchemy ingredients on hand. She was scared of what Reinhart was going to do if he found out.

*I’m just going to pretend that it never happened.* She decided she would just hide the whole incident from Reinhart. Thankfully, he wouldn’t be able to see her burn if she kept her sleeves pulled down.

“That’s a relief,” the head housekeeper said. “How should you like to be in charge of taking care of the prince for the time being?”

*But I don’t like kids,* Valeta thought. She felt like they were likely to break at the slightest touch.

Sensing Valeta’s hesitation, the housekeeper quickly added, “I’ll make sure that

you aren't assigned any other chores. Your only job will be waiting on the prince, okay?"

Valeta contemplated the offer, wondering if it was a fair trade. She was a slow worker and, to make matters worse, she was obsessed with doing things perfectly. Tending to the prince might be better than getting her hands dirty.

"Very well."

"Good, good! Let's do that, then. Thank you!" she said. "After lunch, His Highness will have a joint lesson with his brothers and his sister. Their joint lesson will be followed by dinner. If the prince wishes to go for a walk before then, all you have to do is follow him."

Valeta slowly nodded as she processed her new instructions. She wondered if she was taking on more work than necessary. Since her purpose in coming here was to find Terion, wouldn't it have been better for her to do chores that took her around the palace instead?

"Go have your lunch, then come back. I'll have another maid wait on the prince in the meantime."

"Yes, ma'am."

Valeta turned around. *I wonder when Reinhart will have his lunch. Maybe I'll see if I can find him before I eat.* Her steps quickened.

\* \* \*

Valeta and Praha entered the study together. The two other princes were already waiting inside. They were older than Praha, most likely teenagers. The

brothers all had the same green eyes, a trademark of the royal family, but the two older boys had hair the color of the sky.

Praha hunched his shoulders, trying to make himself look as small as possible.

"What's this? Did you chase away yet another maid?"

"Leave him alone, brother. He has no choice but to misbehave, given the filthy blood in his veins."

"Hello, brothers..." Praha mumbled as he took a seat in a corner of the room.

Valeta stood quietly behind the boy. It was weird seeing the once haughty little boy resemble a wilted cabbage. Each of the princes had their own maids, too. Valeta's eyes flickered over to them, sighing in response to what greeted her. *Seems like bullying runs in the family*, she thought.

"Is it this way, Your Highness?"

"That's right, Rey!"

Valeta heard an all-too-familiar voice outside. Nervous, she glanced down at her sleeves. Thankfully, she'd been able to change her clothes. There was no visual indication anything had happened at all. Reinhart entered the room, holding a little girl in his arms. Valeta's eyes widened. She had never imagined what Reinhart would look like carrying someone in his arms, let alone a child.

*He looks... so normal, though.*

He looked like an ordinary attendant. The gentle smile on his face was so natural that for a split second, Valeta found herself thinking that raising a family with Reinhart wouldn't be so bad. For a moment, she was captivated.

"Hello, brothers."

"Hmph."

The crown prince and his brothers merely scoffed in response to their sister's greeting. Perhaps this response was better than being cursed at, though.

Reinhart ignored their scoffs and set the princess down next to Praha. A haircut and change of color did nothing to hide how handsome he was. Sure enough, his beauty had captured the full attention of the princess and the two other maids in the room. However, his smile was directed at Valeta.

"I didn't know you were going to be here," he whispered in her ear.

Valeta glanced at Reinhart before she shrugged.

"I've never seen you before. Do you two know each other?"

"I started two days ago. I was only just put in charge of looking after the princess," Reinhart replied calmly, answering one of the princes' questions.

*He's probably the younger of the two. The other must be the crown prince.* It was impossible to tell what Reinhart was thinking, his face was so utterly devoid of emotion. Reinhart always smiled when something upset him. It was rare to see him so emotionless. *Is that his angle?*

Of course, the complete lack of smile was only rare from Valeta's perspective. *Or maybe he's just really mad?* Although he didn't seem like the type, Reinhart took Terion to school almost every single day. The magician would be lying if he said he wasn't fond of the child. If he didn't care, he probably would've just tossed the boy a teleportation scroll and called it a day.

"Hmm. You two are both good-looking," the prince said, eyeing them both.

Reinhart's fingers twitched. Valeta was the only one who noticed. She was also the only one to notice that the prince's comment immediately put him in a bad mood.

"Greetings, Your Highnesses."

Their teacher arrived. The teacher was a severe-looking woman wearing triangular glasses. Her hair was tightly pulled into a bun, not a stray hair in sight. The class began promptly following her arrival. The lesson was clearly meant for the crown prince and the second prince. Most of the content was over the twins' heads, the vocabulary too difficult for them to keep up with.

Reinhart's eyes were hard. Valeta didn't feel great about how things were unfolding, either. The teacher carefully explained the material to the crown prince and his brother. She didn't even spare so much as a glance for the twins.

Valeta glanced down and saw Praha, who was visibly struggling to understand the contents of his book, at a loss for what to do. The princess was practically in tears.

"Now, it's time for a quiz. You will receive one blow for every wrong answer," the teacher said. Her eyes finally landed on the twins. "You can ask your attendant for help if you need," she added.

Valeta wondered if this was the teacher's way of lashing out at the children. A smile spread across Reinhart's face.

*Oh, no.*

Both Valeta and Reinhart had been on the receiving end of similar punishments from Count Delight. Being reminded of those memories wasn't a welcome experience for either of them. In fact, they loathed it.

"First, a question for His Highness, Prince Praha. What group of people was the first king of our kingdom from? State the year of his birth and death."

*What kind of country memorizes the birth and death years of its first king?* Valeta resisted the urge to scoff. However, this was something that the teacher had

mentioned in passing during class.

"Uh... Um..." Praha's eyes widened as he began to shake.

Valeta bent forward, leaned close to whisper in Praha's ear. Reinhart's steely eyes grew gentle as he watched her whisper.

"Oh, uh, th-the first king of Resol was originally from Chagall. And h-he was born fifty years before the founding of the kingdom and died seventeen years after..." Praha said in a shaky voice, repeating what Valeta had told him.

The teacher was shocked. She looked at Valeta with new eyes, quickly formulating another question to ask.

"Tell me how old his late Majesty was before his death."

She hadn't taught them that yet. Of course, this wasn't a problem if one knew how to do simple math, but it wasn't so easy for a child, especially when they had to consider the years before and after the kingdom's founding.

Valeta leaned forward again. Praha's eyes sparkled as he listened to her answer.

"His late Majesty was sixty-seven years old when he passed."

"That is correct..." the teacher replied. "You could learn a thing or two from your maid."

"Yes!"

Praha nodded his head, looking much happier than before. He whipped around to look up at Valeta, his eyes sparkling. He looked naive and sweet, all his previous arrogance gone.

*What a cutie.* Valeta smiled softly. She'd always thought she hated kids, but maybe they weren't all that bad. There was a sort of joy that came with

watching kids grow.

She glanced over. The teacher was asking the princess slightly harder questions, but Valeta wasn't worried. After all, the little princess had Reinhart at her back. Sure enough, Reinhart leaned over before the teacher had even finished her question and whispered something in the girl's ear.

"Hein McAllery!"

"Name three of Hein McAllery's most famous works."

Again, this had not been covered in the lecture. It was ridiculous that she was even asking this. Valeta's face twisted with annoyance. However, Reinhart casually leaned over and whispered something into the girl's ear again. Her eyes sparkled.

"The History of Resol, The Origins of Magic, and For the Sake of my Doctrine!"

"That's... correct," the teacher said, stunned. She looked back and forth between Praha and the princess, unable to believe her ears. A flash of annoyance appeared in her eyes. It was now clear to Valeta just how often the teacher had hit the children using the excuse of instructing them. "Well, onto the next question..."

"There were three large wars after the founding of the kingdom," Reinhart said, correcting the teacher.

He was definitely in a foul mood. Valeta worried that he would snap and annihilate everyone in the room, prince or not. *Still, he's being a lot less aggressive than I thought he would be.* Was Reinhart finally maturing? Valeta had never seen him so calm.

"I'm sure that His Highness knows what the three wars were about, right? Could you tell us the names and the years in which the wars took place?" Reinhart

asked.

"What? Uh... The Carya... Canyon War... And..." the prince stammered.

Although he was a prince, he was still only a child as well. Reinhart's question wiped the smirk off his face.

"Are you making fun of me? You, a mere attendant?!"

There was a flash of something unreadable in Reinhart's eyes.

"Never."

"I didn't even cover that material today. You've gone too far, attendant," the teacher said, coming to the prince's rescue.

Reinhart tilted his head to the side gracefully, smug as if he had been lying in wait for this moment.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 10

\* \* \*

Reinhart's smile grew wider.

"Oh, and the questions you asked were covered in today's lesson?"

"How dare you!"

Valeta looked between the two of them. She got the feeling that this was going to take a long time.

"I think the lesson is over for today. Shall we go, Your Highness?" she suggested. Valeta figured that Reinhart would be more than capable of taking care of the teacher. There was no need for them to stay any longer.

Praha's eyes widened. His expression was clearly asking if leaving in the middle of this situation was really okay, so Valeta nodded. She took Praha's hand and helped him down from the chair.

"Wait! Where do you think you're going? I didn't give you permission to leave! I'm the teacher, how dare—!"

"We answered your questions, and it seems as though class is over for the day. Is there any reason we should stay?" Valeta replied, a dubious look on her face. It was expected that the teacher would keep the students who couldn't keep up

in class behind, not those who were excelling.

"Wh-what did you say?"

"It's time for His Highness's walk. We need to leave now, or we'll be behind schedule," Valeta said calmly, glancing out the window at the position of the sun. The teacher's face colored with embarrassment. "What reason is there for us to stay?"

Reinhart chuckled. The teacher turned bright red, hearing him laugh at her. She clenched her fists, her jaw clenching as she grew more and more furious.

"You have a lot of pride for a mere attendant," the crown prince said. He had been an onlooker to the situation until now.

Reinhart and Valeta both turned to look at him.

The crown prince met their gaze steadily. "Who gave you permission to look me in the eyes like?"

Praha and the princess were both visibly shaking. Even the second prince sitting next to the crown prince held his breath. Valeta's gaze dropped to the floor, trying to figure out what to do next. Starting a fight wouldn't benefit them in any way. They hadn't even learned anything about Terion or the magicians yet.

"How dare someone as low-born as you waltz into the palace..."

"Do I truly look low-born to you, Your Highness?" Reinhart took a step forward, bringing himself eye to eye with the crown prince. His eyes flashed silver for a split second.

*Silver...?* Valeta's eyes widened as she realized what was going on.

"I don't, right? We all know who the low-born one here really is."

"Oh..."

Something in the crown prince's eyes suddenly shifted. Reinhart chuckled quietly as the scorn drained from the crown prince's eyes. As he took a step back, the crown prince turned to the teacher.

"Right," the boy said. "The problem is that our teacher wishes to educate us even though she doesn't have the necessary credentials."

The teacher gasped. "Y-Your Highness!"

Reinhart took a leisurely step back and gestured to Valeta with his chin. It was her sign to leave.

Valeta paused. She wasn't worried that something bad would happen, but just the act of leaving made her feel uneasy.

*Did you hurt your arm?* he mouthed.

Valeta tensed. She automatically reached for her own wrist before realizing her mistake. Reinhart's piercing stare didn't stray from her. She broke eye contact and turned before taking Praha by the hand.

*I'll see you later,* Reinhart mouthed again. She didn't want to watch his lips, but they were so mesmerizing she couldn't look away.

Valeta tutted as she left the study.

\* \* \*

"You're amazing. Have you always been so smart?"

"Perhaps."

Valeta usually remembered anything she heard or read once. Prada's eyes widened. Then he brightened.

"That's amazing!"

Valeta absently nodded. Her mind was still on Reinhart. *Maybe I should lock my door tonight.* For some reason, she was scared of what he'd do.

"I want to be just like you when I grow up," Praha said.

"Unless you want to be locked in a room with books all day, I don't think that's possible."

"Locked in a room? How is that possible?"

Valeta couldn't bring herself to say "That's what happens when you have terrible parents" to the boy looking up at her with such sparkling eyes. So, she avoided his gaze instead, suggesting that he study harder.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" she asked.

"I... Um... Do you think you can help me study?" Praha asked in a quiet voice as he fiddled with his hands.

Valeta looked down at the child whose ears were beginning to turn a brilliant shade of red. If she thought about it, Terion rarely asked her for help with anything. *Does he ask Reinhart instead?*

She saw them talking sometimes, just the two of them. She used to think that children would break under the gentlest of touches, but she was slowly beginning to feel differently about it.

*A child like Reinhart...*

She'd be lying if she said she'd never thought about starting a family with Reinhart. Every once in a while, she worried about what that would look like with having Terion in their family. It didn't seem like a bad idea these days, but she could only commit to a child if they were able to put a name to their lukewarm relationship.

She and Reinhart treated one another more like housemates than lovers. Although they had imprinted on each other, it wasn't official on paper like being married or in a civil partnership. He seemed to be satisfied with just imprinting. Reinhart never brought up anything else, and Valeta hadn't thought much of it until now. But if a child were to be born of their union, their relationship would be acknowledged by everyone. They'd be more than just housemates then.

*Reinhart taking care of a baby, though?* She tried to imagine it but couldn't help but laugh to herself. Reinhart carrying a child in his arms looked completely natural, but imagining him with a baby was another beast entirely.

"So? Do you think teaching me will be too hard?"

"Oh..."

Praha's voice pulled her from her thoughts. She looked down at him and shook her head. Valeta wouldn't be able to stay with him for too long, but helping him study for now shouldn't be too hard. *It's probably easier than escorting him all over the palace.* She was better suited for quietly sitting down in one place rather than running around everywhere.

Praha brightened, completely oblivious to Valeta's thoughts.

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*I need to get back soon.* She had to get back to her room before Reinhart found

her. Valeta had put Praha to bed early, passing off the torch to another maid, and was now hurrying through the halls.

She had put the prince to bed an hour earlier than usual, so she doubted that Reinhart would be waiting for her. He wasn't able to teleport to her instantly—he still couldn't use magic as well as normal.

"Where are you rushing off to, Master?"

*Thud.*

Valeta paused, feeling like the air had been abruptly stolen from her lungs. She took a deep breath, blinking at him rapidly. *Impossible. What is he doing here?*

"You look like a rabbit trying to outrun a wolf."

Valeta didn't say anything.

"And my little rabbit doesn't even know that she's fallen into the wolf's trap."

Why did his laugh send icy shivers down her spine? Valeta reflexively covered the burn on her wrist. It was easy to detect how Reinhart was feeling when he reverted to calling her his master and using abrasive language. He was either aroused or in an extremely bad mood.

"What do you think, my innocent rabbit?"

Valeta stared straight ahead, her eyes briefly flicking to one side. Would she be able to outrun Reinhart if she made a break for it? He did have very poor stamina, after all.

"Valeta."

She didn't look at him.

"I'm very upset. Stop thinking and come here."

Valeta held her breath. She would surely be caught by him if she didn't turn and run now, but she couldn't figure out where she could go. Still holding her breath, she slowly turned around.

"Good girl. Now, come here," Reinhart said, reaching his hand out to her. He sounded like he was calling a dog, but it was clear that he was trying to be patient with her.

Valeta extended her uninjured hand, but Reinhart just smiled and shook his head. She kept quiet as she held out her other hand.

"Ngh..."

Burning pain rushed up her arm. Her eyes watered from the unexpected agony. Valeta bit her lower lip as she panted for air. Reinhart's lips curved into a smile. The only problem was that the beautiful smile stretching his lips didn't reach his eyes.

"Valeta."

"What...?"

It had been a long time since she'd seen that look on his face. It sent shivers down her spine.

"Were you trying to hide this from me?"

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 11

Valeta pursed her lips.

She didn't feel like lying, but honestly, she was also scared to admit the truth. They had spent a lot of time together, but he still scared her sometimes, especially when he got like this.

"Yeah." In the end, Valeta decided to be honest. "I didn't want to worry you. I also didn't think it was a big deal."

If there was one thing that Valeta vowed, it was that she would never lie to Reinhart for as long as they were together. Lying was the shortcut to destroying a relationship. You never knew when little white lies were going to snowball.

Reinhart's grip relaxed in the face of Valeta's honesty. He didn't say anything for a long moment, before finally sighing.

"There isn't anything I don't know about you, Valeta," he said. "I see everything when it comes to you, from every move of your body, right down to every one of your eyelashes..."

His voice had grown impossibly deep. Although his voice no longer had a hard edge to it, she could still tell that he was frustrated.

"Did you even notice that you were trying to avoid using this hand? That you've been wincing a little every time you move it?"

"Have I?"

"Yes."

Valeta had no idea. She pressed her lips together, having nothing to say. Finally, she settled on, “I’m sorry.”

“You need to be punished.”

His lips stretched into a naughty smile. Still holding her wrist, Reinhart pushed back her sleeve. The burn was inflamed, bright red and parts of it were already peeling. He created a magic circle in the air, then reached through it, and produced something from within. Valeta’s eyes widened as he poured a potion over her wrist.

“You can still use magic in here?”

“Yes. As long as it’s relatively simple,” Reinhart replied as he turned her wrist over, watching closely as it began to heal. “Using large-scale magic would disrupt the barrier, but little things like opening small subspaces or summoning items is fine.”

Reinhart tossed the empty bottle back through the portal, then grabbed Valeta’s healed hand, and shoved the girl back into a dark hallway. Despite being dark, the area wasn’t completely secluded—anyone could walk by at any moment. Reinhart smirked as he shoved Valeta up against the wall, rich red carpet cushioning their steps.

“It’s time for your punishment.”

His dark hair shone under the moonlight. Although his dyed hair was quite plain during the day, it seemed to almost glow mysteriously at night.

Valeta stared at him, enchanted. Reinhart took the opportunity to lean over and press his lips against hers. Her lips parted easily, accepting the kiss. His tongue slipped into her mouth as he gently stroked her back.

“I heard something interesting,” he said softly.

"Mmm?"

Reinhart chuckled at her reply, which was more like a moan than words. His hands trailed down her back, and then they darted under her skirt, tugging down her underwear quickly.

"I heard that it's more thrilling when there's the threat of being caught."

Surprised, Valeta tried to tug them back up, but Reinhart caught both her wrists, keeping her pinned with only one hand. The next thing she knew, she was completely exposed under her skirt.

"You f\*cking pervert! What do you think you're— Mmph!"

Reinhart kissed Valeta, interrupting her furious rant. His tongue snaked between her lips, exploring her mouth. Purple eyes sparkling as he smiled, he pulled her closer, pressing his lips against her ear.

"I told you, Master. This is your punishment."

He only called her that at certain times these days. A shiver ran down Valeta's spine, knowing what Reinhart was about to do. He sighed before biting down on her earlobe, hard.

Valeta flinched, clutching at his shoulders.

"You're not going to like this."

Valeta tensed. Reinhart smiled as he brought the hem of Valeta's skirt to her mouth.

"Bite down."

It didn't matter how dark their little corner was—the soldiers were bound to come past on their patrol. Moonlight was also pouring through the window.

When Valeta hesitated, Reinhart pressed the skirt more firmly against her mouth.

"Are you going to keep me waiting? Your punishment will never come to an end at this rate." Reinhart looked far too pleased with himself.

Valeta clenched her fists.

"Come now," he cooed.

Defeated, Valeta opened her mouth. Reinhart shoved the fabric between her lips eagerly.

"It's been a while. I get so turned on every time I see you. I'm worried I might die from my need," he said as his fingers dug into her thighs firmly.

Valeta clutched at his shoulder as she watched him go down. Her left hand scrambled against the wall, grasping for purchase. Reinhart smiled as he gazed lovingly upon the flushed apex of Valeta's thighs. Although she was usually so stoic, her face utterly expressionless, her body was incredibly honest. She was flushed red with embarrassment from head to toe.

He squeezed her milky white thighs a little harder. Valeta jolted, realizing what Reinhart wanted. She spread her legs wider.

"Oh, my lovely little master. You're so smart."

She complied to his desires obediently despite blushing scarlet the whole time. Who else would ever understand him so completely? She was the only person in the whole world who was capable of understanding him. Reinhart's teeth grazed the skin of Valeta's inner thigh as if rewarding her. Her legs trembled.

"Don't let go of your skirt, master. This is your punishment. If you drop it... I might take this somewhere more public."

“Ngh...”

Of course, Reinhart had no intention of doing so. Just the thought of someone else seeing Valeta like this made his blood boil. However, she didn’t know that. Reinhart smiled, the expression genuine. He buried his face between Valeta’s thighs, causing her to bite down hard on her lip.

“Agh...”

Valeta tried her best to stay upright as her legs trembled and shook. The unfamiliar sensations blooming in her core were making her vision blur. She clutched at the wall and Reinhart’s shoulder for support, listening breathlessly to the humiliating wet sounds coming from between her legs. Valeta squeezed her eyes shut. It was dark, but that didn’t stop her from seeing sparks behind her eyelids.

“Ngh...”

Suddenly, she felt a sharp twinge of pain, and her knees buckled. Fortunately, Reinhart was there to catch her around her thighs, keeping her upright.

“Shh... You can’t collapse now. You have to endure,” Reinhart said firmly.

Valeta hissed as she tipped back against the wall. She wanted to collapse, but Reinhart held her upright, keeping her pinned in place.

“I... Ha...” She was barely able to catch her breath, let alone form words. She shook her head.

Reinhart was on his knees, looking up at her with a wide smile on his face. He was usually the first to shed his clothes, but today, he remained neat and tidy. Somehow, this contrast only left Valeta feeling more humiliated.

“Ah, come to think of it. I’ve seen a lot of new maids and attendants around the palace these days.”

"Like who?"

Valeta could hear hushed whispers coming from the distance. She tensed, holding her breath. Reinhart must've heard the voices too, because he stood and peeked around the corner. Then he sank to his knees again, returning to his place between Valeta's legs and spreading them a little wider.

Valeta paled. About to yell at him to stop, she froze. If she opened her mouth now, her skirt would fall and Reinhart would take any excuse to do worse to her.

"Oh, you know. That guy with the black hair and that pretty maid."

"Oh, I've seen them around. I know he's a man, but I just want to make him cry. It's a shame he wasn't born a woman."

"You know that snooty teacher that they had? Apparently, they chased her out after beating her in a battle of wits."

*What are they talking about?* Valeta looked down at Reinhart, stunned. He gazed back at her, wordlessly nibbling on her sensitive button.

"Ah!"

Valeta's hand flew to her mouth in surprise, tangling in the fabric of her skirt.

"What? They're smart, too?"

"I guess. Seems like a real asshole to me. There are rumors among them, you know? That they're real uppity."

"Really?"

"Yeah, some of the servants actually want to knock them down a peg or two. Show them their place."

*That's such a disgusting thing to say.* Valeta frowned before another wave of

pleasure washed over her. She pressed her hand over her mouth more firmly to stifle a moan. As she tilted her head back, a vein stood out vividly in her straining neck.

"Yeah, but a guy's kind of iffy, isn't he? I get that he's handsome, but..."

"Yeah, well, everyone has to experience hazing at least once in this place... Wanna give it a go? Actually, some of the maids and attendants were asking me to gather some people."

"Hey, what are you gonna do if you get caught?" The soldier shuddered.

The other soldier patrolling with him lowered his voice a notch. "If we cover their mouths and blindfold them, they won't know who did it. There will be something for your trouble, too. As much as..."

"What? Seriously? That's insane... Wait, who's funding this?"

"Actually, it's..."

The soldiers' voices grew even quieter as if they were whispering directly into each other's ears. Valeta couldn't ignore the growing pleasure burning at her core.

"Ah....!"

Valeta's lips parted, a moan escaping her lips. Reinhart had sealed his lips over a particularly sensitive spot. She couldn't tell if she was experiencing pleasure or pain. Either way, she couldn't remain standing any longer. Her knees buckled as she saw white. As she began to slide down the wall, Reinhart stood and caught her by the waist.

"Hey. Did you hear that?"

"Sh\*t. Halt! Who goes there?!"

They heard the two soldiers quickly approaching.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 12

“Hey, Rein...!”

Valeta fumbled to hold onto Reinhart, her vision still blurred. Reinhart gently stroked her tense back as he whispered words of comfort in her ear.

“Shh, it’s all right.”

Reinhart pressed his lips against hers once more. He took off his jacket and draped it around her shoulders. Instantly, the large tailcoat swallowed Valeta. He pressed his tongue into her mouth, still holding her firmly in his arms. Valeta relaxed in Reinhart’s embrace, opened her mouth, and accepted his tongue as it pressed against hers.

Reinhart wore a grin on his face as they kissed, his arms still wrapped around her.

“What the?! What are these little bastards doing?!”

“It’s them! The attendant and maid I was just talking about!”

“What?”

“Hang on! You two are an item? You know what? That checks out,” one of the soldiers said. He drew his sword and pointed it at Reinhart.

Reinhart had one arm around Valeta’s shoulders, but he shifted, picking the girl up. Threading one arm under her knees, he held her bridal style. Dodging the soldier’s attack, he slipped out into the main hallway.

All Valeta could do in her exhaustion was gasp from within his hold.

"Oh no. These scumbags have laid eyes on my master."

"What? Hah! You don't realize what sort of situation you're in."

The soldier waved his sword threateningly, but Reinhart continued to smile.

"I won't allow any bastard to live after seeing my master like this..."

"What are you talking about? You're a lunatic!" Reinhart's purple eyes rippled silver. Valeta could only watch, dazed. The silver was beautiful, like a full moon contained in his eyes. "You won't be leaving here alive."

The soldier's sword slashed at Reinhart. Suddenly, the soldier turned and charged his fellow soldier, sword swinging.

"Since you've seen my precious master... Gouge each other's eyes out, cut off your companion's nose, and sever each other's limbs." Reinhart's silver eyes glowed with a mysterious power. "Hm, that means one of you will still have an arm in the end, but it can't be helped. Oh, but don't forget the eyes. They're most important." He smiled coldly, his icy gaze landing on the two soldiers. "That's your punishment for speaking of my master with those filthy lips."

Reinhart reverently pressed his lips against Valeta's neck. His teeth scraped along her skin, leaving a mark. Then he looked up at the soldiers who had begun to fight. One of them embedded his sword in his comrade's eye. Reinhart watched for a moment before pressing a kiss to Valeta's lips, her face tucked into his neck so she was unable to see. He then turned and walked away.

"You... You did that on purpose," Valeta murmured.

Reinhart tilted his head, a slightly puzzled look on his face. His smile was so innocent, it was as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. He didn't look like someone who had just ordered two men to fight each other to the death.

“What do you mean?”

“You made sure we would be caught.”

“Hmm... You think? Maybe I was just driven mad by bloodlust in the moment, you know. Maybe I just suddenly wanted to kill someone.”

Valeta forced her heavy eyelids open. She gave a weak smile. He was never honest with himself. She buried her face into Reinhart’s chest.

“Good job.”

“...”

“If you hadn’t done something, I would have drowned them myself.”

There was a limit to trash-talking. Valeta wasn’t a saint. She refused to look the other way when there were scumbags plotting to commit rape. More than anything, the way they had talked about Reinhart put her in a terrible mood.

“Ha... F\*ck... I’m hard now, master,” Reinhart whined, still wearing a bright smile on his face. However, Valeta knew better than anyone just how happy he was on the inside.

“You dropped your dress, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“Haa... I’ll have to give you the rest of your punishment in bed, then.”

Reinhart quickened his pace, Valeta still clutched in his arms. She struggled to free herself from his grip, but his gait was too fast.

\* \* \*

By the time she opened her eyes, the sun was already at its peak. She had only been a maid for two days, but she was already skipping work. Valeta pushed herself upright in her hard, wooden bed.

“Ugh...”

Her back hurt so much that she felt like it might drive her mad. Last night, Reinhart had laid on the bed while Valeta sat on top to protect her from the hard bed, but she still had to sleep on it.

*Ugh, my whole body's stiff.* She was becoming too accustomed to her newfound peace. She could barely tolerate the slightest bit of discomfort. The bed was too hard, and Reinhart was...

“A beast...” Valeta whispered, her voice hoarse.

Reinhart was savage in bed. She sighed before summoning Nereid to give her a quick shower before she started her day. Unlike Reinhart, Valeta could still summon elementals inside the palace without any problems, but...

“*Ugh, what sort of vile place is this? You're something else, really.*”

It seemed like all the magic stones made Nereid feel uneasy. Reinhart must have cleaned her up last night because she didn't feel sticky at all.

“Haa...”

Her legs felt heavy, like they were made of jelly. Valeta quietly left her room. She was suspicious as to why nobody had come looking for her. It wouldn't have surprised her if the head housekeeper had burst into her room and dragged her out by the collar.

*We need to find Terion and get out of here.* She'd only exhaust herself if she

stayed here any longer. What happened last night left a bitter taste in her mouth. She knew that the world was filled with terrible people... Still, being reminded of it was never pleasant. She worried that Reinhart would spill blood again.

*Maybe I can ask the prince if he knows anything,* Valeta thought as she turned the corner.

"Letta? Thank goodness you're safe!"

"Oh... yes."

Valeta nodded calmly at the head housekeeper, who didn't realize that Valeta had been sleeping this entire time. It seemed as though there was a commotion happening in the royal palace.

"I see a lot of soldiers today."

"Don't get me started. There's been a murder in the palace. I nearly fainted when I came upon the scene. There were body parts everywhere! In pieces..."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes. It almost looked as though they'd fought each other, but it just doesn't make sense! They were both soldiers, after all. They did a thorough investigation and found some evidence."

"Evidence?"

What the hell was she talking about? Valeta tilted her head. Was Reinhart up to something?

The head housekeeper continued. "Yes. They tracked him down and caught him earlier."

"Who was it?" Valeta asked, staring at the bloodied hallway.

What kind of evidence had they been able to find in this place? One that immediately tracked down the culprit? Her face hardened at the thought.

"Why, it's that fancy attendant that was recently hired! You should know him. He's the one you took the exam with. Rey, I think his name was."

"..."

Valeta felt her breath hitch.

"I saw the guards taking him away earlier. They'll probably execute him if all goes well," the head housekeeper continued.

"Execute...?"

"Yes. Any crimes that are committed in the royal palace are punished by execution."

Valeta brought a hand to her forehead. If they'd found a strand of hair, then it was highly likely that Reinhart would've been identified as the culprit. It seemed as though he already had a lot of enemies.

"What does an execution look like?"

"Usually, they inject a large amount of corrupt magic into the person so that it causes immense pain. Magicians are always present for the procedure."

"Corrupt magic?"

"Yes. I heard that those who are more sensitive to magic experience gruesome pain, and it feels like you're melting from the inside."

Valeta slowly nodded. She knew that this wouldn't happen to Reinhart, but she couldn't help but worry regardless. Reinhart was too strong. *I guess this is what*

*happens when you're blinded by love.*

She quickly turned around. Her violet eyes were ice cold.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Side Story

### Chapter 13

\* \* \*

The door was thrown open violently, threatening to break the door off its hinges entirely. Reinhart sat up on the hard wooden bed he was lying on.

“Hey! You!”

A knight burst through the door and grabbed Reinhart by the throat.

“Oh dear,” Reinhart said nonchalantly.

The knight used the tight grip on his neck to yank the magician down from the top bunk.

“You! You did this!” the man barked.

Reinhart smiled in the face of the man’s sudden screaming accusation.

“It’s quite rude of you to barge into my room so early in the morning,” Reinhart replied with a smile, even though he wasn’t entirely awake. He always wore a wide smile, but his smile was even more blinding than usual.

“How dare you speak to me that way? Who do you think you are?”

"How dare I?" Reinhart chuckled, his laugh resembling the tinkling of bells. His voice was so sibilant and beautiful that it made the knight falter.

Embarrassed by his own hesitation, the knight set his jaw and crowded closer.

"You son of a bitch!"

Reinhart narrowed his eyes at the soldier. The knight was suddenly filled with an inexplicable sense of unease. He wasn't intimidated by this nobody attendant, but he found it hard to meet his eyes for some reason.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You killed the soldiers who were on patrol yesterday! I heard that you were the last to return to your bunk last night!"

Reinhart blinked. The knight was about to blow a fuse, made furious by the completely unbothered look on the man's face. Reinhart merely smiled as if he wasn't in the presence of a knight waving his sword about.

"Me? Against armed soldiers?" Reinhart's eyes widened. "You make it sound as though you have evidence against me."

"Of course! We found your hair on the ground! Black hair isn't common around here, so it had to be you!"

*Is he having a particularly idiotic day or is he always this stupid?* Reinhart thought. He resisted the urge to laugh and realized, with some surprise, that the awful, defeated emperor might have been the smartest of all the socoros.

*This is so boring.* He didn't understand why people were always so boring. Valeta just made everything else seem gray in comparison. Reinhart continued to blink innocently, the knight's hand still tight around his throat. The little fly buzzing around in his face was annoying, but he wasn't worth the effort of batting him away.

*It would be more fun playing chess with the emperor.* The old man was probably in the middle of the ocean somewhere, drowning and swimming in an endless cycle. He wondered what the emperor occupied his mind with. It wasn't like he could die.

He might have found his way to land. Maybe he would try to atone for his sins. Maybe he would go mad from the guilt and try to find a way to die. Either way, he probably wouldn't just stay where they'd put him.

"It'd be fun if he came looking for revenge."

Not that Reinhart thought this would actually happen, but... If the old man did, he thought he might get away with killing him as a reward.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm just talking to myself. So what are you going to do to me?" Reinhart asked.

"The knight commander made a report to His Majesty. You will be put to death. It's the price you must pay for the terrible thing you've done in the same halls in which our princes and princess roam!"

What an utterly boring response. The knight recited this all as though it was procedure, like he had delivered the same line many times before. Reinhart looked away, utterly uninterested in anything else the knight had to say.

*I miss Valeta.* He was starting to grow tired of this whole charade, too. He'd already seen Valeta in her maid outfit, and he'd done what he wanted in the hallway, too. There was nothing more to do after seeing the embarrassed look on Valeta's face.

"And after you die, don't think for a moment that your corpse will be buried! You'll become the magicians' test specimen!"

"What did you just say?" Reinhart said, his voice as cold as ice.

The knight felt a sudden shift in the air. He let go of Reinhart without meaning to, in his surprise. "Wh-what?"

Reinhart glowered at the terrified knight. His lips parted, the warm smile on his face doing nothing to melt the chill in his gaze.

"There will be magicians at my execution then?"

"Yes, I suppose. They'll collect you right after your death. Why? Are you afraid? Well, it's too late now. His Majesty never goes back on his word once it's given!"

The soldier was behaving with incredible childishness, but Reinhart simply pressed his lips together. He might be able to wrap this whole mess up without the hassle of an investigation.

Reinhart nodded. "Let's get to it then, the execution."

"Okay! Yeah, I bet you don't want to— What?"

"Take me to your king or whatever. Before I change my mind."

Reinhart held out his hands as if allowing himself to be tied up with a rope. The knight looked Reinhart up and down, flabbergasted by his response.

"Isn't this what you wanted? Come on then."

Reinhart's eyes curved, forming the shape of crescent moons. The knight hastily bound Reinhart's hands together and led him from the room.

\* \* \*

For Reinhart, everything in this world was nothing but a game. Everything he did, from the way he was living his life at present to how he would live in the future, was decided on impulse.

Valeta was the only exception to this rule. She was the only thing outside his control, the only one who could make him reel in his impulses. She made him stop and consider the future he wanted. Terion filled a similar position in his life. He was a child, a derivative of Valeta, so Reinhart was of the opinion that it wouldn't do him any good to crush the boy. It was fun and sort of fascinating to watch the child grow, squirming around helplessly like a little worm.

He was always amazed to see just how quickly the child learned from him. He also liked the little language that they developed between them behind Valeta's back. Although he didn't care for Terion as much as he did Valeta, he would protect the child from harm. That's what he thought, anyway.

"Bro... Brother...?"

However, Reinhart could have never predicted he would feel like this. His smile deepened, though it was an expression that did nothing to disguise his displeasure. He'd assumed his hands would remain tied with rope, but heavy iron shackles had replaced the knots around his wrists before they'd reached the king's banquet hall. It felt like all the magic in his body had been dialed down. Clearly, there were some precautionary measures weaved into the shackles. And...

"It looks like my dog found a new master," Reinhart said, his voice ice cold.

He stared at Terion's youthful face, his small body clad in black robes. Reinhart hadn't thought he'd run into the boy here. Actually, he had assumed he'd find the child in this place, just not like this. The king was seated on his throne, surrounded by a dozen of his royal knights. There were also a number of nobles gathered too, presumably to watch the execution. Shrouded figures were

standing around Terion, also clad in black robes.

They were no doubt the fugitives from Tartarose. It didn't take long for Reinhart to figure out what was going on here. *Why are all these people gathered for a mere attendant's execution?*

In reality, it was utterly ridiculous that the king was watching his execution at all. Why should he care how a mere servant died? Of course, maybe he wanted to know who was responsible for committing murder in the royal palace.

Reinhart tilted his head to the side as he observed the boy. He hadn't seen him in such a long time, but he could tell that something was wrong. He seemed nervous more than anything else.

"How... did...you..."

"Rion, do you know this man?"

"Ah... he..." Terion hesitated.

Reinhart studied the boy. His pupils were dilated, and he didn't seem like himself, like he was void of all intellect. At the same time, he didn't seem completely conscious of his surroundings either. Reinhart's eyes flickered to the hooded man who'd asked Terion the question.

"They say that thieves are thieves anywhere they go... Did you resort to stealing something of mine because there was nothing else for you to steal in that prison?"

"Shut your mouth, you son of a bitch!"

After spitting this at Reinhart, one of the knights at his side scowled and struck him from behind. Reinhart's face scrunched up in pain. In that same moment, Terion jolted with surprise.

Reinhart slowly looked up at the boy. "Shake it off, Terion. Come back to us.

Valeta is waiting for you."

"Sister is here, too?"

"Yeah."

"Terion! Who is this man?!"

One of the robed men shouted. Terion's face turned pale as he hesitantly opened his mouth.

"The... head of... the Magicians' Tower..." he stammered.

Reinhart couldn't tell if the child had been brainwashed or just broken.

*I can't tell which it is.*

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 14

Terion's words triggered an immediate response. The people draped in black robes produced their wands and the king's knights drew their swords. In the blink of an eye, they had surrounded Reinhart.

"Terion."

"Yes, brother."

A furrow appeared in Reinhart's brow. He didn't say anything more. He didn't have to. The displeased expression on his face spoke volumes.

"Did I not tell you to come back when I allowed you to leave home?"

"I... won't go back."

Despite the swords that were aimed at his neck and the many wands poised at the ready, Reinhart kept his gaze firmly on Terion. One of his eyebrows twitched in aggravation, a subtle expression of shock on his face.

"You're not coming back?"

"No... No matter how you look at it, I... I just get in the way... Wanting to live with you was greedy of me. These people don't treat me like a child. They treat me as an adult..." Terion's voice grew smaller and smaller as he shrank in on himself.

Reinhart stared at Terion, the realization suddenly hitting him that this was truly how the boy felt. *They've definitely brainwashed him, but he's been able to retain some part of himself, too.* In other words, it wasn't that Terion was completely

unable to think for himself. He was just choosing not to. He was acting differently to the usual brainwashing victim. *What a pain.*

Valeta would be very sad if she learned what had happened to Terion. Maybe it'd be better to just kill the boy now. He could kill him and just tell Valeta that he'd gotten caught in the crossfire. It was also well within his abilities to control the magicians and force them to do the job themselves.

As he contemplated his options, the purple in his eyes slowly bled away to reveal the red underneath. His crimson eyes resembled an eerie red flame, and it was as if his true self was itching to burst free. *That's my best option.* Doing so would spare Valeta. If Terion's life ended like this, it wouldn't leave her too sad. Having come to a decision, Reinhart turned his attention to Terion with a smile on his face.

"So, you're really not going to come back with us."

"No..."

Reinhart slowly extended his hand. One of the swords suddenly moved closer, digging into his neck. Blood began to drip from the wound. There was something almost sensual about the way the crimson blood rolled down his pale neck. Reinhart didn't even flinch.

Terion stared.

"Come here, Terion."

The boy flinched and began to tremble. Reinhart's voice was warm and friendly, but there was an edge to it that was as sharp as any blade. Terion, who had been staring into Reinhart's eyes, squeezed his own eyes shut and took a hesitant step forward.

He was hit with a strange feeling. Alarm bells went off in his head. He knew he

needed to stop, but he felt unable to disobey Reinhart's command. No, the truth was he wanted to comply. As Terion approached him, Reinhart calmly observed the boy with ruby eyes.

"If you're not going to come back..."

Reinhart's long, pale fingers wrapped around the boy's throat. Terion's eyes widened in shock, but he didn't make a sound. He had no thoughts of running away. This wasn't because he had no free will, nor was it because Reinhart was forcing him, either. Terion simply had no desire to run.

"...then die."

Reinhart's voice was as sweet as ever, despite delivering a death sentence. Terion's eyes slowly widened, before he hung his head in resignation. Reinhart couldn't understand what was going through the boy's head. He had every intention of letting Terion go if he tried to run, desperate to live.

*Humans have always...* They were creatures he was unable to understand, especially socoros. "Valeta would be sad to lose you, but she'd also be troubled knowing that you were out in the world all alone somewhere... I don't really like either option, but..."

Reinhart searched through the many memories stored within his mind from the previous heads of the Magicians' Tower, some of whom had been kidnapped before. There had been a few cases that matched this description. Of course, they were more like implanted memories, rather than real, lived experiences. Still, he was able to see what their reactions were, the expressions they wore, and what the outcome in those situations had been.

Reinhart didn't want Valeta to be sad. He wanted her to be happy, so he had to strive for a better outcome.

"Losing you might be better than constantly worrying about you, right?"

Terion's shoulders were trembling. There was a look of resignation in his eyes. Reinhart shot an icy glare at the robed magicians, who were anxiously holding their breaths.

"Get the boy away from him!" the king ordered, but as he waited for them to follow orders, the knights remained as still as statues. The only ones to move were the fugitives from Tartarose.

"But that's a rather unfortunate outcome, too," Reinhart said, unnaturally casual.

Then, right as he was about to tighten his grip around the boy's neck, he stopped. Reinhart's fingers twitched. He slowly turned his head to regard the entrance to the banquet hall. In the blink of an eye, he'd relaxed his grip, letting his arm fall to his side.

"Oh dear..."

Reinhart clicked his tongue as he looked over at the knight who had hit him and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. The man glared, wondering what Reinhart was looking at.

The head magician's eyes widened until they formed perfect circles. The red of his eyes bled away, leaving them silver. In an instant, the knight's face went slack as he drew his sword. There was nothing normal about the way his bloodshot eyes rolled into the back of his head.

"Kill him!"

He charged at Reinhart like a madman. Reinhart simply smiled as he made no move to dodge the knight's attack.

There was a great bang as someone cried, "Gene!"

As soon as the door to the banquet hall opened, a large gust of wind swept in. The knight had leapt on top of Reinhart and his blade was inches away from

plunging into the magician's heart when the gust of wind picked him up and slammed him against the wall.

The other knights immediately scrambled to place themselves in front of the king. Reinhart took a deep breath, taking in the familiar scent carried by the violent storm—the scent that belonged to the loveliest woman.

"Reinhart!"

A sweet voice graced his ears.

"Valeta."

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Though surrounded by armed guards, Reinhart only had eyes for one person. How was it that there was anyone in this world who did not love her?

Love...? Reinhart suddenly tensed, startled by the word that had come to mind so naturally. He'd never thought of what they had as love. Reinhart had already warned her that he couldn't love her. He didn't know what love was but did his best to emulate his best approximation. He thought he'd never have use for the word. He thought he'd never experience the feeling now growing steadily in his chest.

However, Reinhart couldn't hide the surprise that now painted his face. If this wasn't him losing his mind, then it must mean he thought Valeta was lovely... And that it was impossible not to fall in love with her. It suddenly felt so natural.

The girl was standing surrounded by armed knights, elemental energy swirling around her, and the worried look in her eyes sent shivers down Reinhart's spine. Love...? He was second to none in power, but falling in love?

It wasn't a bad feeling though. In fact, it was a wonderful feeling. It felt like he was suddenly living inside a pleasant dream. Fascinated, Reinhart stared at

Valeta as she approached. Why had he been unable to feel this way before? This thought suddenly occurred to him. These sorts of emotions tended to fade as time passed. That's how Reinhart felt, and that's also how the previous heads of the Magicians' Tower had felt.

What seemed fun in the moment could quickly wither away. Even an interesting story grew boring over time. The displeasure that usually painted his face spoke volumes. His interest in someone often disappeared in less than an instant. Every exciting moment he experienced was just that—a moment. Even killing people was only momentary fun. That was it. Most things ended there. Most things didn't last all that long.

A year, two years, even after ten years had passed with Valeta... Everything still felt new, his feelings only growing deeper. His feelings for her were the only things in his life that were like this. Was this strange, unique feeling truly... love?

"Reinhart, are you all right? Are you hurt anywhere?"

Valeta crouched in front of Reinhart. She pressed her small hand against his forehead. Reinhart looked up at his master as he lay on the ground where the knight had knocked him down. Valeta examined Reinhart from head to toe. He had someone who worried about him. She worried about him. She treated him like he was just a normal person.

"Hey! What happened to your neck?"

Hearing her ask this made him happy. "I got hurt."

Reinhart frowned, looking as sad as he could manage. The knights and magicians around them collectively sighed at the beautiful sight. It was as if they hadn't been just trying to kill him. Not that Reinhart cared.

He only had eyes for Valeta as she moved closer. Everyone and everything in this world was beneath him in every way. There existed nothing and no one

above him. Just the idea of allowing someone to surpass him was an unpleasant one, but Valeta was the exception. He wanted her above him. He wanted her to feel sorry for him. He wanted to be weak in front of her. It didn't hurt his pride to look up at her from down on his knees.

That's who she was to him.

"It hurts, Valeta."

Someone he could be weak in front of. Someone he wasn't afraid to act like a baby in front of. Every time he said that... Valeta's expression would become pained as if she were hurt herself.

"Who did this?"

He never understood why children would act even more like a baby in front of their parents, but he thought he could understand them a little now.

It felt good. Children instinctively longed to be embraced.

Reinhart was no different.

"That man you just sent flying, Valeta."

## I Failed to Oust The Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 15

Valeta rose to her feet, extending her hand to Reinhart. She had always been such an important person in Reinhart's life, from the days she'd protected him during tough spots when they were young.

"You're always saving me," he said. "You have done so ever since we were young."

Reinhart lifted his hands, still bound in shackles, and took Valeta's hand. She sighed as she pulled Reinhart to his feet.

"Why didn't you use magic to defend yourself?" she asked.

"I think these bind magic."

Valeta's eyes narrowed as she looked down at the shackles wrapped around Reinhart's wrists. She sighed, furrowing her brow.

"Also, I found Terion."

"Where?"

Reinhart gestured with his chin to the boy, who had been thrown away by the gust. Through all the magicians and knights that surrounded the pair, Valeta caught sight of Terion lying on the floor.

"Terion, are you okay? You're not hurt, are you?"

"No..."

"Thank goodness you're safe," she said. "Let's go home now. I've been worried about you."

Valeta let out a deep sigh of relief. Finally, this terrible business of waking up at dawn and working all day was at an end. It was a life that she wasn't cut out for since she had very little in the way of stamina.

"I'm not going."

"Not going? Why not?" Valeta asked, her eyes growing wide with surprise.

Seeing the look on her face, Terion clenched his fists. He squeezed his eyes shut as he spoke.

"I'm just getting in the way of you two. I'm so weak that I'm an obstacle to you both. I was caught so easily..." Terion said, his face scrunched up tightly.

Valeta could see the guilt and anguish on his face. She examined his expression closely after realizing that the boy's eyes were slightly unfocused.

"I'm no help to you, either..." he said. "I want to make money as soon as possible, but I can't even do that. There's nothing I can do. I can't remain a nuisance to you forever..."

Valeta had never heard Terion say anything like this before. She was sure one of the fugitives had hypnotized him and that was why he was saying all these things. She sighed deeply.

*I didn't expect this to happen.* She realized that this was the reason Reinhart hadn't acted yet. Still, she didn't understand why he was suddenly behaving like a child. Valeta crossed her arms as she sighed once more. If she was being honest, she hadn't seen this coming. Terion peered up at Valeta before ducking his head again.

She slowly turned her gaze around the room. There was one man who was

watching with interest, no doubt the king. Judging by the covetous look on his face, she judged that talking would do nothing to move him.

Valeta stared at the king as he began to chuckle.

"Even here we have heard that the Magicians' Tower has a new head."

"It's an honor."

"We also heard that he's been tamed. I suppose the rumors that an alchemist has a hold on his leash aren't wrong."

Reinhart scoffed at the king's words. He looked incredulous, as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Leash? What bullsh\*t. That's not all she's had her hands on."

Reinhart's gaze dropped meaningfully downwards. His smile was so bright and sweet that the king took a moment too long to process what he'd said.

"You're crazy. What are you talking about?" the king asked.

"I'm just bragging about my master," Reinhart said with a cheerful smile, his voice equally bright.

Valeta pressed her lips together disapprovingly. She'd always known that it was impossible to reason with Reinhart, but she felt like he was only growing more insane as the years went by.

"I'm sorry. He's just a little out of his mind," Valeta begrudgingly explained to the king.

She was of the opinion Reinhart had gone too far. Even though the man was a complete stranger, he was still a king. Reinhart had only grown more obscene in bed, but clearly, his bedroom behaviors were carrying over to his everyday life.

"Please continue," Valeta said to the king.

The king blinked slowly, resembling a cow. Even though Valeta knew that he had nothing good to say, she graciously gave him his chance to speak. If her mood had been bad before, it was about to be made much worse.

"I heard that an alchemist's heart is valuable. That's not even taking into account that you're also an elementalist. They say the heart is good for research purposes, but that it also grants immortality," the king said, sounding so much like a stereotypical villain that it pained her.

Valeta didn't even bat an eyelash though. Instead, she clutched the back of her head in frustration. She even sighed and clicked her tongue. "I suppose my heart is a precious thing."

After all, her heart was working overtime since she was both an alchemist and an elementalist. Valeta looked down, then turned her gaze on the fugitives.

"Let's put that aside for now... I'd like to talk to these fellows for a moment."

"We have nothing to say to the b\*tch who spreads her legs for the head of the Magicians' Tower," one of the fugitives said. He was standing in the middle of the group and was presumably their leader. There was a lot of hostility in his voice.

Valeta tilted her head to the side. She suddenly felt a chill in the air, the sensation coming from behind her.

"You're mistaken about whom the real b\*tch is here, my fugitive friends."

"Reinhart."

Valeta frowned. Instead of backing down, Reinhart took a step forward. He suddenly knelt beside her. The king and all the magicians jolted, startled by Reinhart's actions. This was because the rumors they'd heard about the new

head of the Magicians' Tower didn't match the man in front of them.

Tartarose rarely received news from the outside, but even those imprisoned there had heard stories about the head severing people's limbs from their bodies and exploding their heads, all with a smile on his face.

That wasn't even the half of it. They'd also heard he had the power to turn back time, keep the island in the sky afloat, and annihilate an entire noble house. Finally, the story of how he'd turned the entire empire upside down was undoubtedly something that could not be overlooked.

"I'm the b\*tch who spreads my legs, right, Master?" Reinhart said with a smile, looking extremely innocent despite his dirty mouth. Still knelt on the ground, he spread his knees. Despite all the people in the room, Reinhart looked calm and utterly unembarrassed.

His attention was solely focused on Valeta.

"Woof woof," Reinhart barked.

*Thump.*

Valeta's breath hitched as she felt her heart sink. She knew that this was his way of expressing his discontent with the fugitive's words, but...

*I guess this is just what a mad dog does.*

Valeta pressed a hand to her mouth as she looked down at Reinhart. Seeing him with black hair and dressed in tailcoats was doing something for her. Black hair and red eyes... She felt like she was looking at a demon.

Her gaze swept slowly over Reinhart. His suit hugged his pale body, accentuating every sumptuous line of his body. He was on his knees, legs slightly spread, with one arm tucked behind his back. It was an erotic sight. It was like he was trying to tempt her. Valeta's ears turned bright red. He was

definitely trying to tempt her. How was it possible for a man to still be so sexy while fully dressed? The barest hints of skin only made him all the more attractive.

Someone in the room gulped loudly.

That sound broke Valeta from her momentary daze. She moved to stand in front of Reinhart, blocking him from everyone else's view. When she looked up again, she found that all the knights were looking at Reinhart.

*Isn't it usually the opposite way around?*

In romance novels, it was always the man protecting a stunningly beautiful woman from lecherous eyes. This was the opposite of that. Reinhart was the princess, while Valeta was his knight. It wasn't that Valeta wasn't attractive herself; she was just stoic. If she smiled more, there would undoubtedly be no end to the marriage proposals coming her way. However, Reinhart was so stunning that his beauty couldn't be expressed in mere words. Next to him, Valeta was nothing. She was completely dwarfed by his shadow. In situations like this, Valeta had to protect Reinhart. If she didn't, his sexual energy would bewitch men and women, young and old alike. Despite the annoying situation, Valeta didn't exactly hate it.

"And this is the head of the Magicians' Tower?" one of the magicians spat.

Reinhart smirked.

"I had to show you bastards the difference between a dog and its master, because apparently you can't see it for yourself. What's the point of having eyes if you never open them? Would you like me to pluck them from your skull for you?" Reinhart smiled.

His words sent shivers down the magicians' spines.

"Anyone with eyes can tell that I'm the b\*tch here. I'm the b\*tch always in heat. I'm the b\*tch who's always trying to spread my legs and mount my master, so who are you to call my master a b\*tch?"

Valeta blinked as she listened to the strange turn Reinhart's spiel had taken.

*Why is he dissing dogs? There are far more good dogs in this world than good people.*

## I Failed to Oust The Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 16

"Hm? I'm in a foul mood, thanks to you lot. What are you going to do about it if I decide to just kill you all?" Reinhart pursed his red lips. He slowly rose from his kneeling position on the ground, sighing as he brushed the dust from his pants. "I thought you had something to say to these bastards, Master. Go on."

"Oh. Yeah." Valeta nodded, trying to shake off the momentary daze that had come over her. She turned to face the magicians once more. All the magicians stood silently glaring back at her. "Why did you kidnap this child?"

"I wouldn't call it kidnapping, since he offered to help us escape when we explained our situation to him."

Valeta's stoic expression was shaken by the magician's shameless words.

Reinhart crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged, before taking a step forward. "How is it not kidnapping when you've tampered with his thoughts and forced him to do things."

Valeta smiled, the expression resembling Reinhart's signature grin. This was a new habit of hers—she had begun to smile when she was unhappy. She was beginning to turn into Reinhart. Of course, she hadn't noticed this change in herself. *And I'm not going to tell her.* Reinhart wanted her to smile more. It made him happy to see her smile.

"You have the gall to bullsh\*t me, even after kidnapping my kid, huh?"

"What?"

"Also, I heard that a watchman helped you escape. Where are they?" Valeta asked the leader of the group.

He remained silent.

She slowly looked over the dozen or so magicians gathered. The king rose from his throne. "As fun as this is, I'm going to stop you here. I can't allow you to touch the magicians I have recruited."

Valeta blinked at the king's sudden interruption. *What the hell? Does he have no sense of when to and when not to interrupt?*

"Head of the Magicians' Tower, your corpse will be put to good use. Thanks to you, I also have the heart of an elementalist in my hands. Don't worry. We'll make sure to put each and every one of your organs and bones to good use. Just close your eyes."

Valeta stared. "What?"

"What the hell is he talking about, Master?" Reinhart asked Valeta, who wore an incredulous look on her face. Even the king eventually grew confused by the shocked expressions on their faces.

"So, who is the watchman?" Valeta turned her attention back to the magicians, deeming that the king wasn't worth her time.

"I helped them run away," one man said.

"Can I ask why?"

"I wanted to see the outside world," the watchman said, his head bowed. He had a very soft voice.

Valeta nodded reluctantly. "I'm sure that you'll be... freed soon. I'm sure that Caspelios—"

"I'm afraid not, Master," Reinhart said, smoothly cutting Valeta off. He ran his hand down her back, before wrapping an arm around Valeta's waist. She turned to look at him. "He left of his own accord. He's committed a crime, which makes him a criminal. A watchman who's committed a crime cannot be exonerated."

There was cruelty in his narrowed eyes. Despite how sweet his voice was, there was a clear undertone of annoyance. It was clear that Reinhart didn't care about the watchman's wants or desires, which was the very reason they were in this situation in the first place.

Valeta didn't say anything. She understood what was going through Reinhart's head. He wasn't a normal person, but rather something beyond human. That's why it was hard for him to relate to other human beings. She didn't have the heart to keep him on a tight leash—Reinhart was already going against his instincts, constantly suppressing them. He was bound to crack one day.

Valeta didn't want that. She didn't want him to think the way she did. She didn't want him to always walk the right path. All she wanted from him was basic morals—the bare minimum even. If he could refrain from killing good people or killing people just because they annoyed him, that was good enough for her.

Reinhart had countless memories stored away inside his mind. He needed to be able to let out some of his annoyance and anger. So, Valeta had come to a decision of her own. She wasn't going to stop him from exercising his rights. Right now, Reinhart was citing the rules of the Magicians' Tower. He had every right to exercise this power as head. In that case, Valeta had no place defending this person.

"Oh, I see."

Valeta nodded, and Reinhart smiled brightly. They'd come to a silent agreement.

"That's not fair! Our only sin was being born there! You're the one who treated us like criminals and forced us to become watchmen!"

"Could you please shut up? The adults are talking," Reinhart said coolly. Technically speaking, the watchman was probably older than them. However, no one was capable of arguing with Reinhart.

The once calm atmosphere shifted, the sudden sharp tension in the air prickling their skin. Valeta held her breath. It seemed like Reinhart was reaching his limit.

"I can't say for the watchman... but you magicians shouldn't hope to get out of here alive after kidnapping that child," Valeta said with a smile.

The king spoke up. "You keep talking. Why haven't you killed them yet? Tell me why that is. The head's hands are bound with magic-binding shackles, are they not?"

Valeta blinked slowly. She didn't know why the king was so confident, but she was embarrassed just listening to him. Reinhart could probably use magic. He was just choosing not to.

Moreover... The king was treating her like chopped liver. It hurt her pride a little. Valeta rubbed her forehead as she sighed. Did they think that Gene, perched on her shoulder, was just there for decoration? Or maybe they just couldn't see Nereid swirling around her. In the end, it didn't matter.

"Noas."

She'd make them see her power. As soon as the name left her lips, the ground began to rumble. The ground shook violently like there was an earthquake. It was loud, if nothing else.

*"Hm, it's been a while since a human summoned me. Do you want to make a contract?"*

Noas resembled a doll made out of clay. Despite the trembling earthquake he had brought with him, the earth elemental was only the size of her hand. His commanding voice was an adorable contrast to his tiny size. Valeta wondered if

Noas made himself so small on purpose.

*"He's normally that small,"* Gene supplied as if he knew exactly what Valeta was thinking.

"Uh, no?" she answered. "I just wanted to ask you for your help."

*"Don't even dream about asking for a contract. Do you have any idea how much I'm being exploited as it is?"* Gene

said with a snort as Valeta shook her head. Nereid hovered behind her, squeaking, *"That's right, that's absolutely right!"*

The little clay doll, who had been looking up at her so expectantly, suddenly sniffled, his lower lip quivering. His eyes began to fill with tears, threatening to spill over at any moment. He buried his face in his hands, looking incredibly pitiful.

*"No contract? B-but it's b-been... hic... s-so long s-since someone... hic... summon me... hic."*

No, he wasn't about to cry—he was already openly sobbing. Globs of mud streaked down his tiny cheeks. *Hang on, no one told me that the earth elemental was just a child.* Valeta looked down at the sobbing earth elemental sitting in the palm of her hand and tried to soothe him. She shuffled on her feet as she turned to look at Gene.

*No, but...* Valeta shrugged awkwardly. She wasn't used to dealing with crying people. The little doll seemed to shrink with each heaving sob, leaving her uncomfortable. She looked down at the earth elemental, mud streaming down his face, and finally said, "Fine, I'll sign a contract. That's all I have to do, right? If I can, then let's do it."

"Really?" Noas said with a sniffle.

"Yes, really. Let's do it after we finish here. Promise."

Noas paused for a moment before he said, “*I trust you.*”

“Stop crying now and help me.”

Valeta watched as the earth elemental wiped away his tears. She sighed deeply. The earth elemental hopped up and perched on her head as if he had never been crying in the first place. She could feel Gene glaring at her. Valeta tried her best to ignore the bird’s piercing stare.

“Ifrit.”

*Whoosh.*

A spark lit in the air, and grew into a huge ball of fire. Horns sprouted from within the flames, only to be engulfed once more. It was as though a figure was being born within the inferno. A pair of eyes flashed from within the swirling red fire.

“Ahh! It’s been so long since I’ve been among humans!” a sweet voice said.

Valeta’s eyes widened as a woman around the same size as Valeta emerged from the flames, her body glowing bright red. She had slightly charred, copper-colored skin and fiery crimson hair. Her eyes were like sparks, a mysterious swirl of colors—red, violet, and yellow all at the same time. It was like she was staring directly into the heart of a fire.

Valeta was mesmerized by the way the fire elemental’s thin, short dress clung to her body. She felt a rush of heat the moment the elemental stepped closer to her.

“So, you’re the summoner who summoned me. I’m in a very good mood, so why don’t we sign the—What the? You!”

“What are all of you doing here?!” Ifrit screeched as she pointed at Valeta.

Gene was perched on her left shoulder, Nereid on her right, while Noas was sitting on her head. Ifrit’s jaw dropped as

she saw all the elementals sitting comfortably on Valeta. She pointed at them but didn't seem very surprised.

*“What are all the coming elemental kings doing here?”*

Valeta was shocked.

*“And why is Noas, the king of elementals, here too?”*

Valeta wasn't just shocked, she was now completely astonished. It was like...

She felt like she had been scammed by Noas.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Side Story: Chapter 17

“Master.”

“Yeah.”

“What are you doing to keep those things hanging around you?”

Reinhart had been watching closely as her conversation with the elementals unfolded. His voice now carried a distinct edge to it.

Valeta remained silent for a moment. *What do I tell him?* she thought. She had nothing to say. More accurately, she had plenty of things she could say but nothing that would erase the edge in his voice.

*Should I tell him that I was just tricked into signing a contract? Hmm, but if I do, he might tear the spirit world apart with his bare hands.* She tried to think of another excuse, but the perfect one wasn’t coming to her. It was better just to not lie in the first place than to get caught. Valeta just shook her head. She had no desire to get punished by Reinhart again. He didn’t need to know all the details.

“I decided to sign a contract with Noas. He said it’d be difficult for him to help otherwise.”

“Hm...”

Reinhart’s eyes narrowed. He regarded the elementals with a suspicious gleam in his eye. Valeta shrugged at him casually, and he nodded. His eyes flashed, clearly confident that he could force the elementals to help without a contract, but Valeta pretended not to notice.

*Well, shall we get started?* It was time to take care of those who dared to look down on her. Valeta made a small motion with her hand, and Noas hopped down from her head.

*Rumble.*

The ground began to tremble, producing an earsplitting sound that resembled a roar. The royal castle both looked sturdy and was made out of gold. As the building shook, debris began to fall, showering those gathered in gold.

*“Don’t you touch my master!”*

Despite being only the size of Valeta’s palm, Noas was very loud. As Noas made his move, Nereid, still balanced on the Valeta’s shoulder, chuckled quietly.

*“Should I get started, too?”*

Nereid jumped from Valeta’s shoulder, flipping once midair. Then she swept her hands through the air like a conductor. A thin stream of water shot out of Nereid’s fingers, resembling spiderwebs. The streams intertwined until the singular stream became as thick as a large snake.

Nereid giggled playfully and directed the water to tie up the king and the nobles, all of whom were unsteady on their feet thanks to the tremors. The robed magicians were stumbling around, trying to use their magic.

*“What the? Why won’t it work?! ”*

*“I can’t use magic, leader!”*

*“Damn it! It’s not working!”*

Reinhart smiled at the unexpected turn of events. Anyone with eyes could tell that he had done something, despite the completely innocent look on his face.

Valeta nodded at Nereid, who was in motion immediately, leaving the king and nobles bound and rolling around on the floor. She shot another jet of water from her hand, catching the magicians around their ankles, and dangling them upside down midair.

“Argh!”

Standing behind Valeta, Reinhart made a tiny gesture with his hand. The magicians’ wands clattered to the floor, the magic stones mounted on top shattering into tiny pieces. Although the wind was blowing fiercely, the doors and windows remained firmly shut. Despite this, the king and his knights were being battered by the wind, tossed around on the floor.

In the midst of all this chaos, only where Reinhart, Valeta, and Terion were standing remained untouched. There was only a light breeze. As the other elementals went wild, Ifrit was like a cat in a strange garret. She watched warily, obviously feeling awkward about suddenly being called upon without being offered a contract.

She watched the series of events unfolding, before sighing.

*“Oh, I don’t know anymore. I just have to kill those things, right?”*

Whoosh.

In the blink of an eye, flames had completely enveloped her body. The nobles were terrified by the sudden appearance of fire, frozen and not doing anything. To be more precise, there was nothing they could do.

Except for the magicians who were hanging upside down, all the others, still bound in ropes of water, had lost their balance in the tremors and were being buffeted around by the wind. Their hair and clothes had been completely ruined by the combination of so many powerful forces.

The sound of crackling flames had a profound effect on the nobles. Even Valeta was a little scared. Ifrit summoned a few fireballs. The people's faces paled.

"Ahhh!"

"Mmph! Mm! Mmm!"

The fireballs danced midair, poised to descend on the nobles at any moment. Terion was the only one who seemed safe. He watched, holding his breath.

*"Shall I kill you?"*

They couldn't hear the fire elemental's voice, but the king and the nobles began to frantically squirm about like caterpillars.

They were no match for Valeta. She sighed at the pathetic sight that the nation's most famous and the notorious criminals made. She didn't understand why she had bothered playing maid for these people. *It might have been faster just facing them head-on.* She wouldn't have had to wake up so early in the morning, nor endure Reinhart's punishment. The more she thought about it, the more upset she became. She suddenly felt almost hollow inside. A tiny part of her could understand Reinhart's boredom with life.

*I feel really empty.* Valeta regretted wasting her breath on these people in the first place. "I think these people might be better if you were their king, Rein. What a waste of a country."

Valeta crossed her arms as she sighed. This country was far too good for this king. For a country rich in valuable magic stones—its artisans were the best at crafting magical tools—their leaders were remarkably pathetic.

Reinhart's eyes narrowed upon hearing Valeta's words. He was too quiet, his arms crossed as if he was thinking about something deeply.

"Hm... You think?"

"Yeah. I don't even have it in me to deal with them."

Reinhart smiled brightly as Valeta muttered this, sounding deeply bored by the situation. It was hard not to love someone who thought exactly the same way he did. He unfolded his arms as if he had come to a decision. He took Valeta's hand, pressing his lips to the back of her hand.

"I think that's a great idea."

"Huh?"

"Being king. If I were king, then you'd be my queen, right? Just the thought of it makes my heart flutter." Reinhart smiled, his bright aura a stark contrast to the darkness that surrounded them.

Valeta froze, suddenly feeling like she was about to be swallowed alive by darkness. She grabbed Reinhart's wrist, a puzzled look on her face. *What the hell is he up to?*

"You're not actually going to kill them all, are you?" she asked.

"Um, well, I was planning on it. Sparing them would just be a pain. We could just kill them. There are no ranks on the island in the sky, so keeping useless kings and nobles around is just a headache in my opinion."

Valeta pressed her hands to the side of her head. She wished she could take off her ears, wash them, and put them back on again. Surely she was hearing things.

"I'm killing the knights just because they're annoying. Not to mention useless, too."

"Wait, hold on! I don't understand what's going on right now. What are you talking about?" she asked.

Valeta rubbed her forehead, trying desperately to make sense of what he was saying. However, in the end she couldn't bring herself to say anything. She'd always known he was strange, but she didn't think he'd decide to just kill all the nobles based on what she'd said. Valeta tried to organize her thoughts. She felt like she had to clear up whatever misunderstandings had occurred one by one.

"Reinhart... You know... I just said that because I was frustrated. I didn't mean that I actually wanted you to become king."

"Valeta, I'm already a king. Being the head of the Magicians' Tower on the island in the sky is practically the same thing as being a king."

*Well, when you put it that way...* Valeta frowned, shaking her head. *I should be careful about what I say.*

She sighed deeply.

"Valeta, I know what you're trying to say, but this isn't a spur-of-the-moment decision on my part," his honeyed voice whispered in her ear.

Valeta knew how cold his sweet words could be when directed at others. He probably meant it when he said she was the only one in the world for him.

"We need to move the island in the sky," Reinhart said.

"What are you talking about?"

"The island in the sky is currently being held up by the power of the Magicians' Tower. Caspelios is constantly maintaining the Magicians' Tower when the head isn't around."

Valeta frowned as she listened to Reinhart explain. The loud crying in the background was getting on her nerves. When she raised a finger to her lips, Noas stomped twice with a smirk. Globs of mud rose from the ground, shooting out to cover the people's mouths. The aggressive actions were in complete

contrast to the adorable ground elemental.

*Ugh, what if they accidentally eat dirt?* Valeta grimaced a little before turning back to Reinhart. She nodded, and he continued speaking with a bright smile on his face.

“As long as the island in the sky exists, both the head of the Magicians’ Tower and Caspelios must always maintain it in some capacity.”

Valeta waited.

“This means there will always be a need for someone like me in the future.”

She had never thought about that before. Was this because she thought that he hated the Magicians’ Tower? Hearing Reinhart speak on this came as a shock to Valeta, who was hearing this concern for the first time. She didn’t know he had been thinking about it.

The Reinhart in the novel hadn’t been concerned about the future of the tower. He had planned to live at the top of the Magicians’ Tower for the rest of his life, and that was how the novel ended. He fulfilled his duties as the head of the Magicians’ Tower but never went above and beyond. All he did was repair the Magicians’ Tower and keep magic flowing through it.

“Both the Magicians’ Tower and the island in the sky are unstable, Valeta.”

“What... makes you think that?” she asked.

“The Magicians’ Tower will collapse if a head is ever selected who doesn’t fulfill their responsibilities, or if something were to happen to Caspelios.”

Valeta took a deep breath. She understood what he was saying, already knowing a thing or two about a future where this exact thing happened. In what felt like a distant memory now, she recalled that after Reinhart disappeared, the island in the sky had been on the brink of collapse. Caspelios was barely able to

keep it afloat by himself. Reinhart had been the one to eventually lift it back into the sky.

"Children with magic are being born all over the world. They have to endure life among the socoros until they grow into their power, just as Terion and I did."

"I'm sure..."

Children born with magic had to lie low, suppressing their feelings without knowing why they were being ostracized, just as many magicians had done in the past. New generations of magicians would learn to hate socoros, and that hatred would drive a wedge between them. It was a never ending cycle.

"Wouldn't it be better if there were a place where all magicians could live? If we placed the Magicians' Tower in the center of this island, this could be that place."

Who would have thought of placing the floating island down somewhere? Reinhart was serious, though, as he detailed a plan that nobody had any hope of achieving in the past. He had given the island in the sky's future a lot of thought. He wasn't even doing so out of self-interest or greed. He was talking about changing the entire system for the better.

"It would provide a place for young magicians to take refuge. In the past, they couldn't enter the island in the sky until after they had awakened their powers."

"That's right."

"If we ground the Tower, there will be a place for young magicians to live, and cultural exchanges between magicians and socoros, just as you wanted."

Valeta nodded silently.

"The Magicians' Tower will be more stable on solid ground than it is floating," Reinhart continued. He must have been thinking about this for some time. He

explained his idea in a way that suggested he wasn't just acting on impulse.

"You..."

Reinhart blinked, and his eyes began to turn silvery in color. Valeta looked at him. All she could do was stare.

"But most importantly, it would mean that you're safe, Valeta," he finished.

"What...?"

"I value your safety more than anything. More than my life, more than all of my power... Even if it means giving up all the parts of me that you hate, I want you to be safe."

Reinhart's eyes then turned completely silver.

## I Failed to Oust The Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 18

Valeta was speechless, rendered sick to her stomach. She could suddenly see the future in Reinhart's eyes, see his transcendence. She knew what those shining silver eyes meant thanks to the Reinhart she had left behind in the novel and the one she met in her dream.

His transcendence... was born from killing himself—it was a form he could only reach by giving up on himself. After Reinhart was betrayed, he gave up entirely, and decided to lock himself away in the Magicians' Tower. He probably thought that ever since he managed to break the seal. She was sure that it was experiencing this feeling—giving up on himself and valuing others before him—that gave him the power to transcend.

*Valuing others before him? Is it even accurate to call it that? Was it even possible for him to sacrifice oneself for the good of others?* Valeta pressed a hand to her aching heart.

"It's better for you to interact with people, rather than being locked up in a tower like a princess," Reinhart said. "I'm fine just having you, but you're different. You have more needs than I do."

Valeta's breath caught. It felt like someone had clamped a hand over her mouth. He thought too highly of her. No, *that's not it*.

Reinhart thought too lowly of himself. He always put himself down, going so low that Valeta never had to look up at him. She never struggled to find him. All she had to do was look down, and he was there.

"Valeta, Valeta... I'd do anything to make sure you never get sick of me. I don't

want you to ever throw me away for as long as we live."

Valeta didn't say anything. He was desperate and pathetic, always begging without end. He had the world in the palm of his hand, yet he didn't ever force her to do anything.

The Reinhart standing before her was different to the man in the novel. So many things had changed. He was sweet to her whenever they were together. He rarely ever threatened her anymore. Even on his cruelest days, he never raised a blade against her.

"Close your eyes, Valeta. You shouldn't have to see something so gruesome. I'll kill all these people and become king of this country," Reinhart said, turning to Valeta and waving his hand.

She turned her back on the king and the others, her eyes locked with Reinhart's. The darkness, darker than a black hole, began to grow larger and larger.

"You can just stay there..."

Reinhart always tried to shield her. He never allowed her to see anything bad.

Valeta frowned. He had no confidence in their future together. If he was wrong about one thing though, it was about just how much Valeta liked Reinhart. None of this would have happened in the first place if she truly hated him.

Valeta pushed lightly against Reinhart's shoulder. She turned and looked down at the terrified king, who was rolling around on the floor, tears streaming down his face. The king wasn't dangerous, nor did he have any dignity. There was no comparison between him and their last enemy, the emperor, who was by far the worst person she had ever met, but by no means was he an incompetent piece of trash.

"Ifrit," Valeta said in a low voice, her expression hardening.

*“Hm? Well, don’t you look fired up? Very well. You finally need my help now, is that it? What can I do?”*

Ifrit came closer to Valeta. The heat coming off the fire elemental warmed Valeta’s face. She squeezed her eyes shut, then slowly opened them once more. Her violet eyes grew hard. *Those people kidnapped Terion. After they kidnapped him, they proceeded to torment him. They threatened both me and Reinhart. They’ve disturbed our peaceful life.* For that alone, Valeta was ready to punish them.

“Aside from me, Terion, and Reinhart...”

“Valeta, you don’t have to do it,” Reinhart said, taking Valeta’s hand. His hand was warm on hers. She had once thought Reinhart’s hands would be cold, but they were always warm.

“I want you...” she continued, ignoring him. Her lips were dry. Reinhart thought that he was a good person, but he meant it when he said that he wouldn’t let the people who kidnapped Terion go alive. “...to kill them all. I don’t even want there to be ashes left.”

The cold order passed through Valeta’s lips. Behind her, Reinhart’s lips twisted with delight.

*“Good!” Ifrit said. “Finally, a worthy request!”*

**Whoosh!**

Instantly, flames descended upon the king, the knights, the magicians, and the watchman. The mud over their mouths and the watery ropes binding them evaporated in the heat of the inferno. Even the wind subsided. The moment their horrific shrieks were about to meet her ears, the whole world went quiet and Valeta’s surroundings changed.

In the blink of an eye, she found her body had been turned around, Reinhart with a smile on his face before her. She could feel the heat of the flames coming

from behind. Reinhart pressed his lips against hers. All she could now see was Reinhart, his smiling face filling her entire field of vision. He pulled her closer by her hips, devouring her lips.

*He's using magic... She couldn't hear anything. She couldn't even hear the rustle of her skirt as it was tossed around by the wind, let alone their screams. I don't know anymore.* Valeta slowly closed her eyes, opening her mouth and letting Reinhart in. His tongue worked its way past her lips, plunging inside.

He snapped his fingers somewhere out of Valeta's sight.

The fire went out.

A second snap revived all the people who were now near death, new flesh growing back over their charred skin. They were frenzied, the pain of their rapidly regenerating cells causing great agony.

"Aaaaaah!"

Despite the horrific screaming, Reinhart and the elementals watched, utterly unbothered. Their expressions were so mild, that it was like they were watching a movie rather than witnessing reality.

"S-s-spare me. I-if you want money, I'll give you as much as you want!"

"W-we were wrong, my lord. Please forgive us..."

Reinhart slowly drew his lips away from Valeta's. He stroked the back of her head. He paused time for her as he pressed her face into his shoulder. He didn't even want her to see this sight.

"The only reason I saved you..." Reinhart said, grinning. "Is because I didn't want my master to kill scum like you. It's not because I have any desire to show mercy or negotiate with you."

He was happy enough knowing that she was willing to kill for him. There was no reason for her to actually dirty her hands. He didn't even want that for her. Reinhart sighed quietly. *This is why I'm so greedy.* This was why he couldn't let her go—why he wanted her. This is why she was the only thing in the world he needed. There was no one as lovely as her.

A raging inferno, far more powerful than Ifrit's, consumed every last person, one by one. Their screams were horrific. Reinhart watched as one by one, they turned to ash. He watched until not even ash remained, just as Valeta had wanted.

Reinhart looked around. Terion was in the corner, watching the fire burn with a nervous look on his face. He didn't seem all that shaken for a child who had just witnessed something so horrific. He didn't cry, nor did he scream, and he hadn't stepped forth and asked Reinhart to spare them. He looked scared, but that was all. The boy slowly turned to look at the magician as though he felt Reinhart's eyes on him.

"You seem fine."

"They... They said they were going to do something bad to Valeta."

"Right. And that's why they had to die."

Terion slowly nodded in response.

Reinhart continued gently stroking the back of Valeta's head. She blinked a couple of times, coming back to her senses. Reinhart looked at Terion and pressed a finger to his mouth. Terion nodded as Valeta straightened up.

"What did you just do to me?"

"I paused time for a moment."

"Why?"

"I just... had some things to take care of."

Valeta turned around. Reinhart did nothing to stop her this time. There were piles of ashes on the ground. She could only imagine how horrific their deaths had been. There weren't even any fragments of bone left.

"Did you do it?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"There's only one reason why you'd stop time for me. You didn't want me to kill them."

Reinhart didn't even try to defend himself. He simply smiled.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Side Story: Chapter 19

Reinhart didn't reply, but Valeta could guess at what happened based on his silence. She never would have guessed that he had revived everyone just to kill them all again. She stared at the ashes for a long time before she slowly turned to face Terion, who was still cowering in a corner. She honestly didn't know what to say to him. She didn't want to force him to come back home.

"Well, I'm glad you're safe, Terion."

"You too, Valeta."

"And... if you really meant what you said, you can live on your own if you want. You can live in the dormitory... And if you don't want to do that, you can just do whatever you want," Valeta said evenly. She would get a little lonely if Terion left, but she would probably get used to it, eventually.

"Really?" Terion asked.

"Yes. I heard that everyone goes through puberty at some point..."

"What?"

"I've been thinking about it, and I came to the conclusion that I don't have the right to force you to do anything."

If Terion thought that he was getting in their way, she wouldn't keep trying to persuade him until he realized the truth for himself. His eyes widened, and he ran to Valeta.

"I was wrong! It's not puberty!" he cried.

"Huh?"

"It's just... I don't know how to do anything. And everyone at school has been making fun of me for not being from a noble family. They asked me where I was from and how my family got rich... They're always saying that I smell bad, so I don't want to stay in the dorms..."

Valeta's eyes widened. She pressed her lips together, wondering if everything Terion was saying was true.

"It's just... I can't make money. I'm not good at anything. I can't help with anything... That's why I want to keep living with you, but..."

Reinhart's face tightened as he listened with an increasingly stiff smile. Valeta's expression shifted, too. Listening to Terion, they realized that this was all the result of bullying.

"They said that you were going to throw me away. I couldn't help but believe that they were right, so... That's why I did what I did."

"I see... Out of curiosity, which country are those bastards from, Terion?" Valeta asked with a smile.

She never would have imagined that Terion was being bullied and ostracized at the academy. It hurt to learn about what the child was going through in a strange place like this. Rage was boiling up inside her.

"Just wait one week," Reinhart said. "You're royalty now, too. Got that?"

"What? Are you really going to become king, brother?"

Reinhart stared at the boy.

"Bro..." Terion corrected himself.

Reinhart nodded casually. There was no reason he couldn't be king. All he had to do was take over the country and move the Magicians' Tower. If there were any problems, he would just brainwash the people.

"Valeta."

"Yeah."

Reinhart got down on one knee. He gingerly took her hand in his.

"If I become king, will you be my queen?"

"Is this a marriage proposal...?"

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Valeta was silent in response to Reinhart's question. She turned her head away. If they were to become tied to each other on paper, they would be able to proudly declare they were a couple.

"Before I agree, there's one thing I want to make clear."

"What?"

"Reinhart."

"Yes, Valeta?"

"I love you."

Reinhart's leisurely smile froze on his face. He stood frozen for a long moment, looking up at Valeta with a smile on his face.

"Reinhart?" she said.

The smile slowly faded from his lips. He slowly rose from his kneeling position.

Reinhart stared down at her for a long moment, an impassive look on his face. Then, he leaned over and kissed her.

"I understand what you said about love, and I know how you feel," Valeta said. "I don't want to put any pressure on you."

"I love you, Valeta."

"What...?"

Valeta's breath hitched, feeling as though someone had hit her over the back of the head. She felt like she had just heard the impossible. Reinhart would never say those words.

"I love you, Valeta," Reinhart whispered again, forcing her to acknowledge that this wasn't a dream.

Her face was colored with astonishment, her expressionless stare quickly turning to one of surprise. Then, the corners of her eyes began to curve upward, a bright smile appearing on her face. Reinhart tensed once more. He had never seen such a radiant, happy smile on Valeta's face before.

"Maybe I should've said that earlier." He smiled, tilting his head a little. He felt light as a feather as his lips met hers.

\* \* \*

"Mmm... W-wait. R-Reinhart...!"

"There will be no waiting today, Master."

Reinhart had gone to the Magicians' Tower to tell a few of the magicians what had happened. He'd left the work to them and come straight home. Reinhart had left Terion in the care of Caspelios. He laid Valeta gently back on the living room sofa.

"I love you, I love you..."

"Wait, I get it, but— Ngh!"

Reinhart quickly divested her of her shirt. His own shirt had been cast aside long ago. He buried his face in the girl's neck, expression desperate.

"I must be in heat, Master." He nibbled on the girl's earlobe. Her breath hitched when she felt his finger slide inside her, her hips bucking at the intrusion. "I wonder if this is what a dog feels like when it's going insane. I feel like I've been infected with rabies. I want to bite you all over."

"I'll kill you if you're actually diseased..."

Reinhart chuckled hearing Valeta's unique response. He smiled softly, loving the way she turned red at his touch.

"If you don't want a dog to hump everything that moves, then you have to placate it, Master. What are you going to do if I actually do go insane?"

Reinhart was hard, his desire resting against his stomach. Valeta could feel the heat from his hands where they gripped her thighs. For a moment, she seriously worried that his hands would leave a permanent mark.

"I'll service you today. All you have to do is sit back and take it. You don't have to do a thing."

His words were warm, but his eyes blazed with desire. Valeta's breath caught in her throat as she watched the ruby of eyes fade to silver. She always found herself amazed when his eyes turned silver.

"You're... always... ah....!"

Reinhart gently caressed her hips. He throbbed, desperate to find relief. Leaning down, he began to kiss along her inner thighs. He'd never thought it would be so exciting, leaving marks in hidden places that no one would see. If this is what love was, he'd give anything for it.

"I love you."

The tension in Valeta's body faded with each loving whisper against her skin. Reinhart pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

"You have to completely surrender to me," Reinhart whispered, trailing light nips down her stomach. "If you do this with anyone else, I'll completely rip them to shreds."

"Who else would I do this with? I won't— Ahh..."

"Yes, that's what I want to hear," Reinhart said, satisfied.

He leaned down. She felt something sliding between her legs. Valeta took a deep breath, grasping the soft material below her with both hands, the veins visible in her pale hands. She squeezed her eyes shut, her body tense with anticipation. Despite having felt this raw emotion well up inside her so many times before, it was still so unfamiliar to her.

"Should we try something new today?"

"What...?"

"I really want to do it like a dog."

Is that what he was into these days? Before Valeta could say anything, Reinhart flipped her over onto her stomach. She blinked, her vision suddenly full of the soft pillows instead of his face.

"Rein... Reinhart...?"

He draped himself over Valeta's back and whispered in her ear, "I heard that this is how a dog mounts its partner when they mate."

His arm slipped under the girl's stomach, holding her firmly in place. Each of Reinhart's words, whispered in a low, sultry voice, made her ache. He knew how to arouse the girl without even needing to use his hands.

*This perverted bastard...* Valeta thought.

He slid two large soft pillows under Valeta's stomach. Her hips naturally tilted up.

"If I'm such a dog, I should be able to mount you like one too, right?"

## I Failed to Oust The Villain!

### Side Story: Chapter 20

The appeasing lilt to his voice, sounding as though it was dripping with honey, was appealing to her. Valeta squeezed her eyes shut, growing wet just from the sweet sound.

“Since when have I owned a dog... Hah...”

Reinhart’s teeth grazed her spine, leaving red marks along her back. The feeling of his tongue sent goosebumps running up and down her spine. His desire for her was palpable.

“Breathe, Valeta.”

She suddenly found his soothing voice despicable. Valeta closed her eyes, feeling her own heavy breathing growing heated. Reinhart always drew out their foreplay. That didn’t mean the sex itself was over quickly, but she often felt drained before it even started.

“You feel so good,” Reinhart whispered, lightly slapping her thighs. Valeta spread her legs slightly, and he took his place between them, his member exposed.

“You son of a b\*tch...” Valeta hissed. She could feel Reinhart twitching against her. “I guess you must really be in heat after all.”

His swollen desire slid into her. Reinhart cupped Valeta’s chin, turning her head so he could kiss her. They resembled dogs mating in this position, even though they were both people.

“If you... become... my queen...” Reinhart panted, “how do you feel about doing

this on the throne?"

"Are you crazy?"

She clasped her hand over her mouth as he began to pick up speed. If she wasn't careful, she'd end up biting her tongue.

Reinhart slowed his thrusts and brought their lips together once more.

"Are you opposed?" he asked.

"Don't make me state the obvious..."

"What if thinking about you turns me on? I could go into heat in front of all my vassals."

"You son of a b\*tch..." Valeta hissed through gritted teeth.

Reinhart chuckled. As he reached his climax, he thrust one final time then pressed inside her, releasing deep inside her body.

"I'm just as crazy for loving a son of a b\*tch like you."

Reinhart burst out laughing as she shivered with self-disdain. Their bodies remained intertwined, blanketed in lust and desire.

\* \* \*

Three years passed.

In that time, Reinhart and Valeta came to be known as king and queen. Much had changed. The moment Reinhart announced that he intended to move the Magicians' Tower, there had been strong opposition from many of the

magicians. A large fight broke out between those who refused to mix with socoros and those who were in favor of laying down roots for the Magicians' Tower.

It had taken nothing more than a wave of Reinhart's hand to settle the debate. When push came to shove, people valued their lives over their pride. Even those who valued their opinions more than their own lives became quiet, daring not to oppose the lord of the tower.

And so, the kingdom of Resol was quickly subdued, much more quickly than anticipated. The people of Resol didn't dislike the magicians as much as one might have anticipated. As for the magicians, they found the Resolians less hostile than the average socoro. This was most likely due to their affinity for working with magic.

After Reinhart became king, all ranks within the nation disappeared. He dissolved the class system and dismissed all the nobles. If any of the former nobility wished to remain in the kingdom as ordinary citizens, he'd allowed it. However, many of them resisted.

In the end, he just booted most of them out. As soon as Carlon Delphine and Dreux Leon heard news of Reinhart and Valeta's take-over, they descended on them, berating them fiercely. The couple had just stood there, stunned, unable to believe that two men who were usually so composed had resorted to shaking them by the shoulders.

With Carlon's help, Reinhart drafted a trade agreement with the empire. There was no reason to be hostile with them. That day, the world's first nation of magicians, one without ranks and titles, was established. The change in leadership came with a change in name.

*Valrein Kingdom. As for the name of the new kingdom... Well, the Magicians' Tower was built by humans, perhaps we should ask them.*

There was a king and queen, but no classes. It was a strange and unique country, one without titles, where the nobility had been replaced with civil servants. Of course, they weren't recognized as a country in some places, but the magicians of the Magicians' Tower were very talented and thus, had quickly begun producing results. In particular, the magicians and the magic stone engineers had started to work together, producing results that were impossible to replicate elsewhere.

In any case, the country began to develop quickly. By the time the first year anniversary of Valrein rolled around, most countries had interacted with them in some capacity, which was an impressive feat. It was all thanks to the combination of Reinhart's power, the magic stone engineers, and the magicians.

The former crown prince and the second prince had been thrown out of the country. Reinhart said that he had chased them away himself, but Valeta didn't hear anything more about their whereabouts after they left. If the rumors were to be believed, there were two vagrants, completely out of their minds, who were wandering the lands, claiming to be the deposed princes of Resol.

As for the twins Reinhart and Valeta had looked after for a short stint of time, they were given two options. The first was to find a home in another country. The second was to remain in the castle, but only if their royal status didn't matter to them. The twins had no desire for power, so they chose to remain in the castle. Praha, free from his princely title, began attending the same academy as Terion, who had returned to his studies as patron to the king and queen. He seemed to be doing well in school.

Instead of spending time with the busy king and queen, he began to spend more time with the twins, playing with them as if they were his real siblings. The kids who had picked on Terion found themselves suddenly expelled from school one day. Officially, it was said that they had to leave the school due to family emergencies... But Reinhart and Terion may be the only two people who knew the truth about what had happened to them. Valeta couldn't help but think to

herself that Terion was becoming more like Reinhart by the day.

One day, Terion informed Valeta that he planned to travel the world after he graduated from the academy. Even after all these years, there were still those who remained affected by the emperor's attack. He wanted to eradicate the rezir once and for all.

After Reinhart became king, there were days he didn't return to their bedroom. Valeta was also busy, traveling around the empire and restoring the land with her elementals. The Magicians' Tower was placed in a quiet corner of the country formerly known as Resol, now Valrein. At first, they planned to put the Tower in the middle of the country, but many people opposed this, saying that the location was not well-thought-out, and it got in the way of traffic. And then...

"Congratulations, Your Majesty. You're three months along."

...Valeta found out that she was pregnant.

"What? What did you say?"

"You're pregnant," the physician replied with a bright smile on their face.

Valeta's face crumpled. Reinhart was suddenly pressed close to her, placing a hand on her stomach. His eyes widened.

"There's really something growing inside you, Valeta."

"Yeah, because I'm pregnant."

"Yes... How did this happen? When will it be born? Can we just take it out now?"

Valeta quickly withdrew from Reinhart, a panicked expression on her face. The smiling physician stood in front of Valeta, stepping between her and Reinhart. His eyebrows rose in surprise.

"I believe you'd benefit from a more thorough sexual education, Your Majesty," the physician pointed out bravely, grabbing Reinhart by the back of his collar.

This particular physician was one of the best. Reinhart had personally searched the entire world for them when Valeta had fallen ill with a fever one day. The problem was that the physician always treated Reinhart like a child. Clearly, they weren't afraid of death. However, Reinhart couldn't do anything about it if Valeta became sick one day.

"I'll let the maids know what to do, but for now, it's important to focus on positive affirmations. Only say and think about good things."

"Valeta, are you happy? If you hate it, we can just get rid of—"

The physician quickly covered Reinhart's mouth.

Valeta stared at Reinhart, her jaw slack.

"I don't hate it..." she said, giving a faint smile. "I'm just surprised, that's all. What about you?"

"If it's your child, of course I want to see it born."

Reinhart broke free from the physician's firm grasp, pressing a kiss to Valeta's lips. It was a beautiful fall day, full of bright sunshine.

<The End>

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 1

### **Side: Another world**

“Boring.”

He looked down at the world rolling on without him from his usual place in the sky room. His castle continued to stand strong even after he had allowed a single intruder inside.

“Something that belongs to me in another world falling into this one was certainly fun.”

Following that encounter, life somehow felt more agonizingly boring than usual. He lifted his hand into the air. It was as if he could still feel her struggling under his grip, still feel the soft flesh of her neck.

“*That hurts...!*”

“*S-stop...!*”

“*What?*” he had asked, his voice calm.

“*Rein... Reinhart... you... bastard...*”

“*You know my name?*”

“Ngh...”

Even though she'd trembled, she'd never once taken her eyes off of him—she was such an interesting girl. *She had complete possession over me in another world...* He knew that there were many parallel universes out there, worlds that he couldn't access even as a transcendent. However, she had slipped into his life as if it had been fate.

“What are you doing?”

“I've been searching my memories, but I've never met you before.”

“What...?”

A poor liar, Reinhart thought. And yet, *she's the only source of air for another me in a different world.*

“I should've caught her.”

He shouldn't have let her go.

“I'm bored.”

He was beyond bored. Something twisted deep inside him when he lingered on the tedium of his existence and how he'd have to eternally spend his endless days in monotony. This was his fate. It had already been determined. It was always destined to be this way, from the very beginning. He knew that, but he could do nothing to break the monotony.

“I wish... I could have you, too, Valeta.”

He never forgot the feeling of her choking under his hands nor the electric shock that had gone through him upon kissing her lips. The only thing that would have been more pleasurable, was if they had gotten to join their bodies.

"She's already gone in this world."

He slowly drummed his fingers against his chin. Once he began coveting something, he couldn't stop.

"Ha..." He dropped his gaze. "If she's not here... I'll just have to bring her from another world."

Based on what he'd seen at the time, her life hadn't seemed all that peaceful. There was probably a world out there where her life was in utter ruins. A perfectly intact girl was already safely in the hands of another version of himself, but he'd be just fine with a broken one.

*It doesn't matter if she's broken. I just want to see the look on her face when she's writhing under me.* It'd be fun to watch her gasp for air, as he stuffed her mouth full of him.

"Entering another world is taboo, but..."

It wouldn't be a violation if he paid a large price in exchange for his trespass. For the first time in a long time, he drew a magic circle. Reinhart had never tried to enter another universe before, but he needed a little stimulation after all that he'd endured.

Reinhart gently eased himself to the ground on top of the magic circle and closed his eyes. Concentrating was the first step. It was easy work to send only his consciousness across worlds, just as Valeta had crossed into his.

A faint smile spread across his lips as he searched for the correct world.

"Found it. A broken one."

As far as he could tell, someone had twisted and changed this Valeta's world on a whim. There were universes that followed their intended course and those that didn't. In other words, there were worlds out there where Valeta, destined

to die, was still alive. It didn't take long for him to find what he was looking for. He'd only spent half a day sitting on the circle when he found it.

"It's been ages since I've had this much fun," Reinhart said.

As he slowly rose to his feet, the magic circle under his feet began to glow.

\* \* \*

"Valeta Delight."

"Yes, Father."

"Tell me. How are you supposed to use your skills again?"

"Only when you wish it, where you wish it and how you wish it, Father."

*I'm sick of this.* Valeta Delight was sick and tired of everything. Her only sin was being born to a life of misfortune.

"So you do know. Good," Count Delight said, looking down at the girl on the floor.

He patted her a few times on the cheek as if praising a well-behaved pet. Valeta dropped her head. Her eyes were empty, like a night sky devoid of the moon and stars. *Today will be the last time.*

Count Delight smiled, completely oblivious to his daughter's thoughts. "The potions you made today were excellent. I'm looking forward to the next ones."

"Yes, Father," Valeta said obediently.

Count Delight patted her on the shoulder, pleased with her response. "What a

good girl. You truly are my greatest creation."

All kinds of minerals and herbs, along with bottles of potions, were strewn around her on the floor. She was wearing a thin dress that did nothing to hide the bruises covering her arms and legs. A dark handprint lingered around her neck. The door closed with a bang, and she sat on the soft rug beneath her, unmoving for a long time. Finally, she forced herself off the ground and went to her bed.

The rattle of a chain reverberated around the room. Valeta's eyes flickered down to the shackle around her ankle. The chain was only long enough for her to wander around the room, stopping short right before the balcony window. She stretched out her hand, reaching for the window.

"Valeta."

She flinched when she heard the voice come from behind her.

"I heard that Count Delight dropped by today. I hope he didn't trouble you too—Valeta?"

She clenched her fists.

"Valeta, my love, what are you doing over there?"

"I..." Valeta paused. "I just wanted to get some fresh air."

"Is that right? You'll catch a cold if you stand there. Come here."

She obediently turned around at the prince's command.

"I heard that you've been behaving yourself these days. At this rate, I don't think bringing you to Father's study will pose any issues," the prince said, cradling her in his arms like a doll. She closed her eyes without responding.

Her life had been flipped upside down the day she'd discovered she could use alchemy. Count Delight, who'd used to have no interest in her, did everything he could to control her from that day forward. He was a gruesome educator, teaching her nothing but obedience.

And she had decided that would all end today.

"Do you love me, Your Highness?"

"Of course. I love you, Valeta."

He leaned down to kiss her, forcing his tongue past her lips. She hated his touch, but she was used to it by now. She leaned into him, her hand slowly moving without him noticing.

"Then would you... die for me?"

"What...?"

Valeta slowly pushed the prince away from her, and suddenly, there was a knife buried in his chest, embedded just off-center from his heart.

With dead eyes, Valeta slowly moved. She pulled out the knife, her hands stained with the blood now pouring from his wound. She began to draw a circle using the blood. Then, she slashed at her own wrist, drawing even more blood. She placed a hand on the circle, created using their combined blood, and began to mutter in the ancient language.

The chain around her ankle shattered.

"Vale—"

"I've been contemplating how I would break this, since it was made using a special material. But it was actually pretty simple. Turns out... a person's life is more than powerful enough to destroy it."

Valeta smiled weakly as she teetered toward the balcony. She was at the top of a remotely located tower, a tower made just for her.

“Valeta... How dare... you...”

“There was a seed of immortality planted in the potions you bullied me into making.” Valeta laughed as she planted one foot precariously against the railing. It was refreshing to laugh, the feel of it bubbling up resembling the feeling of the air outside the tower. “One day, those seeds will sprout, consuming your wicked lives, and casting a shadow over this tower.”

She didn’t seem scared, even though the blood from her wrist was now dripping down the railing.

“I hope that you all suffer for the rest of your lives,” she muttered.

Then, she took a step forward and fell.

“Valeta!”

She plunged to the depths below, the fresh air, the feeling of freedom, enveloping her entirely.

*I can't believe I'll finally be free in death... What could be more depressing and thrilling at the same time? Come to think of it, that slave and I were so alike.* Valeta suddenly thought of the slave boy her father had brought home one day. She'd never met him because her alchemy powers had been discovered around the same time.

“Oh, dear. And just when I found you...”

That boy's hair had been silver...

“Are you dying?”

And red eyes...

"If you're going to die anyway, why don't you sell your body to me? I'll pay a pretty price for it."

He had been a beautiful boy.

"It's not like you'd lose anything."

Was it because her last thoughts had been of the slave that this man was standing before her? Or was this just what the grim reaper looked like.

"Well, it's not like you have a choice."

"Hah... Ah!"

As the man spoke, his thumb dug into the wound on Valeta's wrist.

"I've come for this broken version of you."

He pressed a kiss to her wrist, then smiled, his lips stained red with her blood. Valeta's first impression of this man who suddenly appeared before her was that he was a crazy bastard.

Before she could say anything to his absurd words, her vision grew dim, and she succumbed to darkness.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 2

\* \* \*

Valeta Delight used to live an ordinary, carefree life... for a noblewoman, at least. Since she was born a woman, she grew up as her old-fashioned father's property, destined to be married off to a decent noble family when she came of age. She believed that was to be her fate... And it would have been if she hadn't awokened as an alchemist after having a strange dream.

When Valeta was ten years old, she became very ill. One night, she had a dream. The dream was about someone with the same name and face as her, but the girl in her dreams lived a very different life.

This Valeta had a peculiar power—the ability to create healing potions. In the dream, she had been locked up in an attic. Then, she was talking to someone with a charming voice through a door. The Valeta in her dream was carving out her own destiny. Dream Valeta was so different from her. Unlike her dream version, Valeta always did exactly as she was told.

She continued to dream, watching the girl's life unfold until she finally confessed to someone, their lips meeting in a kiss. When she finally opened her eyes, she learned she had been hovering between life and death for ten days. That night, Valeta discovered she had an incredible power. She had the same gift as the girl in her dream.

And that's when the hell that was her life began.

Count Delight shut her away from the world and began experimenting with and exploiting her newfound skills. Her dream was a dream. She couldn't run away like the Valeta in her dream, and she didn't have someone who was going to take revenge for her, either.

Her dream was just a dream, and she was living in reality. She felt trapped, like her feet were sinking into muddy water with every step. By the time she became an adult, there was only one thing she wanted.

*I've had enough. I want to die.* The extravagant life of her youth was long forgotten. She had no more wickedness left in her. The more she rebelled, the more bruises painted her body, the pain only growing the more she disobeyed. Still, how could she have known that the prince she was to be married to was a complete psychopath?

Valeta wanted nothing more than to die. *And I thought I'd finally had death within my grasp, but...* The plan she'd spent a whole month formulating was for nothing, all because someone had stopped her escape midair.

"Oh..."

Valeta massaged her throat, her voice rough from disuse. Her body, once covered in bruises, was now unblemished. She hadn't seen her body so unmarred by bruises in years. Pressing a hand to her forehead, Valeta observed her surroundings. She was in a large room. All the walls were made completely of glass, but for some reason, it felt oppressive rather than airy.

"Hello. You're awake."

She felt the bed sink under someone's weight. Valeta jolted. She turned her head to find a man sitting on the edge of the bed.

"You look exactly the same," Reinhart said.

He took hold of her chin, turning her face left and right. His eyes curved into a smile. Reinhart's hand slowly wrapped around her throat. Valeta trembled, but didn't fight back. She simply closed her eyes as he squeezed her throat.

"No reaction?"

Her only response was to take great gasping breaths as her airway was constricted. Reinhart watched as Valeta's face turned from red to blue, but she didn't even attempt to struggle. He loosened his hold.

She immediately coughed several times, frantically forcing air back into her lungs.

"This is no fun."

Reinhart's excitement was short-lived. He regarded her with cold eyes, the Valeta Delight he had brought from another world.

"You should be fighting for your life."

After a pause, Valeta answered in a raspy voice. "Why should I?"

Reinhart narrowed his eyes. "Oh, you want to die."

Valeta's mouth shut with a click. Reinhart could see that her eyes were completely devoid of life, the light having left them. He had seen those same eyes many times before, staring back at him from the faces of people who had given up on life and were waiting for death.

"Ah, this is no fun." He clicked his tongue. "I thought you'd be more fun, just like the other Valeta."

"Other... Valeta?" she repeated.

"Once, another Valeta intruded in my world, one who was completely different from you."

Valeta dropped her gaze. She had no idea what he was talking about, but at the same time, she felt like she had an inkling of understanding. *Is he talking about the Valeta in my dreams?* A woman who had grown up in the same environment as her but was living a completely different life.

"What...?"

The corner of his eyes crinkled.

"Well, it doesn't really matter. It'll all be the same in bed." Reinhart reached for her, pinning her wrists above her head with one large hand. "If you're determined to die, why don't you satisfy me before you go?"

Reinhart pressed his lips against her neck. Valeta furrowed her brow slightly, but other than that, she had no reaction to the lewd sounds he was making.

"Seems like you're used to this."

She said nothing.

"I guess you don't mind."

Valeta squirmed a little, the feeling of his lips on her skin tickling her. The man's silver hair tickled her cheek.

"Valeta, it won't be any fun for me if you just lie there, so how about we make a deal?"

His sweet voice was like music to her ears. Stunned, Valeta looked up at his beautiful face. She'd always thought the prince had a handsome face, but this man was on another level. Words couldn't describe his beauty.

"Try your best to satisfy me. Open up when I tell you to, eat when I tell you to eat, play with me if I tell you to play, and sleep with me when I tell you to."

Valeta remained silent.

"And if you do, when I lose interest in you, I'll give you a painless death."

For the first time, Reinhart saw something shift in the girl's lifeless eyes. She looked up, meeting his red gaze.

"It'll be so quick and painless you won't even realize that you're dead," Reinhart said, stroking her neck. Although his voice was unbearably sweet, his words were anything but. "What do you say?"

Valeta didn't care. She just wanted to die. Just breathing, just opening her eyes in order to face a new day was hell for her. All she wanted to do was die. She was far too broken, worn down, and dried up.

Reinhart slowly removed her clothes. It wasn't long before she was completely naked. Her body still bore the faded scars of old injuries. Unless he reconstructed her body entirely, even Reinhart could do nothing to heal such old wounds. He was omnipresent, not omnipotent, so even though he was well-versed in many things, there were still limits to what he could do.

"Why don't you try seducing me?"

Valeta didn't say anything.

Reinhart licked his lower lip, pulling her into his lap, and whispering in her ear. "Try to make me hard, Valeta."

"How long..."

"What?"

"How long will I have to do this for?"

Reinhart pressed a quick kiss to her lips before he spoke. "Until I get bored."

A frown marred Valeta's pretty face.

"Don't worry. I've never been interested in a toy for longer than half a year."

"Okay." Valeta agreed, even though Reinhart coldly referred to her as a toy. She was used to it. She had been called useless or a doll on a near-daily basis for over a decade. This treatment had continued until now, until the age of twenty-five.

"Valeta," Reinhart called her name sweetly. "It's up to you if you still want to live after I'm done with you, but don't try and cling to me."

Valeta slowly nodded.

Her hands fumbled to find purchase, wrapping around Reinhart's neck and awkwardly pulling him in for a kiss. Reinhart's eyes curved as he smiled, enjoying the feel of Valeta's tongue fumbling for entry to his mouth. However, he kept his lips firmly closed, the poor girl's tongue continuing to trace over his lips.

*It's a little different than last time, but...* Reinhart didn't think this encounter with Valeta would be as thrilling as the first, but this wasn't bad, either. He smirked as Valeta sat on top of him, clumsily trying to seduce him. He parted his lips, his tongue drawing hers into his mouth.

"Hmm..."

She frowned, her back tensing in response to his sudden attack. He bit down on her tongue hard enough that it stung.

"Just as I thought... Delicious."

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 3

Valeta remained silent pretending that Reinhart was talking about something that was not the inside of her mouth. His tongue lazily explored her as he kissed her deeply. Reinhart's eyes narrowed. She seemed all too familiar with the feeling of someone invading her mouth. His tongue slowly traced over her teeth before brushing along the roof of her mouth.

She tensed, the sensation sending shivers down her spine. She was accustomed to kissing. This was one of the duties that had come with marrying Miloyd, the crown prince. Her father and the emperor had taken great interest in Miloyd producing an heir using Valeta. She hadn't wanted to bring a child into this world. She worried that any child born with the same powers as her would suffer the same fate, so she did everything she could to avoid falling pregnant.

"Hngh..."

Reinhart's eyes curved as he stared down at Valeta, greedily devouring her tongue. It was a shame she didn't fight back or snap harsh remarks at him like the other Valeta, but he was still satisfied.

"Maybe it's because you share the same face," Reinhart said as he unzipped his pants. "Valeta, I really want to make you cry."

Valeta was still perched on his lap. Reinhart's hands found her bare waist, squeezing. Reinhart then tugged her from his lap, sitting her on the bed and letting her lean back in his arms.

Grinning, he looked down at her.

“Ngh...”

He bit his lower lip, his eyes practically dripping with desire as he stared down at Valeta. He looked like he was about to devour the girl whole.

Valeta’s eyes flickered up to him.

Reinhart silently mouthed, “*Be a good girl.*”

Valeta watched his lips form the words, hesitantly opening her mouth and moaning softly. Reinhart shuddered, panting. She was incredibly obedient. She was very different from the Valeta he had met. His fingers traced along the nape of her neck, slowly trailing down her spine, coming to rest on her hips.

“Mmm...”

Breathing heavily, she reached down and clutched at the back of Reinhart’s hands.

“You’re such a good girl, Valeta,” he cooed, his pupils blown.

His legs grew tired from hovering over her, so he gradually relaxed. She swallowed, causing her throat to move. Suddenly, Reinhart picked the girl up and gently laid her back on the bed. By now, Valeta’s face was flushed red, and she was gasping for breath. He worked his knee between the girl’s legs, nudging them apart. He leaned over, trailing light kisses along her navel. He bared his teeth and began to nip at her skin, slowly leaving a trail of marks. Crimson flowers bloomed across her ivory skin with every nibble at her neck.

“Hngh...”

Reinhart chuckled as he watched the girl squirm beneath him. Perhaps she was ticklish.

“Why do you seem so accustomed to this?”

Valeta pressed her lips together in response to Reinhart's question. Reinhart watched her linger in silence for a moment before he pressed a kiss to her lips, his fingers beginning to move.

"Wait! That's dirty—"

Reinhart chuckled as the girl let out a startled gasp.

"Good girls deserve to be rewarded."

He pressed his lips to hers, covering her body with his. Warmth grew between them. Valeta began to relax, the tension in her body easing as his fingers opened her up.

"Shh, breathe. That's a good girl."

When he felt that Valeta's body had relaxed enough, he wrapped his fingers around her nape, massaging her as if trying to soothe her. He grabbed her by her ankles, tugging her close to him, and joined their bodies.

Valeta's eyes widened, her toes curling from the sudden intrusion. For a moment, she saw nothing but pinpricks of white light. She looked up at Reinhart with wet eyes but didn't make a sound. Reinhart swept a thumb along her tightly pressed together lips, working them apart.

"Breathe, Valeta."

She squeezed her eyes shut as his sweet voice murmured in her ear.

"You can cry. Scream if you want. You don't have to hold back," Reinhart whispered to the girl who seemed so accustomed to restraint.

It was only then that a noise escaped her. It was impossible to tell whether she was crying out or groaning. She threw her arms around Reinhart's neck, clinging to him to better withstand the movement of their bodies. He kissed her deeply,

delighted by the way she desperately clung to him. *Bringing her here was a good idea.*

Valeta, who had been helpless against Reinhart's movements, tensed when he suddenly pressed himself deep inside her. She squirmed before going limp.

"Congratulations, Valeta. You passed."

Reinhart nipped at the girl's earlobe lightly. He gave a deep, satisfied sigh, like a predator satiated after a great feast. It had been a long time since he'd last felt so alive.

Valeta's head slowly sank back into the pillow. The brief spark of life in her violet eyes went out like a light, the moment of forced pleasure passing.

\* \* \*

"Ah..."

Her throat was dry. She must have screamed a lot the night before. It was unlike her. Valeta let out a short sigh. *I want some water.* As soon as she swung her legs off the bed, she felt a jolt of familiar yet unfamiliar pain in the small of her back. *He's impossibly big...*

Even at a glance, it was substantially bigger than Miloyd's— *No, what am I thinking about?* She shook her head. Either way, this was just a contract. A contract that would eventually lead her to a quick, painless death. *Never mind that I didn't exactly agree...*

She didn't think there was any way to get out of this anyway.

*It's quiet... The room she was in felt completely different from her tower, where people came and went every day, watching her every move.*

"Wow, are those clouds?"

After wrapping herself in the blankets, Valeta tottered to the glass window, looking out at the vast blue sky. Her back ached, but she could still walk. She stretched out her hand and pressed it against the glass of the window. Immediately, shivers ran down her spine, from her head to her feet.

"Ngh..."

Frowning, Valeta looked down. *I feel gross. Is there a bathroom in here?* She stared out the window for a long time, spacing out, before she looked around some more. The room itself was dreary. There was a bed, a desk, and a table with a single chair. Other than that, there was nothing else.

"Is this that man's room?" Valeta murmured quietly to herself.

He possessed an unearthly beauty. In fact, he bore a strong resemblance to the slave she had seen only once before at her father's estate. She took a lap around the empty room before resting her hand against the window once more.

*I wonder how badly mangled my body would be if I fell from here? She wanted to feel the cold rush of air that accompanied falling before she died, the sensation cutting to the bone. My wish was to rest forever, wasn't it? She didn't want to do anything. She didn't even want to think anymore. At some point as she stood by the window, she closed her eyes and began to wish tomorrow would never come.*

"Oh. You're up already?"

Valeta turned as she heard the sweetest, warmest voice she had ever heard in her life. He had called her name endlessly in bed last night. No, more

accurately...

*He was calling the name of someone who looks like me. She decided not to overthink it.*

"I was downstairs. I had some business to take care of. Are you hungry?"

"I want to wash up."

"Is that so?"

Reinhart smiled as he snapped his fingers. Just like that, a large bathtub appeared in the corner. Reinhart shucked off his clothes and then approached Valeta, tugging the blankets off her as well.

"Wh-wh-what do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm helping you. It's hard to wash up by yourself."

He picked up the naked girl, stepping into the tub with her in his arms. The tub was so large that five full-grown men could easily fit in it with room to spare.

Valeta sank into the hot water, feeling much better already.

"How's your body feeling?"

"Fine."

Reinhart caressed her cheek with all the sweetness of a lover, brushing her hair behind her ear. Valeta said nothing about the way the man was carefully treating her like glass.

"I noticed that you have a lot of wounds. I tried to heal you up as much as I could, but some just won't fade."

"I see."

"Were you abused?"

"Yes," Valeta replied as she sank deeper into the warm water. The hot steam made it harder to breathe, but the water felt good lapping against her chin.

"Do you want me to kill them?"

Although he didn't name anyone, Valeta knew exactly who he was referring to.

"No. I've already planted the seed. It's not revenge if someone else does it for you."

Valeta slowly sank deeper into the water. She closed her eyes as if she was going to go to sleep. It appeared that she had no intention of emerging any time soon. Even after a minute had passed, she remained underwater, not bothering to come up for air. Reinhart looked down at the girl with disapproval. He reached in and dragged the girl back up.

"Breathe," he ordered.

She gasped for air.

He brushed back the girl's disheveled, sopping wet hair. She glanced up at Reinhart, who didn't look happy, lips quirking into a tiny smile.

"It's just something I like to do. It reminds me that I'm still alive."

Wanting to die but also feel alive was a strange logic. *I don't like this.* Reinhart froze, suddenly realizing what he'd just thought.

*"I don't like this?" Me? Why?*

His brow furrowed and he frowned.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 4

Reinhart had no need for such feelings. The only things he needed in life were pleasure and stimulation. He had long ago lost or forgotten the ability to feel anything past that. The same was true for most of the heads of the Magicians' Tower.

Rinse and repeat.

All the emotions and memories accumulated over countless lives made for one boring, tiring life. *I don't know what's going on...*

Reinhart didn't even know why he was upset. However, the unfamiliar feeling wasn't so bad. He decided to just enjoy it. In the end, this would remain just a short game for him. He reached for Valeta, pulling her between his legs. She didn't fight back. Instead, she obediently leaned back against his chest. The sound of splashing water echoed, bouncing off the glass walls of the sky room.

"Do you have any favorite foods?"

"I'm fine with anything."

"Is there anything you need?"

"Not really... Just a bed, maybe."

Reinhart's eyes narrowed upon hearing Valeta's lackluster response. He ran a fingernail down her spine. She flinched. Reinhart beamed, glad to get a response out of the girl.

"Do you like books?"

Valeta dropped her gaze to stare down at the water. *Do I like books?* She didn't know. She might have in the past, but when she recalled being locked in her room, forced to read mountains of books, only to be punished when she couldn't. She didn't think she could find joy in reading again.

*Is he asking because there's nothing in this room? Then again, even she found this room to be bleak. I can't just sit around doing nothing for half a year.* She didn't feel like rotting away until he was done with her.

"I see."

"Yes."

"I'll show you where the library is later."

"Show me?"

"Yes. Don't you want to go?" Reinhart asked, nipping at the nape of her neck.

The feeling of his hot breath and his teeth grazing her skin sent shivers down her spine. Valeta cringed, shrinking in on herself before she forced herself to sit up straight. *I can't be scared.* After all, this was just part of their contract. The man embracing her seemed interested in her body, and Valeta planned on fulfilling her end of the bargain.

"No, it's not that..."

"No?"

"Can I leave this... Ah!"

Reinhart suddenly bit her hard enough that she yelped in pain. Surprised, she clasped her hands over her mouth. He quietly watched as she flinched, her eyes darting around. Then he stroked the girl's hair.

"You can leave this room. But you can't leave the tower without my permission."

"Ah..." Valeta nodded in understanding. She unconsciously rubbed the back of her neck, trying to relieve the stinging pain.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"But you haven't eaten all day."

"That's correct."

Reinhart's eyes narrowed at the way Valeta seemed to talk about herself like she was someone else. "I hate the feeling of holding someone who feels like skin and bones."

"I'll eat," Valeta replied obediently.

"Good."

Reinhart climbed to his feet. He snapped his fingers, instantly drying off his body. Another snap, and he was dressed. Valeta also got to her feet, stepping out of the tub. Reinhart produced a large fluffy towel and began drying her off.

Why? she wondered. He could have just used magic, but instead he meticulously wiped down her body. He even dried her hair for her.

"Get dressed," Reinhart said, handing her some comfy-looking *négligée*.

Valeta quickly pulled it on, happy to be clothed again. Reinhart snapped. The bathtub disappeared, replaced by a table that held a variety of tasty-looking food.

Valeta rubbed her eyes with her hand. *I'm so sleepy.* Maybe it was because of the warm bath, or maybe her body was just overworked, but her limbs felt

extremely heavy. She took in the banquet spread out before her with apathetic eyes before she mindlessly began to spoon food into her mouth. Her table manners were perfect. Even Reinhart was taken by surprise.

*What an interesting human.* In only an instant she had turned from a human to a lifeless husk. Her soul must have been truly crushed. He felt like he was looking at a doll. *I should've just killed them all.*

Interfering with another human in that world would have required a higher price though. Reinhart had abandoned the idea, but he was beginning to regret going so.

He took a bite of his bloody steak, chewing the succulent meat as he observed Valeta. Other than the occasional glance out the window at the painfully blue sky, the girl continued to mechanically spoon food into her mouth. Reinhart began to hack at the innocent piece of meat on his plate with a little more force than intended.

"Valeta." He smiled.

"Yes?" she replied.

"Are you finished?"

"Yes."

He glanced at her plate. She had eaten less than half of her steak. The rest of the food looked completely untouched, too.

"Good. Let's go to the library."

"Yes."

She rose from her chair. Reinhart wrapped his arm around the girl's waist. Valeta flinched, but relinquished control of her body to him. In an instant, her world

spun in a way that made her stomach turn.

\* \* \*

“Oh...”

Valeta slowly opened her eyes. It was the beginning of another day. She sighed. Every time she opened her eyes, she realized that another day had passed in which the man hadn't gotten tired of her yet. She'd always think to herself, *I guess today's not that day*, and leave it at that.

And just like that, three weeks had passed. She had no duties, no responsibilities. She was provided with only the best food and lodgings. That wasn't the end of it either. She didn't understand the man's unusual interest in her, but he was endlessly attentive to her every need. He must have been very busy though because he frequently left the room.

The library that he showed her to was enormous with books as far as the eye could see. All she needed were books and a bed, so her life was far from humdrum. If she wanted to pass the time, all she did was read, clearing her head of all else. And when he came back from his work, she only had to do as he said.

She glanced down at the sleeping man, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist.

*He really is handsome. Honestly, if he weren't so handsome, she thought she might have just bitten off her own tongue and died by now. It's hard to say no to that face, even after all that I've been through.*

Valeta sighed hollowly. At first, she had also liked the prince because of his good looks, but that hadn't ended well. She drank in Reinhart's well-defined

features, his long eyelashes, and silky hair, far softer than anyone she'd ever seen. *How is his skin so clear?* She'd to endure countless treatments at the imperial castle to have skin nearly so unblemished. *No, his skin isn't completely clear.* She had almost forgotten about the scars all over his body. Although it looked like he had the whole world at his command, Valeta was sure he'd suffered through his own trials, too.

But she didn't ask because she had no reason to. They were merely two people crossing paths. She had no need to leave any sort of mark on the man's life. *I heard that magicians live for a long time...* They'd be doing each other a favor by not becoming involved with one another.

Reinhart spoke up when Valeta finally looked away.

"So, are you done admiring my face, Valeta?"

Her back stiffened upon hearing his voice so suddenly. She turned to face the man again. Their gazes met. They were so close, she could see the red in his eyes. Squeezing her eyes shut, felt something soft against her lips. She automatically opened her mouth. His tongue slipped between her parted lips, brushing over every tooth.

"Ngh..."

He took hold of her waist, pulling her in close to deepen the kiss. Their naked bodies intertwined under the sheets. Her expression grew weary as she felt the man's desire pressed against her body, as if advertising its presence first thing in the morning.

"I can't help it. It's a physiological reaction," Reinhart whispered, nibbling on Valeta's lower lip.

He buried his face in her neck and breathed in deeply, before pushing himself up and leaning against the headboard.

"Do you want to...?" The pupils in Reinhart's red eyes were slightly blown.

"Haa..."

She pushed herself out of bed. She couldn't trust the hand that was now moving toward her. "I'm afraid I won't be able to walk ever again if we do that first thing in the morning."

Reinhart licked his lips as he moved his hand, his eyes never leaving Valeta.

"But aren't I pretty?"

His eyes were brimming with desire as they raked over her naked body. His gaze was persistent, almost violating. Soon, the sound of flesh slapping against flesh filled the sky room. The room began to grow steamy, the heat that soaked Valeta's body causing the windows to grow foggy.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 5

"Do you want to take a bath?" Reinhart asked, lightly nibbling at the girl's earlobe.

His question was closer to a command than an invitation, and Valeta didn't really have a choice, not when he had draped the length of his body over hers.

"Let's go out today. I'll show you around," he whispered enticingly into her ear. Before she knew what was happening, he'd already whisked her into his arms and headed for the bath.

Every day, he acted just like a dog in heat. It had gotten to the point where Valeta, who never disobeyed anyone, scrabbled to get away.

"Outside? Why?" she asked nervously.

Reinhart gazed at Valeta. "Don't you feel cooped up in here?"

"Not really..."

She had abandoned such luxurious thoughts long ago. Just being allowed time to think by herself was a luxury.

"I'm thinking a little bit of fresh air might do something to lighten up that gloomy expression of yours," Reinhart said, before nibbling at her lower lip some more. "What do you say?"

Valeta nodded, visibly reluctant. If she was honest, she didn't like being in crowded places. It was hard to shake the memories of being served up as a spectacle for people.

*She doesn't want to,* Reinhart thought as he stood up. It had been a month since he'd brought her to the sky room. No matter how kindly he treated her or how sweetly he spoke to her, she continued to behave like a doll. *It's starting to get on my nerves.*

She never spoke unless spoken to, and she didn't expect anything from him, not even the smallest of kindnesses. If he told her to do something, she'd do it. If not, she didn't. She was like a perfectly trained toy.

*I suppose it's impossible for her to be the same as the other Valeta I met before.* The girl from the other world and this one were incomparable. With a snap of his fingers, clothes appeared on his body. He did the same for Valeta.

"Well, shall we?"

Reinhart smiled as he held out his hand to her. Valeta quietly placed her hand in his. *I'm sure I'll get tired of her soon,* he thought as a magic circle materialized under their feet. They were instantly consumed by the glow of magic.

"Ngh..."

Valeta clasped her free hand over her mouth, her stomach churning. *I feel like I'm going to be sick.* She squeezed her eyes closed, trying to block out the dizziness. Reinhart held her around the waist tightly as she swayed.

"Oh, I forgot you're not used to this," he said in a low voice.

"I'm all right," Valeta said. With a soft sigh, she opened her eyes. "This is..."

She blinked. They were in the empire. In fact, it looked just like the empire she knew. She hesitated as she looked around at the scenery, which was somehow familiar yet unfamiliar.

"Did you miss this place?" Reinhart asked.

"No," she replied. It was just fascinating. "I thought we were in a different world."

The sky room seemed like a whole world away from the empire she'd grown up in. They didn't seem like they could exist in the same world. She felt that way after living in the sky room for only a month. She couldn't imagine what it'd be like for the other man.

"It is another world. Or at least, not the one you were born in."

"But it's so similar?"

"It's similar, but it's not the same. It might look the same as your world, but time flows differently here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the same world can run different courses."

Reinhart chuckled. Valeta didn't understand what he was saying, but she surmised that she was in a similar, yet entirely different world.

"Valeta."

"Yes?"

"Find something you like on this street," he said, caressing the girl's cheek.

"I'm beginning to grow tired of this."

"I'll grow tired of you when I grow tired of you, no?"

Wasn't that how they'd agreed to fulfill their contract? However, it was Reinhart who was left irritated under her perplexed gaze.

"I don't think I'd be able to give you a clean death at this stage. I'd expected to

have you for half a year, but it's only been a month."

His logic didn't make any sense to her. Valeta gazed at Reinhart for a moment, nodded, then turned around. She slowly melted into the crowd.

"It's my first time attending a festival."

She hadn't been able to attend one when she was young because she was too young, and she couldn't go after she discovered her powers because her father had kept her under lock and key from that point on.

Noise came at her from all sides. Bright-faced vendors shouted, advertising their wares, while excited children ran through the streets, clutching tiny handfuls of copper coins. Valeta fiddled with the bracelet around her wrist. It was a bracelet she'd worn since even before she'd tried to kill herself. She didn't feel the need to throw it away, so she just kept wearing it. It was purely ornamental, given to her to wear by one of the maids, but it'd probably go for some coin if she sold it.

"Shall we visit the jeweler's first?"

"Why?"

"I want to sell this."

"I have a lot of money," Reinhart snapped, and a heavy pouch appeared in his hand.

She didn't have to open it to know that it was filled with gold. Valeta stared at the pouch for a moment before she shook her head.

"I just want to start this way."

Reinhart followed Valeta without a word.

A little while later, Valeta stepped out of the jeweler's, coin in hand. Reinhart didn't have much interest in jewels, but even he could tell that Valeta had been scammed. She had received two gold coins and a smattering of silver and copper coins.

"I'll kill them," Reinhart hissed in a low voice.

Valeta, hearing the man's mutters, shook her head.

"This is more than enough for me to enjoy my day," she said. "Any more and it'd just go to waste when I'm dead."

Her morbid words carried not even a hint of self-pity.

"So, what are you going to do with that small change?"

"Just... Go shopping, I suppose."

The bustling street was full of people selling cheap trinkets, but there was nothing actually worth buying. *I heard there's a street where socoro nobles like to shop. What's so great about all this cheap rubbish?* However, Valeta's face looked more flushed than it ever had in all the time she'd been stuck in the sky room. He observed the girl's profile out of the corner of his eye and shrugged.

"Very well."

Reinhart faithfully followed her, choosing to allow her whims, even though she didn't actually look all that interested. He learned that Valeta was very adept at entertaining herself. He realized how used to being alone she was, even though he was with her all the time these days. She quietly strolled through the streets, just observing everything. She watched the shows. If something caught her eye, she would stand there for a bit, just staring at it. If there was something she wanted to eat, she would think about it for several moments before buying it and eating it all by herself.

She was easily able to entertain herself for a couple of hours at the festival. She didn't spare him a single glance the whole time. Naturally, that put Reinhart in quite the bad mood. *This is boring.* He's told her to enjoy herself, and so she did. That's just how Valeta was.

Just when he was about to tell her it was time to go back, Valeta stopped in front of a stall selling cheap trinkets. More precisely, they sold cufflinks and brooches made from cut gemstones. Even the most expensive ones probably cost only a few silver coins. However, she stared at one brooch in particular for a long time, utterly fascinated.

Valeta glanced up at Reinhart before turning back to the brooch.

"I'll take this one."

Suddenly, she pointed at the brooch, a particularly sophisticated looking one with a red jewel.

"This is for you," Valeta said, offering it to Reinhart.

"Why are you giving me this?"

"It's just... I've never picked out something like this for anyone before."

Reinhart looked down at the ornament in the girl's hand. *It looks cheap,* he thought. But he accepted the gift with a smile.

"How sweet of you to give a gift to your master."

"I had fun, thanks to you."

"You had fun?"

"Yes. The food was good, too. I didn't know there was a world like this out here," Valeta said as she looked around. She looked as though she could now die

without any regrets.

"I see..."

He leaned down and kissed her. He heard gasps all around them.

"A good dog deserves a treat." He took her hand, leading her down a small alley.  
"I heard that some people get really turned on when there's a risk of being  
caught..."

Reinhart's beautiful lips moved as he pushed Valeta up against a wall, forcing a knee between her knees, trapping her.

"Does that do it for you?"

Reinhart grinned, sinking his teeth into Valeta's shoulder. His hand crept up her thigh, lifting her skirt. People were passing by the mouth of the alley.

"You're not..." Valeta's voice trailed off.

Reinhart smiled, knowing exactly what she meant to say.

"Yeah, I wanna do it here."

He smiled as he slowly removed her clothes.

"Don't worry, Valeta," he said, pressing a few kisses around the girl's eyes. He smiled as he saw the feverish gleam in her eyes. "There's an invisible curtain around us. We could kill someone in here and nobody would notice."

*I can see everything, though.*

Valeta pressed her lips together. At the end of the alley, she could see the festival continuing, clearly visible in broad daylight. Her dress fell to the ground, revealing the long expanse of her ivory skin. Reinhart leaned down, kissing down her flushed chest. He worked his way up, capturing her lips from below.

"Let's try doing it outside today," Reinhart whispered seductively, holding Valeta's face in his hands.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 6

A chill ran down Valeta's spine. She glanced at the opening of the alley but didn't stop Reinhart from crowding closer. His tongue invaded her mouth like a bold intruder.

"Mmm..."

Valeta wrapped her arms around Reinhart's neck, arching her back slightly. She could feel the rough brick wall scraping against her back. He ran his hands over her thighs. They trailed up her back, following the curve of her spine before slowly roaming down to her hips. He ran his fingers over Valeta's body as if he were playing the piano.

Then his fingers dipped inside her.

"Ah!"

Valeta's eyes widened when pleasure suddenly exploded through her body. His fingers didn't stop moving. Her body trembled, unable to hold herself up as she saw white.

"Hang in here," Reinhart whispered, catching her around her shoulder.

Valeta tried her best to stay upright, leaning back against the brick wall. Reinhart watched the way she recoiled then relaxed when he whispered in her ear. He pressed a kiss to her bare shoulders.

"There's my good girl."

"Ngh..."

"But what are we going to do with you? You're already leaning on me like this?" Reinhart whispered in a low voice. He brought his fingers to his lips and licked them. "You're a bigger pervert than I thought," he said mischievously.

Reinhart chuckled as he watched her flush with embarrassment. He wiped his fingers on Valeta's navel, then kissed her on the cheek.

"Turn around."

Another shiver went down her spine. Valeta trembled as she obediently turned around.

"Put your hands on the wall. We wouldn't want to hurt your face."

Valeta had been leaning against the wall, her cheek resting against the bricks. Reinhart kindly readjusted her hands for her.

"Ah, I can't just let you walk around like this. Not when you're dripping like that."

He bit her shoulder. Valeta's body tensed, and she let out a breathy sigh.

"What if something happens to you?"

"Hah..."

Another sigh escaped Valeta's lips as she threw her head back against his shoulder.

"Hurry..." she whispered.

Reinhart smiled, seeing the desperation in her eyes, and pressed his body against hers. Valeta's eyes widened, and she breathed out shakily. He suddenly spun her around.

"Agh..."

He smiled as Valeta gasped.

“Valeta.”

She slowly opened her eyes. Outside the alley, people were passing by, busy talking, laughing, and enjoying the festival. She shuddered, squeezed her hand into a fist.

Reinhart laughed out loud.

“Do you like this sort of thing?”

His lips curled into a smile as he nibbled at her earlobe. Valeta’s toes curled as the man’s whispers tickled against her ear. As sparks flew behind her closed eyelids, she involuntarily grabbed at the man’s hands as they tightly gripped her thighs.

Reinhart, still holding Valeta upright, smiled as he began to move. Soon, her body twitched under him, her face pale as she slumped against him. Reinhart buried his nose into the crook of her neck and breathed in deeply.

“Why don’t you exist in my world, Valeta?”

“...”

“I tried looking for you after that other Valeta came here, but you had already died in an accident,” Reinhart said, his voice heavy with disappointment. He snapped his fingers, and a robe appeared, covering Valeta’s naked form. “Let’s go.”

Valeta’s face paled upon seeing the radiant look on the man’s face. She looked at her clothes scattered across the alley floor. Reinhart snapped his fingers. He whispered something into her ear. She recoiled in shock.

“No, I don’t like it!”

“Sure, but...”

He looked down at the trodden dirty ground. Reinhart’s eyes curved with his smile. Valeta dropped her head, her face bright red.

“Do you want to get a room in an inn?”

Valeta nodded.

He leaned down, lowering himself in order to meet her gaze.

“Tell me if anything hurts,” Reinhart said, his voice dropping a notch.

Valeta nodded again.

“*Why don’t you exist in my world, Valeta?*”

Her gaze fell as she recalled Reinhart’s words.

*None of this would’ve happened if another me existed here.* She never would’ve come to this world or met this man who spoke so sweetly to her and cared for her. She never would’ve experienced being comforted like this or would have even gotten to go to a festival. She would’ve ended everything that day, the day she jumped from the tower.

Reinhart was walking one step ahead of her. Valeta slowly reached out, her fingers brushing against the man’s hand. He glanced back at her.

“There are too many people.”

The festival was noticeably more crowded than before. Reinhart looked at Valeta, expressionless as ever, before taking her hand.

“You’re right.”

A breeze blew past, tossing around her robe. Valeta dropped her gaze. When

she looked back up, a smile tugged on her lips when she saw the glittering jewel pinned to the man's cape. At some point, Reinhart had pinned the cheap brooch onto his cape.

*I didn't actually expect him to keep it.* Surprised, Valeta bit the inside of her cheek. *Get a grip,* she scolded herself. *You're going to die. You want to die. This is a contract.* She risked becoming this man's toy if she developed pointless feelings. Eventually, he'd lose interest in her. She was being ridiculous. Anyone could see that this was just momentary fun. There was no way she could mistake it for real feelings.

*Don't be careless.*

She heaved a short sigh as she continued walking, straightening from her dejected slouch. Before long, the two of them arrived at an inn, and a very large one, at that.

"Wait here," Reinhart said, tucking Valeta in the corner of the inn. He strode over to the counter. "A room for two, please."

"Oh, of course! How long do you plan to stay with us?"

"I don't know. Two days for now." Reinhart glanced back at Valeta with a smile, but then his expression abruptly grew hard. "Who the hell is that?" he muttered to himself.

Someone was standing very close to Valeta. Another man was leaning into her like he was trying to breathe in her scent.

"Right, two days then. And would you like any meals with—"

"No. How much?"

Reinhart tossed the coins onto the counter, grabbed the offered key, and stormed back to Valeta.

"Valeta," he called.

The man and Valeta both turned to him. By now, the man was holding Valeta's hand.

"Who's this?"

"My companion."

"Ah... A lover?"

Valeta shook her head. "No."

"Family?"

"No..."

The man's eyes narrowed. The man looked Reinhart up and down with his silver eyes. "Then who is he?"

"He's just... someone I'm indebted to."

"Oh, I see..." The cheerful man with tanned skin pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. "Call me if you ever need any help."

"Oh..." Valeta scratched the back of her head awkwardly. "Okay," she said with a nod.

The man smiled, flashing his canines. He brushed past Reinhart and vanished inside the inn.

"What was that about?" Reinhart asked with a smile.

There was suddenly an eerie aura surrounding him. Valeta couldn't help but swallow nervously.

"Why are you mad?"

"Mad? Why wouldn't I be mad to see my dog cheating on me with another man right in front of me?"

Valeta blinked, surprised. "I wasn't cheating..."

"So, what did he want?" He cupped her face with both hands and leaned in close.

"He said that he was hungry and wanted some of my blood..."

"Blood...?" Reinhart narrowed his eyes.

"And I agreed, so..."

Reinhart frowned as Valeta spoke and flipped her wrist over. He could see two clear bite marks on her wrist. He smiled viciously.

"You're crazy, Valeta," he spat, his nails digging into her wound.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 7

"Let's just go up to our room for now," Reinhart said as he pulled her along behind him by her wrist.

Valeta winced in pain.

Reinhart was silent as he stomped up the stairs. He was somehow even quieter than usual. Valeta tensed, a shiver running down her spine. She wanted to run. When she hesitated, Reinhart slowly turned back to her.

"Are you defying me?"

"No, it's not that... I just don't understand why you're mad..." Valeta mumbled as his hands wrapped around her neck.

"Do you want to undress here, Valeta?"

His grip on her neck didn't hurt, but her heart began to pound painfully hard in her chest. It hurt her to look into his red eyes. She wished he'd just squeeze her neck more tightly instead. He wasn't strangling her, yet she felt like she was suffocating. Before she could say anything, Reinhart began pulling her up the stairs again.

"N-no..."

All kinds of different fears suddenly seized her. She was scared that she was about to be beaten to death. She was scared she would be starved, too. She thought she wasn't scared of death. She was sure that the fear of death didn't affect her. However, now she felt a minuscule primal fear rising up inside her.

For the first time ever, she was afraid of dying.

"No?" Reinhart repeated, pushing her up against the corridor wall. "No, Valeta. You have no right to say that to me."

Valeta stared up at him silently.

"Your body belongs to me until your contract is over," Reinhart said as he reached around the girl to unlock the door to their room.

It swung open, and he strode inside. Their room was spacious, quiet, and clean. He turned to her, who remained by the door. He held out his hand to her and said, "Come, Valeta."

She eyed the man's outstretched hand and hesitated. *Is running away even an option?* Stepping further into the room seemed like a bad idea.

The man smiled.

"You're not coming inside? That's the end of our contract, then," he said, lounging on the bed.

Valeta lingered by the doorway. After a long moment, she took a single step into the room. Reinhart smiled, taking in her obvious hesitation.

"Close the door and lock it."

Valeta turned around and locked the door.

Reinhart spoke again, "Valeta, why don't you just undress there?"

She tensed at Reinhart's words. He sat back on the bed, crossing his legs at the ankle. Her hands trembled a little. He didn't press. He just waited. If she didn't do anything, this would be the end of their contract.

*I can't let that happen.* Valeta, still tense, began to undress. Reinhart's gaze

remained locked on her all the while. His eyes roamed over her naked body, making sure that she wasn't injured anywhere else.

Valeta ducked her head, her face glowing with embarrassment.

"Come here, Valeta," he said as he held out his hand.

As Valeta stepped closer, Reinhart smiled. She stopped in her tracks and stumbled back.

"Crawl," Reinhart whispered.

Valeta paused, then slowly got down on all fours. She crawled across the plush carpet, coming to a stop by the bed at Reinhart's feet. He patted her on the head like she was a well-behaved puppy. Then he cupped her cheeks in his hands.

"I'll give you a chance. Explain."

"I..." Valeta was intimately aware of the feeling of his large hands on her cheeks. "He just approached me... and said that he was hungry. He said that I smelled good..."

Valeta forced herself to speak, pinned by the man's intense gaze. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. Reinhart moved his hand under her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes.

"You should look people in the eyes when you speak."

"I'm sor..."

His red eyes were terrifying. Her heart was pounding so fast that she feared it might beat out of her chest.

"Go on."

"He said that he was a vampire and that he wanted to drink my blood..."

She'd held out her wrist to him, partly out of curiosity and partly because she felt sorry for the man. His bite had stung a little, but not as much as she thought it would. The man had only taken a couple of sips before stepping back. She didn't even have to stop him from taking too much.

"I just... thought it was interesting that there were vampires in this world."

"So you decided to just give out your blood like you were giving bread to the poor?"

Valeta's mouth clicked shut upon hearing Reinhart's words. That was basically what she'd done.

"What were you going to do if his bite was venomous?"

Reinhart sounded incredulous as if he couldn't believe what Valeta had done. She slowly shook her head. She hadn't thought anything of it. She had long ago lost her ability to distinguish what was dangerous and what wasn't.

To Valeta, living was simply the difference between life and death. Even if doing something was dangerous, she had to do it. It didn't matter how close to death she was. Her captors would never forgive her if she complained.

When she was told to drink unknown concoctions, she drank them without knowing what was in them. When they wanted to inject things into her, she would reflexively put out her arm, despite having no idea what dangerous things they were forcing inside her.

Valeta had been trained to just obey her entire life. As a result, she lost her ability to perceive what was dangerous from what was safe. More precisely, she lacked the ability to worry about her own safety, and she didn't want to have to think about it, either. Even thinking was an act of defiance. Until the moment

she'd chosen to die, Valeta had lived like a doll. Until the moment she desired nothing more than to soar through the skies, Valeta had been nothing but a perfect puppet.

The main reason people were able to sense danger was because they had survival instincts. However, Valeta understood that her death was inevitable. She had accepted it. That's why she didn't feel the need to be wary of danger.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you," Reinhart said, looking down at Valeta, her chin still cupped in his hand.

She only remained by his side because she wanted to die. *Killing her would be her greatest happiness.* Reinhart chuckled to himself. It was a little ridiculous how upset he was with her for endangering herself. He felt like he was scolding a small child.

Reinhart pulled her into his arms, sitting her on his lap, then kissed her, and Valeta obediently opened her mouth, just the way she'd been taught, allowing his tongue inside.

"Ngh..."

She squirmed, as she felt his tongue explore the inside her mouth. She gasped loudly. He nipped at her throat.

"Valeta."

"Yes."

"Next time, you better not let yourself get hurt without my permission. I won't tolerate it."

"Yes."

Valeta nodded immediately in response to the man's softly spoken demand.

"Actually, I was thinking about putting you in a cage and chaining you..."

Valeta's whole body flinched.

"But that's exactly what the people you hated did to you." Reinhart sighed.

"You're not allowed to die without my permission."

Valeta nodded.

*Something strange is happening to me... Why was he so furious just because his toy had given away some blood? She's just a toy for my amusement... Or at least, that's what he thought. It seemed as though she would continue to amuse him longer than he'd thought she would. That meant he would have to adjust his plans a bit. I'll have to make her want to live. She'd learn to fear death again the moment she felt the desire to live again. She'd live a happier, safer life than the one she'd lived before.*

"Valeta, you're safe here. So you can tell me what you like and dislike," Reinhart said as he caressed her. His smile was so warm it could melt ice. He knew better than anyone how weak the human heart was.

"I'll protect you," he said.

He kissed Valeta's cheek. He began peppering her body with marks. Carefully laying her on the bed, he drank in her naked body.

"Don't die. Let's live a long life together," Reinhart whispered in the sweetest voice he could muster.

"Oh..." Dazed, Valeta stared up at him.

"I'd like for you to live."

Valeta's eyes widened.

"I love you, Valeta."

Reinhart's warm voice burrowed its way into her heart. He searched through his memories, trying to adopt the warmest look he could, as if he were truly a man in love.

Valeta was silent.

When people fell in love... That was when they were most vulnerable and feared death the most.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 8

Reinhart was a very strange man. Valeta was left utterly confused by the situation she found herself in. The man who had ravaged her body like a beast every day since they'd met, had suddenly become soft. He began to kiss her more often, prolonging foreplay and aftercare.

"Good morning, Valeta. Did you sleep well?"

He treated her as if she were his lover, dotting kisses over her eyes before pulling away. He was different from before. *But why?* His behavior had changed ever since he confessed to her. At first, she'd wondered if this was some sort of new game for him. After a week, she began to grow suspicious.

"No, this won't do."

The biggest change was...

"I can't stand it anymore. Can I kiss you, Valeta?"

He'd started asking Valeta for permission whenever he wanted to do something. It was strange. Reinhart had never been the type to ask permission before doing anything. He was too arrogant, believing the world revolved around him.

"Yes..."

As soon as she gave a bewildered nod, Reinhart pounced on her, despite her awkward scramble to sit up. Then, he lightly bit her lower lip.

"Ngh..."

Valeta awkwardly tried to defend herself, so Reinhart lightly nipped at her. Trembling, she opened her mouth slightly, trying to catch her breath. Not missing the chance, Reinhart swooped in, his tongue slipping deeper inside her mouth. His soft tongue ravished the innermost parts of her mouth, as if he was trying to swallow the very air she breathed.

Their bodies were pressed together. Reinhart threaded his fingers between hers, bringing them to rest next to her head on the bed. Her tongue squirmed, struggling to escape his, but Reinhart smirked and gave chase like a beast. Their saliva mixed, filling the room with wet, obscene sounds. Struggling to draw breath, Valeta clenched her fist, her blunt nails digging into Reinhart's hand.

He slid his knee between her legs, pinning her down to keep her from moving. When Valeta's face turned red, Reinhart finally gave her some space to breathe. She gasped, sucking in oxygen, her eyes wide. She couldn't tell if she was experiencing pleasure or pain. This felt more lewd than sex somehow. She wasn't used to him watching her so closely with his eyes curved with amusement.

She felt her belly tightening with pleasure. As soon as Valeta caught her breath, Reinhart was on her again. Valeta saw white as his lips captured hers again. Before long, all she could hear was the sound of her own heartbeat.

*Badum! Badum! Badum!*

It was insane how fast her heart was racing.

No.

She recognized this feeling. Once, long ago and for a very short period of time, she had these same feelings for the prince.

*Badum! Badum! Badum! Badum!*

Reinhart slowly ran his tongue over a particularly sensitive spot in her mouth. Her eyes squeezed shut as she felt pleasure shooting down her spine and the sound of her heart pounding in her ears.

No... Reinhart smiled as he looked in her eyes. His smile served the same function as a halo in Valeta's eyes. She put her hand on his shoulder and tried to push him away, but he just pressed their bodies closer together. They weren't even doing anything particularly lewd, but she could still see sparks behind her eyelids. His fingers caressed Valeta's wrist.

"Ahh!"

He captured Valeta's tongue and sucked on it, coaxing it into his own mouth. Her face paled, the sensation of him pulling on her tongue feeling strange. Her head was spinning. He bit at her tongue several times, her body trembling more and more with each bite. But that was the end of his attack. Typically, he would've continued, ravishing her like a beast, but he didn't this time.

She lay there, dazed, her head swimming with pleasure and her pupils blown.

"Haa... haa..."

Reinhart gazed down at Valeta, his eyes filled with lust. He looked like he might try and swallow her whole. His curved eyes were as gentle as he was capable of being. She wondered when her heart would stop racing.

*I hope he can't hear it.* Her heart was racing from more than just pleasure. She hated the sound of it more than anything else. Valeta looked delicious to him, gasping for air with swollen parted lips.

Her moist mouth looked absolutely delectable.

"Valeta."

She turned to look at Reinhart. Unlike Valeta, who looked disheveled as she

gasped for breath, her cheeks ruddy, Reinhart looked perfectly composed. Valeta thought about how unfair this was, even as he flashed her a beautiful smile.

*Badum!*

She felt her heart dropping to her stomach. She wondered what her expression looked like at that moment. She hoped she didn't look like a complete fool. His fingers slowly traced the length of her spine.

"Did you catch your breath yet?" he asked.

Valeta didn't reply. Instead, she focused on her breathing, making sure it was slow and steady.

"You'll get some rest now, right?" Reinhart asked, cupping her cheek with the hand that wasn't knitted with hers.

When Valeta said nothing, he ran his hand down her cheek, his thumb brushing over her lower lip. His lips captured hers again. She couldn't deny his tongue entrance. He was being so tender with her—it made her heart beat wildly in her chest. She felt his fingers gently playing with her earlobe. Valeta exhaled, breathing softly against Reinhart's face.

She couldn't restrain her hopeless sigh. It was hard to ignore his growing desire, not when their lower bodies were pressed so closely together. His tongue persistently explored the inside of her mouth. The tips of their noses brushed together. Tears pricked her eyes, threatening to spill over. This was the longest she'd ever just kissed. She didn't know what to do. Even if she tried to squirm away, he held her firmly in place with their interlocked hands.

In the end, she couldn't hold back the tears that ungracefully streamed down her face as she tried desperately to catch her breath. Reinhart nibbled her tongue some more before releasing her, wearing a disappointed expression.

"Why are you crying?" he asked, caressing her cheek.

"Hngh..." Valeta burst into tears upon hearing his gentle voice.

She suddenly realized that she had crossed a line she shouldn't have. No. She could do nothing to stop her racing heart. Her body burned, everywhere he touched her leaving a trail of heat behind.

Warmth tickled at her, crawling slowly up her body.

"Shh... Was it all just too much for you? Don't cry, Valeta."

Valeta knew. She knew that his confession was a lie. She knew that he didn't love her. This was just a game to him. His warm eyes, gentle voice, and tender hands were all just a part of that game. He wanted to coax a different side out of someone who was so accustomed to the idea of death. Reinhart's game was cruel and unforgiving. He wanted to toy with her, to make her suffer, before he killed her.

At least, that was what she suspected.

Valeta had craved love and affection for a very long time before she'd finally given up on it entirely. She knew this newfound sweetness was poison, but she was worried she'd already swallowed it. No, she was certain she'd already swallowed it.

"Don't cry. It breaks my heart," Reinhart whispered, sounding exactly like a prince from a storybook. He kissed the red flush under Valeta's eyes.

Warmth bloomed inside her.

*Badum, badum, badum.*

Her heart raced faster. She prayed that Reinhart couldn't hear the sound. Valeta forced herself to bury her feelings, adopting a stoic mask. If she wanted this

game to last, she had no choice but to hide her feelings. She had to hide them until the very end. That was the only way she would be able to keep his interest.

"Do you want to take a bath?"

"Yes," Valeta said, forcing herself to reply.

Reinhart extended his hand, and she took it obediently. He draped a white gown around her shoulders and led her to the bathtub. She stared at his back for a moment, before her gaze dropped to their joined hands. She felt like she was seeing a vision of the future, summoned by the heat of his fingers.

One day, she wouldn't be able to handle his heat. She'd be consumed by it, reduced to blackened ashes, suffering through an end she no longer wanted.

"I love you, Valeta."

She turned away, her face devoid of emotion.

The heat that enveloped her felt like hell.

# I Failed to Oust The Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 9

\* \* \*

Following the festival, they returned to the Magicians' Tower, and Valeta's entire demeanor changed. Reinhart noticed the way she would shrink away from him, her face growing red whenever he touched her.

"Valeta."

If he leaned in close to her, she would freeze, her expression strange as she nodded in acknowledgment. However, Reinhart could see the desire within her. He knew just how she was feeling based on the way her pulse quickened, her pupils dilating, her breath hitching, and the way her ears burned every time he touched her.

*This is easy.* She crumbled faster than he thought she would, leaving herself wide open for him to devour. Reinhart was capable of wielding his feelings and expressions as a weapon. He could act like a bachelor in love if he wanted to. He had access to endless memories in his head, so he could easily pull a feeling or an expression out and wear it like a mask.

He would brush his hand down her arm before lacing their fingers together. She flinched, but showed no signs of shying away. For Reinhart, it was as plain as day that Valeta was in love with him. However, the love that he remembered seeing in the first Valeta he'd met and the love this one seemed to feel were slightly different.

“Want help?”

“No... I can do it myself.”

She'd refuse his help when he offered to help her take a bath.

“Something to eat?”

“I'm not really hungry, but I'll eat if you want me to.”

He couldn't get her to eat with him outside the one meal they shared a day.

“Is there a dining room in the Magicians' Tower?” Valeta asked.

“Why?”

“Just because...” Valeta hesitated but continued. “I just wanted to explore the Magicians' Tower and eat by myself.”

She even actively tried to put some distance between them. Reinhart couldn't understand what was going on. *Aren't you supposed to always want to be with the person you love?*

Reinhart thought that people in love were supposed to always be all over each other, never wanting to be apart for even a second. Valeta's actions didn't match with his information. She didn't want anything to do with Reinhart.

Occasionally, he would have to seduce women to get what he wanted. They all reacted the same way. When they fell in love, they'd cling to him, willing to give him anything he asked for. They acted as if love was the only thing they needed in this world.

*But why?* Instead of being upset, his first feeling was one of doubt. Valeta was waiting for him to answer her question.

Reinhart dutifully replied, “The magicians around here won't like you.”

Most of the magicians in the Magicians' Tower despised socoros. That's why he'd never bothered to allow Valeta outside of the sky room. She'd never expressed an interest in leaving anyway. However, it seemed like she wanted to go out and about by herself now.

"It's all right. I'm used to it."

"Oh, really?" Reinhart thought for a moment. Then he smiled and nodded.

"Okay, then."

He made a bracelet and put it around her wrist. It was a simple, silver bracelet.

"You can't leave the Tower, but you can go anywhere else within the Tower using this. All you have to do is think about where you want to go."

"Okay."

He was sure that she'd come running back, hurt by the magicians' cruel behavior. Just thinking about it made him happy. While having patience left a bitter taste in his mouth, its fruit was sure to be delicious. That was Reinhart's opinion anyway.

\* \* \*

"It's my first time being in a library by myself."

The first place she went after being gifted her new bracelet was the library. It was a completely novel feeling. When she'd first come here, she hadn't thought about looking around, but there was an incredible variety of books, more than

she'd ever thought possible to gather in one place.

If she wanted to reach a book at the top of an impossibly high shelf, she had to step on top of a magic circle drawn on a wooden board. The board would then float through the air, allowing her to retrieve the book she desired.

"Who's that...?"

Valeta had been slowly wandering between the stacks when she heard a displeased-sounding voice. She turned and saw a group of magicians looking at her and talking among themselves.

"Isn't that her? The head's pet. I heard that he's keeping a socoro."

"Oh, you must be right. But why has she been set loose?"

"How are we supposed to know what's going through the head's mind? I gotta say, it's unpleasant seeing her roam around without a leash."

"Ugh, she's gonna stink up the place."

Valeta stared at them for a long moment, the magicians not bothering to lower their voices, before she eventually yawned and turned away. She'd been constantly verbally abused at the imperial castle and in the count's manor. A few insults wouldn't hurt her.

"There are books on alchemy, too."

She had grown sick of reading them, but they were a familiar sight. It was funny. *I wonder what happened to Father.* He probably wasn't doing well now that she'd disappeared into thin air. But then again, he had forced her to make so many potions for him that he might be okay without her.

Valeta suddenly snapped out of it. *This is why brainwashing is scary.*

After all that he'd put her through, she felt like an idiot for worrying about her father. At one point, Valeta had tried to win her father's affection. She was so desperate to live up to his expectations, just so she could receive his praise or love just once. She believed that he'd look at her if she just worked hard enough.

*That was just wishful thinking, though.* As Valeta fingered the pages of a random book, she suddenly froze, eyes landing on the puncture wounds on her wrist. That bite was so deep that the mark had yet to heal.

*"I knew it. You're the one we've been looking for."*

**"What are you..."**

*"Our king has been looking for you. You're the only one capable of making a homunculus."*

**"But that's... taboo..."**

*"We shouldn't talk here. Call my name when you're alone. You can summon me no matter where you are as long as you bear these marks."*

**"I don't know what you're..."**

*"I know you're being held by that wicked magician. We can help you. I'll wait for your call."*

Valeta recalled the conversation she'd had with the vampire who she'd offered her wrist to. After conveying this message, he'd turned to Reinhart as if their conversation had never happened, and then disappeared. She recalled the man's polite demeanor and soft voice as she scanned the shelves in the alchemy section.

—*The Birth of the Homunculus*

—*Ancient Sorcery and its Origins*

—*The Origins of Alchemy and Magic*

Valeta stood there for a moment, slowly reading over the titles that were now piquing her interest. The library was quiet. The flock of magicians had shuffled away, having grown bored with Valeta's lack of reaction. There weren't a lot of books on alchemy. In a corner, however, there were some books that she had never read before.

Eyes narrowed, Valeta selected a couple of the books that caught her eye.

"Look at it, so insignificant and pathetic."

"Can't believe there's a socoro here..."

"The head went too far this time."

Valeta sighed and turned her head to regard them. "If you've got something to say, say it to my face."

"What?"

"How dare a mere socoro like you speak to us...!"

"So what?" she replied shortly.

Although she had been through a lot and had given up on life, she had also been the crown princess. She lived among the wealthy, never raising her voice at a maid or an attendant, living like a doll in the world of nobility.

“Don’t say anything you can’t say to my face behind my back. Or do it where I can’t hear.”

“You socoro bastards are always so arrogant!”

“You should take a look in a mirror.”

Valeta had lived through the hell that was high society. She wasn’t an easy opponent. Her expressionless eyes landed on the group.

“I’m reading, so I suggest you be quiet,” she said loftily.

She took a seat and opened her book, her posture flawless. Reinhart was right. Valeta was used to these types of acidic remarks. And she knew better than anyone how to fend them off.

“Ugh...”

The magicians’ gaping mouths snapped shut, unable to believe that they had been pushed around by a socoro.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 10

“Sorcery...”

Valeta didn’t realize she was speaking aloud as she read. The book she had found contained information she’d never even heard of before.

Its contents were hard to believe, detailing how alchemy originated from sorcery and that sorcery had been divided into two schools: alchemy and magic. The most interesting new information was about homunculi. It was one of the huge taboos that only alchemists were capable of now that sorcery was obsolete. A homunculus was an artificial person—a being created using strange sorcery instead of by a man and a woman.

What did vampires want with artificial humans?

Valeta furrowed her brow. Vampires didn’t exist in her world, but they existed everywhere in this one. They weren’t the only new additions. Dwarves, elves, and many other races you’d only find in novels existed here, too. Learning about their existence was when she truly realized that this world was very different from her own. She closed the book and looked out the window, noticing that the sky was growing dark.

*I’m getting hungry.*

For some reason, she didn’t feel like having a meal with that man. He’d probably be upset because she wasn’t doing what he wanted... But she couldn’t stand the way her heart pounded whenever she was around him. For a long time, Valeta had needed warmth. She longed for love and affection. A cruel trespasser had suddenly saved her from death, showed her affection, and taught her pleasure.

Now, he was whispering loving things to her.

It was Valeta's weakness. Someone treating her with kind gentleness, and giving her a sense of what was ordinary, something she'd long forgotten. She had killed everything, squashed any expectations, letting herself become nothing more than a rag doll. However, that man was trying to revive all the parts of her that she'd killed. He didn't know how hellish the experience was for her.

"How cruel."

She already knew what the future had in store for her. Reaching for his hand was no different than walking into hellfire.

"I don't know what to do anymore."

When had she ever lived for the future? She didn't want to think about it. Valeta slowly closed her eyes. She thought of the dining room, feeling suddenly weightless as she did. She suddenly felt the eyes of many on her, including the frostiness with which they regarded her.

As she slowly opened her eyes, she found many magicians looking at her. *I guess it's dinnertime.* She was almost at a loss for what to do. Ignoring their startled looks and hostile glares, Valeta slowly went to where the food trays were stacked. Watching what the other magicians were doing, she picked up a tray and waited in line.

Unable to stand the glares, Valeta looked up at the magician standing in front of her in line, who had turned around to look at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Who said you could come here?"

"That guy gave me permission."

After a pause, the magician asked, “The head of the Magicians’ Tower did?”

“Yeah.”

“So what are you doing here?”

“Isn’t this where you eat?”

What did it matter that she was here? As long as she could fill her hungry stomach, Valeta would eat anything, including stale bread.

“It is, but you’re one of those arrogant socoros, aren’t you?”

“What’s arrogant about waiting in line for food?”

“What?”

“Just let me know what exactly I’m doing that is arrogant. I’ll rectify it,” Valeta said.

Honestly, Valeta didn’t want to cause any trouble. If she was being rude, she wanted to correct her behavior. The man scoffed at Valeta’s sassy response.

“Forget it.”

“Okay,” she replied calmly.

She shuffled forward in line as it steadily grew shorter. *I’ve never eaten like this before.* Was she allowed to put anything she wanted on her tray? The man in front of her frowned and turned around as Valeta stood on tiptoes, trying to see the food.

“Quit moving around and stay put. Unlike you socoros, magicians are sensitive. We can sense you moving around.”

“Oh, okay. Sorry, it’s my first time.”

As soon as Valeta apologized, the man's face twisted into a strange scowl. *What the hell is this?* She could tell that was what he was thinking, so she apologized again. It was true. She didn't know that magicians were sensitive.

"It's your first time eating at a place like this?"

"Yeah."

"How did you usually eat?" he asked.

"I just went directly to where the food was prepared. Or I ate a piece of bread while I sat in the corner. If I couldn't do either of those things... I just didn't eat, I guess."

The man frowned as he listened to Valeta speak softly, almost as if she were talking about someone else rather than herself.

"Were you a beggar among the socoros?"

"No."

"Then?"

"I was a noble."

It was the man's turn to take his food. Valeta gestured with her chin. The man slowly began to pile food onto his tray. As the man moved on to the next dish, she picked up the tongs and paused.

"Um..."

"What?"

"What should I do if the people behind me don't want to eat anymore because they think I'm dirty?"

Socoros and magicians were completely different. It was an entirely plausible scenario in her mind. The magician scoffed at Valeta's words.

"Don't you have any self-respect? Why would you say something like that?"

"I'm just facing the facts."

"Forget all that. Just get your food," the magician snapped before he picked up his tray and walked away.

Valeta glanced back at the line of magicians behind her and began carefully piling food onto her tray. The piping hot bowl of cream soup caught her eye. Valeta picked up her tray, now loaded with soup, and looked out over the dining hall.

*Hmm...* There weren't very many empty seats left, much less an entirely empty table. Valeta pondered for a moment before sitting down at one of the smallest tables tucked away in the corner. She didn't want to bother anyone.

Dipping some bread in the soup, she took a bite. It was delicious. It was very different from the steak and salads she was used to eating. The food that Reinhart ordered wasn't to Valeta's taste. The dining room, however, had a variety of food that she could pick and choose from to her liking.

*This is relaxing.* It was nice being able to eat a meal like this. It was an experience she could have had if she had grown up normally.

"Hey."

Suddenly, someone set down a half-eaten tray of food opposite Valeta.

"Why are you sitting in the corner like this? It's pathetic."

She looked up. It was the same magician who had stood in front of her in line. Two more people followed behind him, one taking a seat next to Valeta, the

other next to the man.

“Hello.”

“Good evening.”

The two magicians greeted her. Valeta hesitated before greeting them in return.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“You just looked so pathetic.”

“That’s it?” Valeta asked.

The magician gave her a fierce look. His eyes were a deep blue. “I’m Morris, one of the senior magicians. Sitting next to you is Cate, and this is Droson.”

“Um, I’m Valeta,” she said, finding herself suddenly thrown into a situation where she needed to introduce herself. She set down the bread she had been tearing apart. “I thought you didn’t like me.”

“I don’t like socoros because they’re annoying, wicked, and use force against the weak.”

Valeta calmly nodded in response to his open scorn. She told him that’s what she expected him to say, before going back to her meal. Morris’ eyes narrowed as he watched the girl eat with impeccable manners.

“I guess you really are a noble.”

“Yes.”

“How did you catch the eye of the head? He doesn’t even look at other magicians.”

Valeta slowly picked at her food with her fork. “It’s just...” She stabbed a piece of

chicken and pursed her lips. “I think I look like someone he’s interested in.”

She was only taking a wild guess, but Valeta wondered if it was another version of her in a different world.

“I’m probably her substitute.” Valeta knew that his affection was going to dry up soon, so she tried not to have any expectations.

“It’s interesting that there’s a socoro in the Magicians’ Tower.”

As Morris chatted with his companions, he’d occasionally ask Valeta a question. They weren’t particularly difficult questions. However, the more she talked to him, the more she came to feel that their worlds were very different.

“I’ve been trying to come up with a new magic circle, and it’s a mess,” Cate, the magician sitting next to Valeta, griped.

As Cate complained with pursed lips, Valeta took small sips of her orange juice.

“What kind of magic circle?”

“Oh, you know. A transformation one. I’m sure the head can fix it with a snap of his fingers.”

Cate was looking down at a piece of paper inscribed with the magic circle with a sorrowful expression. Valeta glanced at the magic circle. She could see what the problem was.

“You should use this technique over here instead of that one.” Valeta reached out, pointing to a spot on the magic circle. “And draw a line down the middle. It’s simpler to think of it as two techniques within a single circle instead of one. I feel like you’re making it harder because you’re breaking it down and building up from there.”

Cate’s eyes widened. She’d never thought of it like that before.

"That's what we do for alchemy symbols. I'm sure the same goes for magic circles."

After all, alchemy and magic both had roots in sorcery. It shouldn't be too difficult transferring principles.

"Oh... That actually works."

Cate started adjusting the magic circle, solving a problem she had been struggling with for months.

"How long are you going to chatter on for, Valeta?"

Before long, Reinhart came for Valeta. She quickly rose from her seat and bid the others farewell. That day was the beginning of the fierce fights to see who would get to sit with Valeta during mealtimes.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 11

Magicians were all selfish and individualistic, so they never taught or accepted help from each other. If they did deign to teach someone, their explanations were usually disingenuous, and if one ever took a student, they weren't kind teachers then, either.

Even if they were all geniuses, someone who was capable of teaching others was considered smarter. That's just how magicians were. They were smart, but didn't know how to explain things. Instead of searching out an explanation, they tried to rack their brains and locked themselves in their laboratories, completely immersed in their studies.

Unless they got the chance to ask for help from Reinhart, the head of the Magicians' Tower, that was the only thing they could do. Reinhart was an unparalleled genius, and most ordinary people couldn't understand the way his mind worked. And so, Valeta's calm explanations were considered groundbreaking within the Tower.

"Hello."

"Oh, um... Hello."

Valeta looked around at all the people sitting at her table and frowned slightly. She'd enjoyed her meal in the cafeteria that first day, so she'd started eating dinner in the dining room after studying in the library. The menu changed daily, and she enjoyed the variety more than she thought she would.

Thanks to this, eating was enjoyable again for her. Valeta began looking forward to mealtimes. Maybe it was because she ate in the dining room at the same

time every day, but her table was always empty, no matter how busy it was.

*Something's off about this.* Nobody ever sat at her table, but someone always came to see her once she sat down. No matter what way she looked at it, this didn't seem normal. People kept flocking to her like a swarm of gnats—no, magicians.

Only a few days earlier, the same magicians had shot glares her way. While they weren't contemptuous, she could tell that they didn't want her around. Oddly, she felt like she was growing closer to the other magicians after Morris and his friends had sat with her.

*What's going on? Are we becoming friends?* Honestly, if a bug suddenly started talking and having conversations at the same intellectual level as her, she'd be surprised, too. Is that what it felt like for them?

Valeta scratched her cheek, a confused expression on her face.

"Hey, Valeta. What's the sky room like?"

In addition to all that, they'd started calling her by name. She never liked hearing her name because hearing it called out had always brought bad things with it, but... *This isn't so bad.* She felt like she was making friends.

"It's just... a little lonely?"

It was a dreary and lonely room with nothing inside it. Recently, Reinhart had put in a bookshelf and a desk for her, so it was less empty than before.

"Really? I heard rumors that the view's great, though."

"Yeah, but it's still lonely if you're looking at the view alone."

"You think the head's lonely?" The magician made a face as if she'd just been told something horrible.

Valeta dipped her bread into her soup and nodded. "Not necessarily, but maybe? I was lonely. I feel like anyone would be lonely up there by themselves all the time."

No matter how great the view was or how amazing Reinhart might be, being stuck there would make anyone lonely. *Is that why he brought me here?* Maybe he didn't realize he was lonely and had just sought out a toy he could play with. She suddenly felt ashamed of herself for thinking about him again. She kept thinking about him even if they weren't together.

Valeta sighed and ran her hand down her face. She had been doing everything she could to avoid Reinhart. *I thought I'd think about him less if I wasn't with him.* She realized that she had just been lying to herself.

"You're so interesting. I wonder if it's because you're a socoro. No one would normally describe the head as lonely."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he's kind of scary, but... everyone longs to be him."

Valeta's lips lifted in a small smile. That's probably why he was lonely, but they probably didn't understand that was the case.

"By the way, can you look at my magic circle one more time?" the young magician said, pushing a piece of paper toward Valeta.

Reluctantly, she took the paper from the strange boy. Her eyes slowly traced over the magic circle, pointing out several things that could be fixed. He listened intently, fixing the parts that needed to be fixed, before passing the paper to Valeta again for a final look.

She looked at the bread she had just dipped into her soup, sighed, and made several more corrections to the circle.

"You're a genius! You're so good at explaining. I understand everything you said."

"Uh, could you help me?"

"Me too!"

Her table grew crowded, filled with magicians asking her for this and that. By the time she finished answering their questions, her soup was stone-cold. Depressed, she swirled her bread in the soup a bit before taking a bite. It was still good, but she had lost her appetite after being interrupted so much.

"Oh, sorry. Are we interrupting your meal?"

"No."

"I'm really sorry. I'll buy you something next time. Is there anything you want to eat from outside the tower?"

They offered to fetch her things, knowing that Valeta couldn't leave the Magicians' Tower.

"It's fine."

"O-okay. Sorry. We'll leave you to your meal, then, and get out of your hair."

The magicians awkwardly stood, about to leave, but then abruptly froze on the spot. The dining room, once bustling with all the sounds made by the hungry magicians, suddenly fell silent.

Valeta, completely unaware, continued to pick at her soup. Belatedly, she realized something was off and lifted her head.

"My Valeta seems so sociable these days."

Before she knew it, Reinhart was sitting in front of her with a smile on his face.

Valeta frowned. *Sociable?* She didn't think she was very sociable at all. Her father was fiercely overprotective of her. Even after she got married, she wasn't allowed to meet anyone unless she was making an official appearance. Her world had consisted of only her father, her house, and the people who lived and worked in the imperial castle.

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, you know. You've been rubbing shoulders with the others down here for the last few days."

Valeta's slight frown turned into a full-blown scowl. She didn't understand what Reinhart was talking about. She wasn't having all that much fun hanging around the Magicians' Tower. And she'd only had a few conversations with the other magicians during meals. For the most part, she was just answering their questions.

"Or... Are they all leeches with nothing better to do?"

When Valeta didn't respond, Reinhart turned his attention to the other magicians. They paled, tensing in their seats. Looking from Valeta's tray to the other magicians with narrowed eyes, Reinhart smiled prettily. Her eyes met his for a second before she glanced away. She couldn't stand the way her heart pounded in her chest.

"Valeta."

"Yes."

"If you're trying to provoke me, then you've won. I'm so lonely I could die. Won't you come back to me now?" Reinhart said, his eyes curved prettily, voice filled with emotion. "I'm not a priest. I feel like my balls are turning blue from disuse."

Valeta's face turned red hearing Reinhart's vulgar words while the magicians

gasped.

"What are we going to do if they shrivel up and die? I won't be able to pleasure you then."

His fingers slowly traced the inside of her wrist. She could feel his touch burning her skin wherever his fingers trailed.

"What do you say?"

Reinhart's fingers trailed up her arm before coming to rest on the nape of her neck, gently stroking a red mark he had left there before.

"Let's go back to our room, Valeta," he whispered seductively.

Valeta ducked her head. She slowly nodded, and Reinhart wrapped his arms around her waist. In an instant, their surroundings changed. Now back in the familiar room, Valeta's sigh was cut short as Reinhart kissed her.

"Why are you avoiding me, Valeta?"

"I'm not avoiding you."

"You are. You were seducing other people, too." He cupped the girl's cheek in his hand. "You're acting crazy, like you want me to kill you, Valeta."

He cupped her cheeks with both hands and leaned in. He bit her lower lip, forcing his way between her closed lips.

"Valeta."

"Yes..."

"Can you tell me that you love me?"

Valeta's eyes widened upon hearing his words. His curved eyes were filled with

mirth. She wordlessly opened her mouth at his cruel request, then lowered her head.

"Go on," he said as he slowly stripped her of her clothes.

In what felt like an instant, Valeta was naked. Reinhart sat on the bed, taking in the sight. He patted his knee. She kneeled at his feet, and he stroked her hair.

"No?"

He tickled the spot under Valeta's chin.

"You should at least say you like me." Reinhart gazed at her. His eyes roamed over her naked body. "You're not going to say anything?"

His thumb swept over Valeta's firmly closed lips.

"I... love you..." Valeta slowly complied with his request.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

She could hear her heart pounding in her ears. Reinhart reached down, taking her and pulling her into his lap. His eyes formed curves, deeply satisfied. He pressed kisses around Valeta's eyes. Her face grew flushed.

"Good girl. You did such a good job."

Like he was rewarding her, he first kissed her cheek, her nose, and finally, her lips. It was a tender kiss.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 12

“Valeta.”

“Yes...”

“Tell me you love me,” Reinhart demanded cheerfully.

Valeta didn’t even want to hear her own voice at this point, hoarse from screaming all night as it was, but Reinhart clearly felt differently.

“I love you.”

Reinhart’s eyes curved into happy crescent moons after hearing Valeta’s dry confession. Last night, he had ordered her to say those same three words over and over again. Saying them now felt as easy as breathing. She repeated them like a broken doll.

“Mmm, I like the sound of those words on your lips.”

He smiled, delighted by playing with people’s hearts in the same way a child was when playing with a toy. He’d left deep, red marks all over her body, leaving her looking astonishingly debauched. Lifting her hand, she covered her eyes. It was like he shone so bright that it was hard to look at him directly.

Reinhart held Valeta into his arms as if she were something precious and buried his nose in her skin. Valeta never initiated touch between them, but he never hesitated to touch her. He clearly felt very different about it than Valeta, who thought her heart would drop into her stomach if she touched him.

“Why do you keep making me say it?”

She had been dying to ask this question since the day before. He tormented her if she remained silent. In the end, she'd said it again and again, her mind a hazy mess from pleasure.

"Because you like me," Reinhart said, stroking her cheek.

Valeta froze. She turned to look at him, her face pale. Reinhart smiled back.

"What?"

"How... did you know?" she asked.

"It's obvious. Your pulse speeds up when I touch you and then there's that lustful look in your eyes," he said between kisses.

Valeta's ears turned red as her heart began to race. He took her index and middle fingers and pressed them against her own neck.

"See? Fast, right?"

Reinhart was clearly enjoying her reaction. He was like a curious child plucking a dragonfly's wings. It felt like he was trampling all over her heart. She knew what he was doing, but it still made her feel like a fool.

"I want you to want me more, Valeta."

She said nothing.

"Life's less boring with you around. So, make it a little more exciting for me," Reinhart said as he kissed Valeta's cheek. She resisted the urge to scoff and turned her head away from him. He looked a little too excited by this reaction.

The worst had yet to come, however. The man next to her knew all about the full gambit of human emotion, but he still thought that this was fun—treating feelings like a game.

“Okay...”

Having to accept and understand that was terrible for her. She felt bad for him. He didn't find any meaning in the way their bodies met but also seemed fixated on it. *We know nothing about each other, too...*

He never talked about himself, and Valeta wasn't the type of person to ask questions about anything she didn't need to know. That's why their relationship was the way it was. Valeta slowly turned her head back to look at him.

*I wonder when these feelings will go away.* It had taken her three months to get over the crown prince. She felt like an idiot for taking that long to get over him, even after seeing what he was really like.

One day, when Valeta disobeyed him, he'd grabbed her by the throat, pressed his lips to hers, and tried to force her. She had given up entirely that day. The crown prince had been the only thing that kept her going throughout her rigorous education, but after that day, she'd come to loathe and resent him. It didn't take any time at all.

*I wonder which will die faster—my feelings or his interest.* Both paths had value to them, though neither spelled a happy ending for Valeta. She had long given up on having an ordinary life. She was too broken to live as everyone else did.

Reinhart's hand lingered on her cheek as he kissed her. Valeta obediently parted her lips, her eyes slipping shut.

\* \* \*

“Valeta.”

"Yes."

"When people are in love, don't they always want to touch each other and be with each other?" Reinhart asked, hugging Valeta from behind as she was about to leave for the library.

She frowned. Is this all he had to say after spending the entire night leaving marks all over her hips and lower regions? Valeta shoved his hands away in frustration.

"That hurts."

"I hurt even more. Think about what you did to me last night."

Reinhart adopted a contrived smile as Valeta grumbled.

Annoying. It was impossible to handle him because of how effectively and efficiently he wielded his face. Even more so now that she'd developed feelings for him.

"Are you going to keep doing this to me?" he questioned, drawing closer. Grumbling, he tucked his chin over her head. She could see that this was all just an act. "You love me right?"

Her heart pounded, sinking like a stone. Valeta clenched her fists. He treated her love for him like it was her weakness. Their conversations recently had all followed this same pattern. If Valeta refused to listen to him, Reinhart would try to manipulate her by bringing up her feelings.

Valeta understood that he was no ordinary man. She'd learned as much from talking with the others in the dining room. That thanks to being a magician he had a long lifespan, and it was his duty to protect the floating island for as long as he lived.

One of them had even said that Reinhart was all-knowing. Another person said

he was a powerful transcendent, stronger than anyone else in the world. However, no one could really understand Reinhart. Valeta was probably no different. The man who Valeta had fallen in love with led a lonely existence.

Two weeks had passed since he'd confessed that he knew her feelings for him. All she'd learned in that time was that she could never be with him. There was no possible future between them. Even if he came to reciprocate her feelings, she planned to reject him. She wasn't a suitable match for him, especially not when her death was imminent and he was immortal. Their relationship had been doomed from the start.

"Hm? Stay here and play with me today, Valeta."

This was how she came to spend an entire week in this room.

"Excuse me."

Valeta suddenly realized that she still had never spoken his name aloud. She'd never used it before, even though he always used hers. Reinhart's eyes curved when she addressed him.

"Yes?"

"Just because I like you..." Valeta clenched her fists and pursed her lips. "...I won't let it be my weakness." She planted her hands on Reinhart's chest and roughly pushed him away. "You can't use my feelings as a reason to order me around," Valeta said through gritted teeth, the rims of her eyes red. She cried every night, meaning her eyes never had any time to recover. "I'm going to deal with these feelings eventually, so don't try and use them to manipulate me anymore."

Reinhart listened, but did not interrupt.

"If you want something, just say it. Stop threatening me." Valeta huffed, then

swallowed a sigh. She felt out of breath. It had been a while since she'd spoken so much. "Please don't come and collect me today. I'll return in my own time."

She whirled around as soon as she'd finished speaking. Reinhart was speechless, perhaps taken aback since he'd never seen her so upset. The next thing he knew, the girl's bracelet had flashed, and she'd disappeared. The last thing he saw was the girl's gritted teeth and tears welling in her eyes.

"Why is she so mad?" Reinhart found himself annoyed that she had coldly rejected his sweet proposal. "I don't understand either of these Valetas."

The other Valeta had been difficult to understand, but this one was also difficult because of how broken she was. He was baffled by the icy feeling that had settled in his stomach, too. Reinhart placed a hand against the glass and looked down at the world.

*It's been a while since I've done this.* He hadn't felt the need to look down at the world below recently. After all, he had something far more interesting occupying his attention. He slowly surveyed the room. The sky room was almost unrecognizable now, filled with various objects as it was.

He used to live alone in this room, and now it was filled with Valeta's things. He thought having all these items scattered around wasn't so bad. *It might be good to keep a Valeta around.* He hadn't believed in animal therapy, but having Valeta around was causing him to reconsider.

"She's going to deal with her feelings, huh?" A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I don't know about that, Valeta."

However, Reinhart had no idea, in that moment, that Valeta would never return.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 13

\* \* \*

Upon reaching the library, Valeta sighed. Her heart pounded painfully. I felt like it was broken, making it hard to breathe. She resolved to never fall in love again for as long as she lived. Everyone around her just wanted to use her, and love was just a tool they used to manipulate her into doing things she didn't want to.

Valeta was the type of person who'd do anything for the people she loved, even if it drained her or consumed her own life. She used to be a fool. Her first love was a mad crown prince with multiple personalities, and her second was the most insane man there ever was.

*If there is a god, they're trying to tell me that love isn't for me. She had wanted to find more information about homunculi and sorcery today. I don't feel good. She'd been feeling unwell lately. Valeta shook her head, feeling weak. She sighed as she pulled up a seat.*

"Oh? You're here today. I heard that you tend to appear in the library. I guess it's true."

"Appear? What am I, some sort of monster?" she asked.

"You're much rarer than a monster, I'd say... Teacher."

"If you're going to talk nonsense, please go away. I don't feel very well. You're

just going to make me feel worse.”

Morris laughed. After they’d met in the dining room, Morris often went out of his way to talk to Valeta. She didn’t know anyone else in this bleak tower, so she didn’t mind seeing a friendly face every once in a while. So, she put up with his jokes.

“The dining room’s pretty lively these days, thanks to you. Everyone’s scrambling to sit next to you.”

“Why? I don’t even know how to use magic.”

“We’re not idiots. We can understand the basic principles once we learn them, but we need someone to teach them to us in the first place. How is it that you can understand all those magic circles just by looking at them?”

“Because I was locked inside and forced to read books since I was young,” Valeta said evenly.

“You jest,” Morris said with a chuckle, but Valeta was telling the truth.

She had gotten nosebleeds because she’d studied for so long every day. Occasionally, the emperor would teach her himself, but his lessons always came with a cane and a whip. She had no choice but to study desperately. As long as it had to do with alchemy, Valeta was confident that she could recite any known fact word-for-word without a single mistake.

“Hey, teacher. You mind looking at something for me, too? Oh, let’s go to the dining room first.”

“Sure...”

She was still feeling a little queasy, but she wanted to go to the dining room. She was hungry, having exhausted all her stamina the night before.

“Let’s go.”

It happened as Morris teleported them to the dining room. *Urgh.* She felt her stomach churn, her hand quickly shooting up to cover her mouth. Once appetizing smells had suddenly become nauseating.

“Looks like we’re having fish today.”

Instead of responding, Valeta kept her mouth pressed closed. She was more than just pale—a cold sweat dripping down her face.

“Valeta?”

“I think I...” she gagged.

“Hey, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“The smell...”

“You don’t like the smell? It smells good, though. Wait, let’s go somewhere else.”

Morris grabbed Valeta’s hand and teleported them somewhere new. The sudden movement only intensified her nausea. She gritted her teeth, desperate to keep the contents of her stomach inside.

“Is that better?”

The familiar smell of paper and ink filled her nose. Valeta took a deep breath, feeling the nausea slowly dissipate.

“What’s wrong? Did you eat something bad?”

“No, I didn’t really eat anything.”

*Other than Reinhart’s fluids,* she thought. She rubbed her face.

"Hmm, why don't we go see a doctor?"

"A doctor? Magicians have those?"

"Well, they're technically magicians who know how to use healing magic, but they know a lot about the human body. They're no different from a socoro doctor."

Valeta thought for a moment before nodding. It was better she got this sorted out now before it became a bigger issue.

"I'm going to teleport you one more time. Is that okay?"

"No... Please wait a moment." Valeta shook her head.

Morris watched as she sank into a chair.

"You look like you've lost weight."

"Really?"

"Yeah. The head's not an easy man to deal with, right? He's not very sympathetic. He's like that with us magicians, so I can't imagine what it's like for a socoro."

"Socoro this, socoro that, can you quit calling me that? If you actually want to be my friend, you've got to stop referring to me that way," Valeta snapped. Was she testy because she wasn't feeling well? It wasn't even a big deal, but it suddenly bothered her a lot. She pressed a hand to her temple.

"Oh, sorry. It's not a bad word. I know its roots aren't necessarily kind, but... it's just what we call non-magicians. Sorry, can I call you Valeta instead?"

"Sure."

"Anyway, I'm sure that's why you're having a hard time."

Valeta didn't deny it. Every moment she spent with that man was difficult. He wasn't understanding or considerate. In fact, she was somehow more understanding and considerate than him. She hardly ever disobeyed him because she knew that between the two of them, the one that was more in love would always lose.

"Have there been... many others like me? People he's used like a toy?" Valeta asked.

"Not very many, but there have been others. Some were socoros, some were magicians. Some were even werebeasts and vampires."

"Has he ever pretended to be lovers with any of them?"

"No, you're a special case. He usually just kept them as pets."

"I don't think I'm any different."

Morris smiled faintly. He glanced surreptitiously around the room before he spoke.

"No, they really were just pets. He made them crawl on all fours, took them out on walks, and wouldn't let the werebeasts transform into humans. I've even seen him starve vampires to the point where they'd shamelessly drink animal blood. Vampires tend to be pretty picky, so they won't drink blood from anything unless it's a pure human," Morris said. "He's got some strange tastes."

He wasn't just your average madman. It was hard to believe that he was even more insane than she'd first suspected.

"They also always wore a collar. I know that it's hard to believe... but you're special."

Was she just a pet that he was treating like a human this time? *It's probably because of that Valeta from a different world.* He was doing all of this because of

the Valeta that had got away, not because of her. She had been summoned because she was a replacement for another version of herself from a different world, but she couldn't tell Morris that.

"Let's get you to the doctor for now."

"Yeah."

Valeta's dizziness had subsided as they'd talked. She slowly rose from her seat, and Morris teleported them again.

"Oh..."

Her nose tickled. The scent of various herbs and chemicals hit her nose, all ones she was familiar with. She slowly opened her eyes. She was surrounded by herbs and medicine.

"What? Without so much as a word of warning? Don't you know that it's rude to enter someone's laboratory without permission?"

"I'm sorry, but my friend's sick."

"A socoro?"

A man wearing a white coat with pale skin and equally pale hair asked. Even his sky-blue eyes were so light that they looked almost white.

"Is that really a socoro? Get out her out of here immediately! You can't just bring a socoro into the Tower like this!" the man cried, stumbling back. His open contempt for socoros left Valeta speechless. "The audacity! Get out! You! Take her and get out!"

"Don't be like that. She's not feeling very well. Can you just look at her?"

Morris put his hands together and pleaded, an uncharacteristic gesture from

him.

“Don’t you know what they did to me?”

“What have they done?”

“Oh, magicians used to live among soco— I mean, ordinary people before they came to the Magicians’ Tower. However, those sorts of memories tend to stick, so... we don’t like non-magicians. Most of the magicians here were abused by ordinary people when they were young.”

Valeta’s eyes widened upon hearing Morris’ explanation. She’d had no idea. *That’s why they hate me.* It wasn’t just because they thought they were superior to her. No wonder they hated her. Now that she knew why they had such contempt and disgust for her, their reactions to her were completely understandable.

“Oh, of course. I had no idea. I can see why I might make people feel uneasy in the library.”

Valeta nodded understandingly. It’d probably be uncomfortable for her, but she decided she’d start checking the books out and reading them in her room.

“I understand. I’ll be more careful next time. I don’t need treatment, either. I’ll just go rest in my room.”

“No, it’s not like that. You don’t have to be so cautious.”

“I didn’t know anything about your history, so...”

“You didn’t?” the grumpy magician who’d yelled at interjected.

“No.”

“How could you not know?”

Valeta pressed her lips together. Was she allowed to say that she was from a different world? That she didn't know what the world was like because she was constantly confined? She didn't want to talk about either of these options. Both sounded rather miserable.

"She's the one the head of the Magicians' Tower is keeping these days."

"What? Oh... jeez. And he's letting her roam around like this? That's unexpected."

Valeta tilted her head, unable to understand what he was thinking.

"Sit. I'll take a look."

"No, I'm fine."

"You don't look like you've lived an easy life, either."

He grabbed Valeta and directed her to sit in the chair. Then, he stretched his hand out over her wrist and began channeling magic into her arm. It was an uncomfortable sensation, white-hot energy prickling all over her body. Valeta's spine tensed, and she gritted her teeth, not wanting to lose the magician's goodwill.

After a pause, he said, "What...? You're pregnant."

The room was plunged into a heavy silence.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 14

Valeta paused.

“What?”

“What?” Morris echoed.

“You’re pregnant. You’re probably not feeling well because of the morning sickness.” The doctor paused. “Seems like you’re six weeks along. Were you sexually active around then?”

She’d been sleeping with *him* almost every day. It would be much easier to list the days they hadn’t joined their bodies together. The doctor drummed his fingers against the table when she remained silent.

“Well, never mind that. When do you want to abort it?”

Valeta reacted with alarm to the doctor’s aloof demeanor and detached tone. The word pregnant didn’t seem real. She couldn’t recall ever using any form of birth control. The man wasn’t considerate enough for that, and it never crossed her mind because she was counting down the days to her death.

That had been a mistake. A huge mistake. When she’d first come here, Valeta had assumed she would no longer exist in a few months’ time. But... a lot of things had changed. She began having feelings she shouldn’t have for someone she shouldn’t love.

“You’re not considering keeping it, are you?”

“I don’t know,” Valeta said dryly.

She hadn't suddenly developed any maternal instincts just because she'd found out she was pregnant. It didn't feel real. It almost felt like it was happening to someone else.

"The head of the Tower won't like this."

The doctor was quite rude. However, Valeta couldn't argue this point. He was probably right.

"I'll abort it," Valeta replied calmly without a second thought.

"Right? When do you want to do it? I'll just use a bit of magic. It won't hurt too much. It's invasive, though, so you might feel under the weather for a few days."

"I'll come back in a few days."

"Sounds good."

Valeta gave the doctor a nod before turning away. She'd been feeling dizzy and nauseous for a few days, but she never suspected that this could be the reason.

"I'm going back to the library. What about you?" Morris asked with a grim expression.

"I'll join you," Valeta replied.

As soon as Valeta thought of the library in her head, the bracelet flashed and teleported her there.

"Hey, are you okay?" Morris asked seriously.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?" she asked evenly.

In fact, at this point in her life, there wasn't much that could rattle her. While her pregnancy was a surprise, it wasn't a problem that couldn't be solved. However, there was a faint flicker of anxiety growing somewhere deep inside

her. That tiny feeling was disturbing Valeta.

"I mean, you're having a child. D-Doesn't that mean something to you?"

"I don't really know. Is it so terrible that the head of the Magicians' Tower is having a child with a socoro?"

"No, it's not like that, but..."

"That's what you were thinking."

Morris remained silent.

Valeta casually picked up the book she had been reading earlier and sat down.

"Now, if you'll excuse me. I want to read my book."

"Aren't you going to tell the head?"

"I'll tell him once I get back."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah."

Morris gave her a dubious look but nodded regardless. He opened and closed his mouth several times as if about to say something, but eventually just sighed. The worry in his eyes was palpable.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow. Take care of yourself."

"You say the strangest things sometimes," Valeta said with a smirk.

She waved Morris off and sighed as she skimmed through the pages of her book, the words barely registering in her brain.

*Pregnant... She already knew that if she told the man about it, he'd just tell her*

to abort it. He might even try to get rid of it right then and there. He probably didn't even like kids.

"You were given to the wrong parents."

A man-child for a father, who didn't know what love was, and an emotionless mother who only wanted to die after suffering years of abuse. As she absentmindedly rubbed her stomach, her attention was caught by her wrist. She could still see the vampire's mark, although it was very faint now. The vampire said that she could call him as long as the wound existed.

Suddenly, it hit her.

The baby would die if she stayed here. Maybe she would die, too. That's what she'd always wanted, but suddenly it didn't sit right with her for some reason. *Am I really okay with that outcome?*

Was she okay with being this man's plaything until the day she died? *Did I even want to die in the first place?* She didn't know. She had developed emotions. She'd even had fun. However, his presence pained her, making every moment unbearable. There were times when she grew angry with the selfish man for playing with her feelings.

"Would he still be lonely if he had you?"

Would it be the right thing to do, leaving the child with a man who was destined to be alone for all eternity? Or would it be abuse? But would it be right to kill a cell that hadn't had the chance to develop yet?

*I heard that people change when they have children. Would that man change, too?*

"Would I desire to live if I had you?"

Could harboring a life cause her to yearn for a life of her own? Valeta was worried. She could just run away if she wanted to. As an alchemist, she had the

power to create something out of nothing.

Valeta leaned back in her chair. She'd never had the desire to hurt anyone before. However, that man... was deeply despicable.

"If one of his toys were to stab him in the back... would that be so bad?"

If he was going to think of her as his toy, she wanted to add her own modifier to the title.

"Raul."

A bright light flashed in front of her, freezing time. The air stilled, and all sound vanished. The magicians around her moved slowly as if they'd stopped breathing.

"You finally called. We were afraid that you wouldn't," the familiar vampire said.

He wore a black cloak instead of a robe and offered his hand to Valeta. His hair was golden yellow and eyes silver. Grinning at her, his white teeth flashed in contrast with his tan skin.

"How did you..."

"I borrowed our king's power in order to collect you. I have orders to bring you to him safely."

"Is it safe there?"

"Yes."

"Even from the head of the Magicians' Tower?"

"Most likely. Will you come with me to my world?"

"Only if you can guarantee my safety."

Raul nodded.

"We only wish to serve you. We have no desire to harm you," he said with a cheerful smile.

Valeta placed her hand in the man's outstretched one. She would run away if she needed to. Raul's eyes narrowed, his fingers catching the bracelet around her wrist. It began to crumble under his touch. She felt the air compressing around her as her surroundings changed.

When she opened her eyes, she looked up to find three moons in the sky. She was in a completely new world. Her eyes widened when she felt the cool breeze on her skin. In contrast, the Magicians' Tower had always been warm, its temperature constantly regulated.

"This is..."

"This is our world, Levanil."

"You have... three moons."

"The largest of our moons, the red one, symbolizes our king. It's always visible in the sky if he is alive and well. The other moon is the same one that can be found in your world, and the third is a restorative moon created by a vampire king of old by harnessing his own energy," Raul said as he slowly escorted her.

As they walked, Valeta determined that they were in a castle with a garden. It was dark, the dim light enveloping them like a thick blanket. Compared to the constantly bright sky room, she felt more at ease here.

"Our king is waiting for you."

"Oh, okay."

Without realizing it, a frown had begun to form on her face. The chill in the air suddenly felt foreign against her skin.

"Vampires tend to run hot, so it's cold around here. I'll tell them to light a fire in your room."

"I see," she responded evenly.

As Raul approached the castle, a door swung open before them. Inside, Valeta saw a long row of maids and attendants waiting. At the front of the line was someone slowly walking toward them. The man had black hair, pale skin, and red eyes. The beautiful man was clad all in black and seemed like the embodiment of the night itself.

He looked to be around Valeta's age.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Kaios, the vampire king," he said in a husky voice.

Kaios held his hand out to her, a smile playing at the edges of his lips.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 15

Valeta looked down at the Kaios' outstretched hand before finally taking it. His hand was large and firm, callused as if he was used to wielding a sword. It was very cold in hers.

"We've been waiting for you."

"Why?"

"You're our savior."

Kaios bowed and pressed his lips to the back of Valeta's hand. His lips were horrifyingly cold, too.

"And you've brought an unexpected guest."

Kaios's eyes drifted down to Valeta's stomach.

Valeta grimaced. "How did you know?"

"We're quite sensitive to living things. One of our specialties. It's the Magician King's child, no?"

Valeta said nothing.

Kaios didn't press, as if he didn't expect an answer.

"I came because I heard you can protect me."

"Of course." Kaios held out his hand to Valeta. She placed it in his, and he led

her up the castle's stairs. "This is a world only vampires can enter, since only vampires can pass through the gate."

"Is that so?"

"That's right. So, it doesn't matter how brilliant of a magician or a transcendent that man is. He can't step foot in this world without my permission," Kaios said with a smile. His whole demeanor changed with just the slight lift of his lips.  
"Can I ask you for your name?"

"Don't you already know it?"

"Well, regardless, I think a mutual introduction is only right," Kaios said.

He stopped in front of a heavy door, which he opened to reveal a beautifully decorated room.

"I'm..." Her lips slowly parted. "Valeta Delight."

It felt weird introducing herself in this new place after months of sleeping with a man she'd never once personally told her name.

"And I'm Kaios Von Levanil, a transcendent within this world."

The red in his eyes began slowly fading away like the tide receding, replaced with a silvery hue. Valeta stared, mesmerized by the unbelievably beautiful sight.

"A transcendent," Valeta whispered.

"As long as I'm here, no harm will come to you in this world," Kaios said, pulling Valeta into the room. He led her to a table that was next to the window and sat across from her.

"That man... Is he a transcendent too?"

"You mean the magician who captured you?"

"Yes."

"Yes. He is a transcendent in that world."

"And what exactly is a transcendent?" Valeta asked.

"The closest you can get to being a god, a being who's been granted eternal life and can interfere with the world's workings," Kaios said with great sincerity.

Valeta nodded as he snapped his fingers. A bottle of wine and glasses appeared.

"You can't drink because of the baby?"

Valeta didn't know what to say. If she refused a drink, it would look like she intended to keep the baby. If she accepted a glass, it would seem like she was trying to kill it. Kaios snapped his fingers again. This time, a reddish-purple drink appeared. Grape juice.

"This doesn't contain any alcohol. It should be fine, I think."

He poured the wine and grape juice into their respective glasses and slid the cup of juice over to Valeta. As Valeta accepted the glass, Kaios continued.

"Normally, vampires have red eyes. That's the commonly accepted idea anyway."

"What are you talking about?"

"However, when my eyes are red, my kin's eyes turn silver. If my eyes are silver, their eyes are red. Venturing outside has become a little easier thanks to that."

He clearly didn't want her to think that his eyes were common for some reason. *I've never seen that guy's silver eyes before.* Then again, she didn't know anything about him. She didn't even know his name.

"You want to die," Kaios said, staring at Valeta. "At the same time, you want to live."

Normally, she would have argued that this was contradictory, but he wasn't technically wrong. Valeta wanted to die. At the same time, she wanted to see her child come into the world.

"All I have to do is protect you from that world's transcendent, right?"

"Yes. I'm sure there's something that you want in return."

"I want you to make a homunculus."

"I've read about it, but why?" she asked.

"We need a way to obtain a steady supply of human blood. Preying on people in the wild isn't enough."

"Are you trying to make a human factory?"

"What does it matter?" Kaios asked. "They're living organisms without any feelings."

Valeta pressed her lips together. This was true. A living being born through abnormal means didn't have any feelings of their own.

"I heard that they look similar to humans."

"If you don't like that, you don't have to make them look human. You, of all people, can change how they look, right?"

Valeta didn't respond. She had long ago figured out how to create homunculi. Not everyone could make one, but if one had the talent and skills and knew the methods, they could.

Homunculi were dolls that moved using magic. They looked just like humans,

but they were dolls that would no longer work if they weren't supplied with magic. They looked just like humans but acted like puppets. You could order them to walk into a fire, and they wouldn't feel any pain.

"As long as we can feed off of them every once in a while, it doesn't matter what shape or form they take. They could look like a lump for all I care."

Valeta slowly turned her head. This was inhumane. There was a reason why making homunculi was taboo. She had even read an essay where a homunculus learned how to develop feelings after it was lovingly raised.

"A lump..."

*That would be okay, surely?* It would probably be all right if she created a doll that didn't have a soul, thoughts, or even the ability to do anything. Judging by the moons she saw outside the window, this land was barren and desolate. She could tell that they were just trying to find a way to survive. Using her powers in exchange for protection was a cheap price to pay.

"Very well."

"Thank you," Kaios said. "After terrible rumors started spreading about vampires, we've had to be careful about hunting in the human realm. Many of us have been captured and killed. We've had to protect ourselves by remaining in this world, but..." Kaios reached over the table and laid a hand on Valeta's arm. "There are no living beings in this world. There's no blood to be found in any corner of this realm. So, no matter what you might think, this is something we need. We have no warmth or heart of our own, so we have to rely on the warmth of others."

She felt a terrifying chill emanating from his fingertips.

"We'll do whatever it takes to protect you, so please... protect our future."

Valeta slowly squeezed Kaios' hand in return.

His eyes widened. "Your hand is cold."

Valeta paused before she said, "Yes."

"But you're warm... That's because you will be our savior," Kaios replied evenly.

"I know someone whose skin is so hot that you feel as though you're going to be burned by him, but he's as cold as they come."

Kaios quietly observed Valeta's face. There was a hint of exhaustion to his otherwise expressionless face.

"We'll have to get you a midwife," Kaios said, rising from his seat. "You should get some rest for the next few days."

"Thank you," Valeta replied.

At her quiet response, Kaios left, closing the door behind him.

Silence settled over her.

\* \* \*

"Why isn't she back yet?" Reinhart said, a frown appearing on his face.

He'd had matters to attend to outside the Tower and had gotten back late, but the sky room was completely empty.

"She's so much work."

Despite his sigh, his lips twisted into a smirk. He tapped his foot a couple of

times. Eventually, a magic circle appeared under his feet, instantly teleporting him elsewhere. He was supposed to arrive wherever Valeta's bracelet was.

"What is this...?"

He arrived at the library, but all he saw were the remains of the girl's half-corroded bracelet.

"F\*ck..." Reinhart's face went pale as he picked up the mangled bracelet.

"Valeta!"

He couldn't sense her presence anywhere in the Magicians' Tower. The bracelet was covered in traces of unpleasant magic.

Valeta had run away.

"How dare..."

It wasn't hard to figure out what happened.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Special Side Story: Chapter 16

Reinhart quickly followed the traces left behind by the girl. He followed the trail of magic that emanated from the bracelet. The dining room, library, and one of the magician's laboratories were the only places she had visited. He didn't even need to check the dining room. He headed straight for the last place she had visited.

*Whoosh.*

The first thing he saw was a startled magician with white hair.

“M-My lord?! What brings you...”

“Where’s Valeta?”

“What...? Who’s that? I’ve never met that magician before.”

“She’s not a magician, but she was here earlier.”

There was an oppressive energy hanging in the air. It was hard to breathe.

“Oh, if you’re talking about the socoro, I haven’t seen her since she left. She was with Morris, though,” the white-haired magician said cautiously.

It wasn’t hard to infer why Reinhart was in a poor mood. Although it was quiet now, not a single soul in the Tower had forgotten the bloodbath leading up to his inauguration. He tended to be heavy-handed when he was in a foul mood.

“Morris...”

Reinhart easily recalled the people Valeta usually shared her meals with. He knew that she talked to that trifling magician occasionally. However, he didn't crack down on their relationship, thinking Valeta needed some space to breathe in the Magicians' Tower.

"Could she have disappeared because she's in shock?" Morris said when questioned about it.

"Shock?"

"Yes, or maybe she needs time to organize her thoughts."

"Why?" Reinhart narrowed his eyes.

"Well, she's pregnant, so she probably needs time to get herself sorted before having the abortion."

"Pregnant?" Reinhart repeated as his eyes widened.

Startled by Reinhart's reaction, the magician quickly spoke.

"Yes. The socoro didn't tell you yet? I think she's pregnant with your child."

"So? What's this about an abortion?"

"I... recommended that she abort it."

Flames flickered to life in Reinhart's crimson eyes. His hand shot out and grabbed the magician by the throat. His light blue eyes watered with pain.

"M-my lord...!"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Wh— What?"

"Who are you to recommend that? Are you out of your mind?"

"I-I just recommended it because I thought you wouldn't like it!" the magician shouted as he squirmed.

Reinhart regarded Morris with a blank expression.

"How dare..."

"Th-then are you going to keep it?" the struggling magician cried.

Reinhart's lips pressed into a straight line. He loosened his grasp.

"Herk, ngh..." Morris coughed, sucking in lungfuls of air, trying to catch his breath. He hit the floor.

"Pregnant... Why did she run away?"

"What...?"

"When humans are pregnant, they always want to stick close to their partner. So, why did she run away?"

The magician quickly pulled himself off the floor as Reinhart muttered to himself, focused on the problem.

"R-ran away?"

The terrified magician crawled into a corner.

Reinhart stared down at him. Everyone was scared of him. It was only natural since he'd made it so. However, Valeta didn't avoid him. All she did was look back at him whenever he gazed at her, quietly accepting his touch.

"Maybe she wants to keep it...?" The magician's voice was weak.

Was it possible she didn't want to abort it?

Reinhart clicked his tongue, running a large hand down his face.

"You."

"Yes...?"

"You need to learn your place."

He snapped his fingers and the man's left arm was separated from his body, tumbling to the floor.

"Ah... Ahhh!"

The man squirmed, screeching in pain. Reinhart stared at the magician for a long moment before exiting the laboratory.

"She ran away," Reinhart mumbled as he paced around the sky room. "She's pregnant with my child?"

*And she ran away?* He didn't understand. How come? Why? For what reason? He had done everything for her, treating her with gentleness. He'd whispered his love for her. He'd been willing to take care of her until she died.

So why did she run away?

"Ha... So what if I lose a single toy?" Reinhart said.

Catching his toy again was only a matter of time. *I'll rip her to shreds once I get my hands on her again.* Or he'd break her ankles so she'd never be able to run away again. Having her rely on him so completely didn't sound bad to him.

Reinhart clicked his tongue as his mind churned with dark thoughts. *It'll take a month at most.* He didn't think that it would take long to find her. He didn't know how she had escaped, but she couldn't hide from him forever. All he had

to do was hold his breath and wait.

"When I find her, I'll make sure she'll never be able to run away again," Reinhart muttered.

It wasn't a bad idea to take the child hostage, too. Not that he understood it, but maternal love was a powerful thing for humans. Valeta would never even think of running away again if the child was in his grasp. If she was lonely or frustrated, he supposed he could always let her hug the child... He'd never thought about leaving behind someone who shared his blood, but if that's what she wanted... He could allow it.

His heart started racing anxiously. It was a strange, unpleasant feeling, one that he had never felt before. Indeed, it was very unpleasant. He didn't like that the woman who was supposed to be by his side was gone, and he found it just as unpleasant being left alone in a room surrounded by all her things.

He tried to shake off the feeling. He knew that the thing he wanted would be in his hands soon enough.

"Valeta..."

He pressed a hand to the glass, looking down past the clouds at the world below. It was a gesture both familiar and forlorn. A world without Valeta felt so infinitely distant to him.

\* \* \*

*Four years later.*

Valeta occasionally thought that human feelings were directly proportional to

distance. She felt like her heart was melting when she was with the man she liked, to the point where it felt like she couldn't live without him. However, after spending time apart, those feelings faded. Now that enough time had passed, she didn't even think about him all that much anymore.

"Valeta."

"Yes, Kaios."

"It's cold. What are you doing out here?"

"Terion said he wanted to play," Valeta replied as Kaios approached from behind, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders.

For the first time in a long time, snow fell in the realm of three moons. She heard that children and dogs get excited when it snows, and it seemed to be true.

"Ahh! Mama! Look! It's a showman!"

"Very cute. Did you make that yourself?"

"Yeah! Raul helped me! I give to you!"

Valeta smiled at the child's clumsy pronunciation. He had her eyes, but all his features and his hair were just like his father's. *Maybe it's a good thing he doesn't look like me.* That face would come in handy in this world.

"You can keep living in this world. Are you sure you want to leave?"

"Yes. I kept my promise," Valeta said calmly.

The homunculus they wanted was complete. As long as they kept channeling magic into it, the vampires would always have a steady supply of blood. It was nothing more than a large mass in the shape of a heart, but they were beyond

pleased with it.

"That's a shame."

"My thoughts exactly."

"Valeta, you and Terion are members of our society. You can always open the door and return here if you want."

"I understand."

Valeta smiled as she rose from her crouching position, brushing the snow off her clothes. Kaios wordlessly gazed at Valeta.

"Have you..." He paused. "Have you given any thought to what we discussed earlier?"

"I'm sorry. I have no intention of developing feelings for anyone again. And Kaios, you are my precious friend and savior."

He'd protected her for a long time. Even when that man had captured, tortured, and killed vampires in order to lure her out, he'd remained silent. Instead, he summoned all the vampires back to their world and closed its doors. That wasn't all that he'd done for her. He'd found a midwife for her, and made her life here as comfortable as possible.

"Thank you for liking me." However, that didn't mean what she felt for him would grow to become love. "I'm going back because I'm confident I can turn him down."

Valeta couldn't keep her child trapped in this closed world forever. Her son had inherited his father's blood. He was so talented that keeping him here would be a waste.

"That's why I'm going back."

She was confident that she would be fine even if he tried to hurt her. Kaios nodded in response to her determined words.

“I respect your decision,” he said simply.

It was time to return to the reality she had avoided for so long. *It's time to say goodbye.* During all this time, she had prepared herself to meet that man again. While in this world, Valeta had studied sorcery, the predecessor. She knew she couldn't win against the man's sheer power, but was sure she could land a single blow.

*I heard that rats can bite cats sometimes... That man should learn this lesson, too.*

“Let's go, Terion.”

“Aww.”

The child whined but obediently let his mother scoop him up into her arms.

It was time.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Special Side Story: Chapter 17

"I didn't tell you because I didn't think you'd like it, but the situation's not good right now."

"What?"

"The world of mortals is not faring well," Kaios said as he opened a portal.

Valeta, with only her son's clothes and some money, gave the vampire a strange look. She had tried hard not to think about that world after she'd come to this realm. She didn't ask, and had never bothered to search out information herself. Aiding her in her efforts, Kaios didn't offer any information either. The other vampires kept their mouths shut, too.

Thanks to their consideration, Valeta had heard nothing of the goings-on in that world. She'd run away from everything, devoting herself to her child and the present. However, she couldn't avoid hearing whispers of how that man was hunting vampires. She knew that she owed her life to the vampires and the sacrifices they had made.

"I don't want to say this, but the man that you stabbed in the back... is far crazier than you think."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Don't feel guilty, Valeta."

Valeta paused. "What?"

"None of this is your fault. I don't want you to blame yourself. You took my hand

because you wanted to protect yourself.”

Valeta remained silent. Honestly, she was afraid to ask what had happened.

“Uncle... Can we see you again?” Terion asked, clutching a teddy bear and looking upset.

Kaios gave a weak smile and leaned down. He removed his necklace and put it around Terion’s neck. “Of course. You’re welcome to come back at any time.”

“Really?” Terion asked.

“Really. Have I ever lied to you?”

Terion thought for a moment before he shook his head. The boy’s eyes were full of trust. Valeta smiled as she looked down at Terion’s face.

Kaios straightened up and spoke. “You’ve changed a lot. When I first met you, you looked like you wanted to die.”

“I did?”

“Yes. You don’t have that look about you anymore, now that you have a reason to live.” His gaze landed on Terion. Valeta couldn’t argue this. She agreed with his assessment. “And don’t think ill of that man.”

“...I don’t. It’s just... We weren’t a good fit for each other.”

“I say this as one myself, but life is tedious and lonely as a transcendent. We need something stimulating to keep us going.”

Valeta thought of the man who she knew to be was excessive in everything he did. *Come to think of it, I still don’t know his name.* She didn’t know his age, what he liked or disliked, or anything about his past. Valeta realized she probably only liked him for his face and his tenderness. She liked him, but had made no effort

to get to know him. That's how trivial their relationship was. The collapse of it was inevitable.

"I could only endure in this world... because of my friends, Largris and Eliza, who gave up their ordinary lives for me and this realm."

"Valetaaaa! Teriooon!"

"Speak of the devil," Kaios quipped as he took a step back, his expression softening.

Sure enough, two figures appeared in the distance. They were some of the first people to help her settle in this world.

"Huff, huff... I was worried we'd missed you."

"How are you still so weak after becoming a vampire?"

"Ugh, I don't want to hear this again."

"You'll never win against me, Largris, so I suggest you just give up."

Valeta had heard that these two were once human, but had decided to become vampires for Kaios. They were old friends that Kaios had met long ago. Vampires had venom. If they bit and injected an ordinary human with their venom, the human would become a vampire. They said it was an excruciating process, but their love must have been strong to help them persevere through it.

"He probably doesn't have anyone like that, which is why he's as twisted as he is."

"Oh, you don't know how twisted Kaios was when we first met. He was terribly arrogant. Right, Eliza?"

"Can't say he wasn't. We're the ones who made him act human."

"That's ridiculous..."

"Aw, c'mon. I know you like it." Largris laughed, elbowing Kaios in the ribs.

Kaios bit back a scoff.

"It's a real shame, though. It would've been great if you could've been our queen," Largris blurted.

Valeta climbed onto Gene, still holding Terion in her arms.

"Come back anytime!"

"Yes, Largris."

"You have to visit, Valeta!"

"Okay, Eliza."

"Please invite us once you're settled. It's been a while since I've been in that world," Kaios added.

Valeta smiled as she nodded.

"May the night be with you," he said as red magic flowed from Kaios, surrounding Valeta.

In an instant, her surroundings changed. After a short spell of dizziness, Valeta opened her eyes to a horrendous sight.

"What's this?"

There was an acrid stench in the air, and there wasn't a single intact building in sight. Corpses littered the streets. Valeta quickly pressed Terion's head into her

shoulder. She realized that everything she brought may have been useless. She could see the wreckage of the imperial castle in the distance, its splendor lost. The crackling of burning flames here and emanated heat as hot as lava.

*What the...* She felt like she was seeing the end of the world. Familiar signs were scattered around on the ground. This was the capital, the very same place she'd visited the last time she'd gone out in this world.

"Mama...?" Terion called, squirming in Valeta's arms.

She gasped and gently lifted her hand from the boy's head, which she had been pressing into her shoulder. She was completely at a loss. *What the hell happened in these four years?*

Was four years in the vampire realm different from four years in the mortal world? No, that wasn't it. Kaios told her that wasn't the case. That meant that whatever had transpired had done so in four years.

*Was there a war?* How many countries were there that could devastate the empire like this? Valeta began to walk around, looking for survivors. Thankfully, there were signs of life in the back alley she passed through. Some of the corpses were missing limbs, and some were emaciated, as if they hadn't eaten in days. They were huddled in a corner, trembling like mice.

"Um, hello..."

The people whipped around upon hearing Valeta's call. Their eyes widened.

"Oh... It's her! We found her! We can live... We can survive if we bring her!"

"Wait, hold on!"

Valeta threw a premade sorcery circle onto the ground, channeling magic into it. It crackled to life, instantly forming ice under the survivors' feet. The people's faces paled.

"A-A monster!"

Valeta winced at their shrieks. She patted Terion on the back. "Terion, can you cover your eyes and your ears and hide your face in Mama's chest?"

"Yes..."

Terion followed Valeta's instructions faithfully, squeezing his eyes shut and covering his ears. Valeta turned around to face the screaming people once more.

"I need you to stop screaming for a second. Can you tell me what happened?" Valeta opened her pack and took out some money and food. "I'll give this to you if you do."

She could practically hear the survivors salivating. The oldest of the group spoke.

"What do you mean? Didn't you know that monster, Reinhart, has been razing the empire for the last three years?"

"Reinhart? You mean... the head of the Magicians' Tower?"

"Right! The Magicians' Tower declared war! The country's in ruins. Half of those who once lived here are dead!"

"But why...?"

"Why do you think? He's looking for you!"

Valeta gasped, unable to believe it. The terrified people glared at her with resentment in their eyes.

"The ice will melt in ten minutes." Valeta set down plenty of food and gold and stepped out the alley.

“Found you.”

A familiar voice met her ears.

“Valeta.”

She turned, her eyes landing on a man whose beauty was unchanged by time. He was the same except for his missing left arm and the eye patch over his right eye.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Special Side Story: Chapter 18

Valeta stared wordlessly at Reinhart.

The previously trapped people began to creep out of the alley, finally freed from the melting ice. Their faces paled when they saw Reinhart, and they quickly fled.

"What took you so long? I've been waiting for you."

Reinhart's one remaining eye curved beautifully as he spoke. Valeta remained silent for a long time, not knowing what to say to the man standing in the middle of this living hell.

He snapped his fingers. "See? Look."

Several round unidentifiable things rolled across the ground in front of Valeta.

"What are you..."

They came to a stop in front of Valeta's feet. Puzzled, she glanced down at the round objects and immediately paled.

"Ugh..."

Valeta clapped her free hand to her mouth. Terion remained resting against Valeta's shoulder, eyes and ears still firmly closed.

"I took care of everyone that made you suffer," Reinhart said proudly, a broad smile on his lips.

He looked like a cat expecting praise for catching a mouse. The rolling things

were heads, and very familiar ones at that.

Her father, who had confined and abused her; the prince with a split personality who had forced her to do things against her will; and the emperor, who had tried to use her. That wasn't the end of the gruesome parade. There were the heads of all the jealous young ladies who'd called Valeta pathetic, and of the young men who'd tried to molest her. It had all happened so long ago that she barely remembered it.

Dozens of decapitated heads tumbled across the ground, the heads of people who had used or tried to use her.

"I made them suffer, gave them more pain than they put you through," Reinhart said as Valeta went white as a sheet.

"Why? In this country..."

She could understand if he had gone after the people of her own world. She tried to imagine that he'd done this to win her love and affection. She could understand that motivation at least. However, Valeta had no connection to this world. Technically, he was the one who had taken her and brought her here, and she had only entered the capital once with his permission.

"You..."

Reinhart took several long strides toward Valeta. He stopped only inches from her face, but Valeta couldn't bring herself to move. Her legs felt like they were made of stone. *Is this his magic?*

Valeta's expression darkened.

"If you had nowhere else to go, you'd come home."

"What?"

"There were too many people in this world. It was easier to find you with fewer people around." He reached out and pressed a hand to her cheek. The hand that had once felt like a burning brand was now terrifyingly cold. "Houses, warehouses, basements... There were too many places for you to hide. You could live anywhere, even on a barren wasteland, if it meant I wasn't there. That's why I destroyed everything I could," Reinhart explained quietly.

His kind and gentle voice, the way he lovingly caressed her cheek, even the way he affectionately pressed a kiss to her forehead... none of it had changed. The only difference was that his body was now ice-cold, as if blood was no longer running through his veins.

"What happened... to your arm and eye...?" she asked.

"I may be a transcendent, but even I must pay a price for meddling in other worlds," Reinhart explained, but Valeta didn't understand what he was saying. He was speaking in riddles. But it didn't matter—she didn't want to understand. "That's why I cut my arm off. It wasn't enough though, so I gouged out my eye, too."

He acted like this was a perfectly ordinary thing to do. He sounded like he was reuniting with a lover he had parted with for only a minute.

"That's the price you paid... for going back to my world and killing all these people?"

"That's right. I knew my Valeta was smart," he said, his red gaze softening.

Something was deeply wrong with this man. He had definitely lost the plot somewhere along the way, but he kept talking and smiling, as if this was completely normal.

"I killed and strung up the gnat that told you to abort the baby... I even killed the man who dared to call you his friend," Reinhart said.

He was acting like a child that was proud of tearing off a dragonfly's wings, ripping off an ant's legs, snapping off a stag beetle's horn.

"I even eliminated all the magicians who called you a socoro. There's no one left in the Magicians' Tower."

Reinhart had destroyed everything in his reach and presented it to Valeta.

"Let's go back to the tower. I got rid of everyone for you."

A child who hadn't ever grown up properly had become an adult with the power to destroy everything, and all for something he couldn't have.

"I won't go," Valeta said firmly.

The man hadn't spared his son a glance. He hadn't even acknowledged his presence. That meant he didn't see the child as his own.

"Why not? You love me. I got rid of anything that could possibly bother you."

He cocked his head to the side.

"I don't love you anymore." Valeta finally said the words she should've said a long time ago.

Reinhart froze in place instantly. His expression grew stiff, much like a real human's would, as if he'd heard something he didn't want to believe.

"I don't want my child's father to be a demon who destroyed the world, and I don't want to believe... that the person I loved would do something so horrible."

"It was for you."

"I'm sure you were just taking your anger out on them," Valeta said evenly.

"Why?" Reinhart repeated as if he didn't understand. "This was all for you,

Valeta. You have to love me.”

His expression twisted. In the time she hadn’t seen him, his beautiful face had been ruined. Valeta gazed out over the sea of bodies, all belonging to the people who died because of this man’s desire for her.

“You made it impossible for me to stay here on this land.”

He had ruined her plans for settling down here. Valeta couldn’t live in this empire anymore. She’d have to go to a foreign country, some place where he couldn’t touch her. She calmly regarded the despairing man. She didn’t really want to know the answer, but there was one final thing she had to say.

“Don’t follow me. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

She turned away.

“Don’t go! I’ll kill you if you do! I’ll kill that child in your arms first!”

Despite his shouts, Valeta didn’t stop.

“Go ahead and try, but you’ll have to go through me to get to him,” she said.

“Stop right there, Valeta.”

A magical storm swirled around her.

*Crash!*

*Crack!*

Valeta kept walking, undaunted by the incredible blasts of energy exploding around her. Soon, the attack stopped.

“Valeta...” the man sobbed sadly. “Please... Don’t go. Come back to me.”

Valeta slowed her steps. She stopped only when there was a considerable distance between her and the man. She realized something when she turned and looked at the man.

"You..." she began. "You loved me too."

Reinhart's eyes widened. He stood rooted to the spot as if her words had struck him straight in the heart, leaving a deep wound.

*This was all his way of showing love. His way of expressing love was so twisted that she hadn't realized that was what he was doing at the time. He didn't even realize that was what he was feeling as he brooded over Valeta's disappearance.* She smiled.

Reinhart stared, dazed by her radiant smile.

"Whatever I went through, you no doubt suffered the same."

As miserable as Valeta had been, that man had probably felt equally miserable. He'd probably never felt such pain in his life. After all, he was a wondrous and arrogant person who lacked for nothing in this world.

"Let's never meet again."

"Don't be like that, Valeta."

Reinhart strode toward her. She dropped a paper with a sorcery circle etched on it to the ground and stepped on it with the tip of her foot.

"Our contract is over."

"It's not over. I haven't ended it."

"You are going to kill me then?"

Reinhart paused.

"If you can't kill me," Valeta continued. "Then that means we no longer have a contract."

Gritting his teeth, Reinhart was just about to snap his fingers when a bright light emanated from Valeta's sorcery circle.

"Valeta!"

Reinhart snapped his fingers. As his magic reached out for the circle, something suddenly blocked it.

*Ting!*

Valeta's eyes widened as she watched the magic bounce back and scatter in the wind.

"Terion...?"

At some point, the child had opened his eyes, and was now generating a barrier to protect them.

"Stop bothering Mama! Stupid Papa."

Terion's words caused Reinhart to freeze in place. The last thing Valeta saw of the man was his shocked face.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 19

\* \* \*

“Terion.”

“Yes, Mama!”

“What did Mama say?”

“Uh... to keep my eyes closed! And... my ears too...” Terion said, glancing at his mother to gauge her reaction.

Valeta narrowed her eyes at her son. She had been startled when he'd used magic. When did he get so powerful? She hadn't expected him to be able to perform that sort of magic. She sighed. *I made this teleportation circle to take us to a foreign country just in case...* Valeta looked out over this new land, one that was clearly heavily guarded. Luckily, this place seemed to be perfectly intact.

“I'm technically in this country illegally.”

She'd entered the capital without presenting any documents or identification, so she didn't think things would end well if she got caught.

*Still...* Valeta wondered if it was a good thing that he hadn't destroyed any other countries. *First things first, I'll exchange some money.* Valeta cast her mind to the coins and gold Kaios had packed for her and set off.

This was her first time living on her own like this. If she was being honest, she had no idea what she was doing. However, she knew that staying still wasn't going to help. Nobody was going to help her.

Valeta slowly made her way deeper into the capital.

\* \* \*

The kingdom of Rowan was a large kingdom surrounded by water on all sides. Settling there wasn't as hard as Valeta had thought it would be. She bought a small house in a quiet neighborhood far from the center of the capital. The gold she'd brought along was more valuable than she'd calculated it to be, so she was easily able to buy a house with a small garden.

Thankfully, the people in their new home didn't reject Valeta and Terion. On the contrary, when they found out she was from the empire, they patted her on the back, exclaiming how lucky she was. It seemed like she wasn't the only person who had risked it all to escape that hell. However, only people who were high-ranking or outstanding specialists in their fields were accepted into Rowan. Valeta had the power to use alchemy, so the people didn't suspect that she'd never been officially accepted at all.

"Pharmacist, could I buy some medicine?"

On the contrary, they called her the pharmacist. The people came and told her their symptoms, and she'd give them potions in return. She'd had every intention of searching for a job, but thanks to the locals, she'd settled in much faster than expected.

"Terion?"

"Yes!"

At Valeta's call, the child popped out of the thicket in their garden. Leaves and twigs were stuck to the boy's hair and face. His shirt, which Valeta was sure had been clean that morning, was covered in dirt.

"What have you been up to?"

"I was watching the ants! They're marching in a line!"

"Seems like they're going home."

Terion beamed. Valeta recalled how happy Terion had been when she told him that they had a house now. He had probably been curious about what a house looked like, having lived in a castle his whole life.

"But... When is Papa coming back?"

"Papa?"

"Yes... You fought with Papa, right? Uncle Larg told me. He said that Mama and Papa fought!"

It seemed as though Largris had been telling Terion weird stories. She felt like she had to protect the innocence of his childhood, but...

*Could you call this a fight?* A fight meant they had the potential to reconcile, but would Valeta ever make up with Reinhart? Never. *I can't forgive him for what he's done.* He hadn't just killed one or two people—he'd murdered too many to count. He'd turned the empire into a wasteland.

*If I hadn't gone back, he probably would've continued.* She couldn't restore the country to what it had once been, but at least he'd stopped destroying it. Surely the remaining people would be able to rebuild. It was hard to believe such a powerful empire had fallen at the hands of only one individual. *Transcendents*

*are truly something else...*

Valeta hadn't felt anything when she was by such an incredible person's side.

"Why don't you play outside today, Terion? I'm going to have a few guests over."

"Oh! I can go out?"

"Of course, but you have to be back by dinner."

"Okay!"

Terion ran out of the garden, looking delighted. There were no children in the vampire realm, so Terion had no one his age to play with. Largris was probably the closest to him in terms of immaturity, but Terion had no true peers.

*I'm glad I came back. She'd forbidden him from using magic unless he was in a dangerous situation. Terion's an incredible little boy though...*

Valeta smiled. She wanted to hide the fact that Terion was a magician. She remembered what Morris had said about how people tended to ostracize magicians. However, even if the people knew Terion was a magician, they were still willing to play with him.

*Is it his looks?* There wasn't a soul that could hate his little face. The way he looked meant he could be forgiven for anything. Valeta ducked her head, sorting through the herbs she was drying in the sun.

"It's a beautiful day," she said to herself.

"It sure is."

Suddenly, Valeta heard an unfamiliar voice from behind her. Startled, she whipped around to face the stranger.

"Oh no! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I heard that you sell medicine. I

came to buy some for my wife."

The voice belonged to a well-dressed old gentleman. He looked a little too put-together to be a commoner but too poor to be a noble.

"Perhaps you haven't opened yet for the day?"

"No, no, I'm taking visitors. Please, come in."

Valeta let the old man inside. The first floor of the two-story house was used as the dining room and was where she brought her customers. *I really need to get more teacups*, she thought as she pulled the last clean teacup from the pile of dishes. She sighed as she put on the kettle.

"What's troubling your wife?"

"She's developed a skin condition. It kind of looks like scales. We've asked doctors, but they don't know what it is."

"Hmm, does she say it itches? Is she coughing a lot?"

The old man's eyes widened at Valeta's question. He nodded. "That's right. She coughs so hard that she hacks up blood."

"Oh, I think it's because she ate something wrong. I don't know how she got her hands on the thing I'm thinking of. They're hard to find. Valeta said, a dubious look on her face.

There was a type of bee known as the haobee. The honey produced by haobees was toxic. People who consumed it often developed severe allergies and dry skin. To most people, they looked like scales.

*Haobees are hard to find, though.* They lived high along the mountain cliffs and produced honey inside rocks. Valeta mixed a few herbs together and placed them on top of an alchemy circle. The symbol in her eye flashed. Within

seconds, the ointment was complete.

"She'll improve if she rubs this on the affected areas every day. And..." Valeta opened her mouth. "It's hard to eat haobee honey without processing it first. It has to reach a temperature of over a hundred degrees before you eat it. Please take care next time."

In extreme cases, eating it raw could cause death.

"Huh... This is all thanks to that honey? Goodness... I'd better dispose of it immediately. Thank you, pharmacist. All the doctors we've seen just shook their heads..."

Valeta didn't blame them. Not very many people know about haobee honey. It was classified as a trigger for food allergies and was not generally sold. Most people would have no reason to know about it unless they intentionally looked it up. *It's not even an allergy per se, but it's funny that it was classified as one.*

The old gentleman rose from his seat and set a heavy coin pouch on the table.  
"Thank you so much."

"Oh, no. This is too much..."

"Please. Accept it as a token of my gratitude. I'll be back." The old gentleman quickly left as if he were afraid Valeta would try to return the money.

"Huh, so he was rich..."

Valeta scratched her cheek as she stared at the pouch stuffed full of gold coins. Oh, whatever. If he'd given it to her, it meant that he could afford to spend this much, surely. There was no need for her to feel uncomfortable about how much he'd given her. Suddenly...

"Mamaaaa!" Valeta heard Terion cry from outside.

Her eyes widened. Instincts kicking in, she leapt to her feet and dashed out the door.

"Waaaah! What do I do, Mama?"

"Terion!" Valeta kneeled in front of the child, noticing the blood on his hands and shirt. "Are you hurt? What in the world did you do?"

"It's not... Hngh... it's not my blood..."

"What?"

"Waaah, m-my friend.... got hurt... It's all my fault..."

The child was inconsolable. Valeta frantically looked around. Behind Terion, there was another child around his age. The boy had black hair and blue eyes. He had his hand pressed to his right eye, which was dripping blood.

"H-hang on, Terion. Oh, no..."

Valeta scooped up Terion's friend and brought him inside the house. The boy had a large wound above his eye. It looked like it had been made with a knife.

Terion sobbed, blubbering something about wind and magic. Valeta quickly prepared herbs, gauze, and water. Then, she inspected the boy's eye. She got to work dressing the wound with a poultice she had made.

"Thank you," the child said, polite despite his injury.

"Not at all. Oh my goodness... I'm sorry. Where are your parents? I think it's going to leave a scar."

Valeta's face twisted as she heard their response. "I don't have any."

"What?"

"I don't have any parents. That's why it's okay."

The child smiled like this was a perfectly acceptable way of thinking.

"Oh... I'm sorry. Your name is...?"

"Iren. It's Iren."

"I see... Iren. I'm going to call a real doctor, just in case. Can you wait here for me? Terion, come with me," Valeta said to her son, who was still blubbering with his fists clenched at his sides.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Special Side Story: Chapter 20

After listening to Terion's story, Valeta concluded it was an accident.

"Waaah... I'm so... I'm sorry..."

Terrified, the child had burst into tears. Through heaving sobs, he explained that he'd meant to make a small wind but had accidentally created a fierce wind instead. *Did this happen because he's still not used to using his magic?*

It was strange. Terion often played small tricks on Valeta using simple pieces of magic. The child had probably grown careless. Nothing had ever gone wrong, so he probably didn't think anything would go wrong this time either. Is it because we're in a different world?

She heard that magicians were very sensitive to different mana levels in the world around them. *Things might be different now that we're in a new world.* However, that logic didn't entirely make sense either. This wasn't the first time Terion had used magic in this world.

"Who's your friend?"

"Just a friend I play with. I played with him yesterday, too."

"Really...?"

"Yes. Sasha said that he's a street kid around here!"

"A street kid?"

She'd thought he must be from a well-off family. Was it just her imagination?

She wouldn't describe him as overly posh, but he looked clean and his skin and nails were well-maintained. The way he sat and held himself was very proper, too.

"I see..."

Sasha was one of Terion's friends and a very straightforward child. *I shouldn't have reason to distrust any of the children who live here.* She didn't think they would lie. Valeta nodded and pulled the crying child into her arms.

"I'm not mad at you. I was just... surprised. But this can't happen again."

"Okay..."

Her son obediently nodded through his sniffles. *What am I going to do with the kid?* It bothered her that he was an orphan. Now that Valeta had a child of her own, she couldn't help but sympathize with children who came from unfortunate circumstances.

*He has no parents to go to, but I can't just send him on his way, either. Not with that injury.* Valeta sighed. She'd managed to stop the bleeding for now, but the wound was so deep that a scar would remain. In addition to that, an alchemist's potions weren't as effective on wounds made by magic. Maybe it's because he shared blood with that man, but Terion was so strong that her potions usually failed to completely heal his wounds.

*A top-tier potion might've worked, but...*

Materials for a top-tier potion weren't easy to come by. Or more specifically, the herbs and other ingredients that went into those potions were expensive. Quality was important, too. She couldn't afford those sorts of ingredients in her current situation, and now that she had a child, she didn't have time to go out and find them herself. *I might have to grow them from seeds...*

She patted Terion on the back with a sigh and left the room. The child named Iren sat exactly where Valeta had left him, staring into space. *He looks just like a doll...*

The child slowly turned to look at Valeta, one visible eye curving into a smile.  
“Are you done with your conversation?”

“Oh... Yes. I’m sorry for my son’s actions. I’m afraid it might leave a scar.”

Valeta checked under the gauze and clicked her tongue. It was exactly as she thought. Iren couldn’t open his eye. The scar was deep and long. *A low-quality potion would never be able to heal this.* Normal medicine wouldn’t work, either. *His face could be permanently marred...* She felt like she’d committed a huge sin by being unable to heal the wound. The child had such a handsome face.

“Where do you usually sleep?”

“The ladies take turns housing me.”

“The ladies?”

“Yes, the ladies on the Red Street.”

Valeta’s jaw dropped at Iren’s innocent words. She slowly shut her mouth. The Red Street was exactly what it sounded like. He was talking about the brothels. The street was named after the red lights that lit it at night. The streets were bathed in a red glow, earning it the name Red Street.

*And this child hangs around there? Was it because he was cute? Valeta couldn’t help but wonder if they were raising him with sinister intentions. Maybe I’m just being prejudiced, but...*

Still, it was hard to shake the prejudice.

“It’s all right. The ladies don’t care about what I get up to. I’ll just tell them I fell,”

Iren whispered softly with a pure smile.

How was this kid so sweet? He was almost stupidly kind. Valeta's expression darkened. *He's not my problem, but...* Maybe he was doing all right with the ladies of the Red Street.

"Nothing bad has happened to you there, right?"

Iren stared at Valeta for a moment before he smiled.

"No, nothing."

"That's good..." Valeta said.

But she couldn't just leave the injury as it was. *I'll have to treat it and find a way to make a top-tier potion.* Mind made up, Valeta spoke again.

"I'm sorry, Iren, but do you mind coming to my house every day? I know how to make medicine... And I don't think leaving that wound untreated is a good idea."

"I'll be fine."

"I don't think it's fine."

With one eye firmly shut, Iren's remaining blue eye twinkled as he grinned.

"Okay, I'll do that."

Valeta let out a small sigh of relief.

"I'm truly very sorry."

"I'm really just fine."

Valeta applied more ointment before rewinding the gauze over the boy's eye. He looked like a one-eyed pirate, but the child smiled as if he enjoyed the comparison.

"I'm really sorry." Valeta counted out a generous amount of money, slipped it into a coin pouch, and tied it to the boy's belt. "If it hurts, don't hesitate to go to a doctor."

"Thank you," he said after a long moment's pause.

Valeta had stooped down to bring herself eye level with the boy. When she finished, she straightened up and opened the door.

"I should come back tomorrow?"

"Yes. And again, I'm really sorry for what my Terion did."

"It's all right. I just..."

"Just...?" Valeta repeated.

"Could you make me a meal, just once?"

"A meal?"

Valeta's eyes widened upon hearing the sudden question. Iren nodded as he looked up at Valeta. Compared to the trouble Terion caused, preparing a meal wasn't a difficult request.

"I'm not good at cooking, though," she said.

"It's all right."

The child grinned at Valeta. She nodded as Iren turned and ran into the distance.

"What a strange child..."

He had a strange aura about him, and he acted like an adult.

"I should clean up. What a mess."

There was blood all over the floor. *If his injury was superficial, I might've given him a potion.* For some reason, she felt like something was wrong.

\* \* \*

"Hmm..."

Iren walked along the sidewalk, eventually slipping into the back alleys, humming to himself quietly.

"It's warm," Iren muttered, running a finger across his eye.

There were several shops further down the alley, lit with red lanterns despite being so early in the day. Iren stepped into the biggest one. There was a door toward the back, which he knocked on twice. After a long moment, the door swung open, held open by someone who had an annoyed air about them.

"What the? What happened to your eye?"

"I fell."

"You... fell? Fell, my ass! I told you to take care of your face! It's the only thing you've got going for you!" The man grabbed Iren by the collar and tossed him roughly into the better lit part of the room. "Damn! What the hell is this?"

The man leaned down and grabbed Iren's chin. He clicked his tongue as he turned the boy's face back and forth.

"Do you have any idea how f\*cking hard it is to take care of you? You've got nothing going for you but your pretty face."

"I'm sorry." Iren ducked his head, avoiding the man's eyes. It wasn't like he wasn't upset, but it couldn't be helped.

"Get to work, you! And change that bandage to something less unsightly! Go to the girls and ask them to put makeup on you!"

"Yes, sir."

Iren picked himself up off the floor and headed up the stairs. *I feel like I've returned to the past...* He was reminded of a memory he didn't want to remember. There were no lights on the stairs, making it very dark. *That kid hasn't suffered a day in his life...*

Iren groped his way through the darkness as he slowly climbed the stairs, thinking of the sunny boy without so much as a scratch or wrinkle on his face. *Is it because Valeta's an alchemist or because she's human?* Either way, it didn't matter as long as he could remain by her side.

Iren finally reached the second floor.

"Ugh, gross."

"Ack! Who sent this brat up here?"

"It was probably Master Pobo!"

The women's shrieks filled the air. If he needed to dive head first into hell itself in order to win Valeta's sympathy...

*I'll do anything I have to.* Flames danced within the boy's one visible blue eye, causing it to glow vibrantly for a moment before fading once more.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 21

\* \* \*

“Hello, big sis.”

As Valeta was preparing breakfast, she heard a knock at the door and turned to find Iren standing there. *He's here early. Also, what did he just call me? I'm too old for him to be calling me big sis...* She was no longer at an age where she could call herself young anymore. Valeta was about to say hello to Iren when she caught sight of a dark bruise peeking out from under the boy's clothes. The severity of the bruising suggested to her that they had not been left by a simple accident.

*What's that?* Valeta pressed her lips together as she tried to examine what little she could see of the boy's bruises, mostly hidden under his baggy clothes. For some inexplicable reason, a horrible chill ran down her spine. Anyone with eyes could tell what those bruises meant.

Iren smiled, his expression inquiring. The bright look on his face didn't sit right with Valeta.

“Come in,” she said. “Did something happen yesterday?”

“No,” Iren replied, maintaining a bright smile on his face.

She stared at the boy for several long moments before finally turning away. Her clenched fists trembled slightly, but she skillfully hid it from the boy. Valeta knew what he was going through better than anyone. She'd grown up faster

than most. She knew that he was just denying that anything was wrong so as not to worry her.

“Big sis.”

“Iren, calling me that is kind of...”

“I want to call you that.”

Valeta fell abruptly. She glanced at the boy before shrugging. “Sure. If that’s what you want.”

Most kids didn’t address their friend’s mothers like that, though.

“Have you had breakfast yet?”

“No.”

“Let’s eat together.”

“Okay,” Iren said, beaming.

Valeta awkwardly transferred the food she’d made into bowls. When she noticed Iren quietly sitting at the table, she removed her apron, realizing that Terion had yet to make an appearance.

“Wait here for a moment. I’ll go get Terion.”

“Okay,”

When Valeta entered his room, she found Terion snoring away, without a care in the world.

“Terion, your friend is here. It’s time for breakfast.”

“Mmm... Mamaaa.”

As Terion whined, Valeta scooped the boy into her arms and began patting his back. "It's time to wake up."

Valeta re-entered the kitchen, still patting the boy gently.

"Terion."

"Mama... Just a little longer..." Terion mumbled, sounding teary.

Valeta narrowed her eyes at the little boy and found that he was still half asleep. She sighed and turned her head only to find Iren watching them. She noted the way Iren stared at the hand she was using to pat Terion, so she quickly set him down in his chair.

She didn't want Iren to feel jealous. *I need to be more mindful around him.* She didn't want an orphan to feel even more deprived than he already was.

"Terion, it's time for breakfast. You need to say hi to your friend, too."

"Yes... Hellooo..."

Terion bowed sleepily, his eyes still half-closed. A small smile appeared on Iren's lips.

"You must sleep a lot."

"Yeah... What about you?"

"I don't sleep much."

"Oh..."

Terion held his fork in one hand, his head bobbing up and down sleepily.

"Terion."

As Valeta sighed, Iren reached out and poked the sleepy boy in the cheek.

"It's time to get up, Terion."

Valeta's eyes widened upon hearing Iren's gentle tone. *Maybe it's because he had to grow up quickly, but he doesn't seem like a child at all.* It was kind of fascinating. Valeta and the two boys sat around the table together and began to eat. The food was clumsily fried and grilled, but it was homemade.

"Are you going to go back home after this?"

"No, I'm going to explore the market a little first."

"When do you usually go home for the day?" she asked.

"Um, when the sun goes down."

The boy's reply caused Valeta to become lost in thought. No matter what angle she considered the issue from, she couldn't bring herself to overlook this.

"Why's that?"

"That's when the boss and the ladies wake up."

"I see..." Valeta wiped away the food dribbling down Terion's chin before turning her attention back to Iren. "If it's all right with you, why don't you stay with us until your eye heals? You'll have to share a room with Terion, though."

Iren's single visible eye widened. His injured eye was covered with a leather eye patch, but she felt like it would grow infected if left unattended.

"I don't think you need the eye patch. You should probably take it off."

"Oh, I put it on because I thought you wouldn't want to see it. Does it look weird?"

“No, I’m just worried that it’ll get infected.”

“Are you worried about me?”

“Of course,” Valeta said, her tone making implying she thought this was obvious. Iren beamed at her words. Her heart sank a little seeing the radiant look on the boy’s face. “However, we’re not a family of means, so we won’t be able to host you for very long...”

She didn’t feel good when she thought about how she was only letting the boy stay with her because of his injured eye.

“That’s all right,” Iren said.

“I guess you’ll be staying with us for a while, then.”

“Yes, big sis.”

Iren’s lips curled into a smile.

\* \* \*

Time passed quickly. Before Valeta knew it, a whole month had passed. The seeds she had worked so hard to get her hands on were finally beginning to sprout.

“Big sis, should I leave this here?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I’ll put this here, then.”

“Okay.”

As Valeta organized the herbs and supplies, she glanced at Iren’s fading injury. It hadn’t completely healed yet, so he couldn’t see out of that eye, but the boy never complained.

*It’s strange. Usually, not being able to see out of one eye would be enough to make anyone panic. Maybe he’s quick to adjust because he’s still young.* However, it didn’t seem as though the child was naive. In fact, he was rather smart and clever.

“Iren.”

“Yes, big sis?”

Iren had started helping Valeta ever since he’d come to live with them. In order to make a living, Valeta had been running a pharmacy on the first floor of her house during the day. Because of this, there were always herbs and other household supplies lying around, but Iren was always quick to put them away.

*Actually, he is helpful, but...* She wasn’t all that happy about it. The fact that he was so quick to put himself to work meant that he had been walking on eggshells for a long time.

“That’s enough for today. Go outside and play. You don’t always have to help me so much.”

“Am I not helpful?”

“You are very helpful, but you don’t have to be,” Valeta said as she gently took the broom from Iren’s hands. “You can act like a kid. I never had a childhood, so I’ve always been jealous of those who had one.”

“...”

"That's why you don't have to work as long as you're in my home."

"But..." Iren ducked his head.

Valeta's eyes widened when she saw tears in the boy's eyes. "Iren?"

"You'll abandon me if I'm not any help..."

Tears ran down Iren's face. Valeta stiffened. The way tears rolled down his soft cheeks made him resemble a fairy or an angel.

*For some strange reason, he reminds me of that man... The way he could call up emotions at will whenever he needed them felt almost fake. No, that's impossible. I'm just reading too much into it.*

"I don't want to be abandoned... I don't want to go back there, big sis..."

Valeta's stomach flipped after hearing Iren's words.

*What in the world was I thinking? Iren has just been doing his best so he wouldn't have to go back to that place. Iren was just trying his best in order to be loved, just the way Valeta had when she was a kid.*

When a child was trapped in a horrible place, that was the only thing that had any meaning. Once they'd tasted freedom, a kid realized that life didn't have to be so painful and wanted to keep it that way.

"Iren."

"I'll make money. I won't eat a lot, either. I'll do my best to help, big sis. So, please..."

"Iren."

Valeta reached out and began to pat the crying child on the back.

"It's all right. Everything's going to be all right. You can stay here."

Iren's eyes widened as Valeta patted him gently on the back. He awkwardly raised his arms and pulled Valeta into a hug.

"I..." A strange look appeared on Iren's face. "I would've had a normal life if you were my mother."

*A slightly more normal life... she thought wryly.*

The boy squeezed Valeta tightly.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 22

The Reinhart of this world didn't know his parents. The first thing he could remember was blood, darkness, and the nasty smell of cheap perfume.

He didn't even know where he was born. All he could recall was water and the stench of something rotten that permeated everything. When Reinhart was born, the world had been quite a mess. He was born during a time when the wounds of war were still fresh, and people had done anything they could to survive. The boy who didn't know his father was born in a place called the Raccoon's Den, a maze-like place with many twists and turns. The boy's mother smeared cheap powder on her face and went out to work every day.

The place was like an anthill and always filled with smoke. That hellish maze was Reinhart's home and his entire world. Reinhart's mother thought he was disgusting. Just seeing his face brought a sour taste to her mouth.

*"Well, he's easy on the eyes just like me, but why do I hate the look on his face?"* Reinhart's mother always said.

A *beast* that's easy to look at. That's all Reinhart was. The anthill was filled with smoke. Someone would put a rolled cigarette in their mouth and smoke it. People would breathe in that same smoke, looking happy to do so. Reinhart thought that was normal. The boy was born in the den, and therefore the owner's property. He wasn't allowed to leave without his master's permission.

As Reinhart grew, he realized that there was more to the constant beastly

copulation than just pleasure. There were always children being born in the den. Most of the children didn't know who their parents were. Occasionally, a newborn child would disappear, and the owner of the den would return with a bundle of money, a gleeful look on his face, "*You worthless brat. I have to feed you, so do what I tell you to do.*"

Reinhart was very unpopular with people because he was a magician, so it may have been a blessing in disguise that he was born in such a world. That's what Reinhart's childhood had been like. His hands were always a mess, and he never felt the loving touch of another, not even from his own mother.

His anger and resentment grew, but he had nowhere to put it. As Reinhart's magical abilities manifested, he came to a realization. None of what was going on around him was considered to be ordinary. However, that didn't change anything. If he did something wrong, he was beaten for it.

Parents didn't love their children, who were the lowest of the low within the den. That's what Reinhart came to learn at a very young age. It was no surprise when Reinhart's mother contracted a disease from the cheap powder she put on every day to make herself look beautiful and died from the mercury she used to treat it.

Reinhart had been thrown out as soon as his mother, once as beautiful as a flower, lost her usefulness. That was when Reinhart had experienced the world for the first time. For Reinhart, who grew up in a world where there were more people who whispered lovely lies than there were drops of water in a lake, love was no more than a fairy tale, a trivial feeling one could sell for a little bit of money. He thought that parents who loved their children were only pretending. They behaved as they did from guilt, from a desire not to break up the family or ruin the stability they had created. But...

"Why are you just standing there, Iren? You should take one, too."

They were in the market running errands when Valeta held out a skewer to Iren. It was just some meat on a stick grilled over charcoal.

"You've got something on your cheek."

Valeta wiped a smear of sauce from Terion's cheek as he struggled with his skewer. Then, she turned around and did the same to Iren. His body melted in response to her warm gesture. *I really don't know anymore.* Everything that Valeta did made his childhood feel like a lie. *I thought she was like me. Someone who didn't trust people or love. Someone who didn't long for affection.*

"Big sis..."

"Yes?"

Iren gasped and shook his head, realizing that he had spoken out loud. "Uh... Where are you from? You're not from this country, are you?"

"No, I fled because of the war."

"War...?"

It hadn't been a war for Reinhart. It was more like squishing ants.

"Yes."

"Doesn't Terion have a dad?"

"Who knows...?" Valeta didn't really answer the question. "I suppose you could say he doesn't."

And it'd stay that way until the day the lost country was restored. Reinhart had committed a great sin, and as long as he carried that sin, Valeta refused to accept him again.

"Why not?"

“He did something bad. Something that’s irreversible.”

Iren calmly peered up at Valeta. “But I heard from the other ladies that the country is getting better.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s being restored. The dead are coming back to life.”

“How is that possible?”

Iren tilted his head to the side at Valeta’s question. “Some magician paid a price.”

“A price?”

“Yes. I don’t know much about it, though. The ladies said they heard it from their customers. They say it’s possible as long as the magician pays a price that’s equivalent to life.”

“Life?”

Valeta fell silent as Iren nodded. She opened her mouth before shutting it with a click.

“I see,” she responded evenly.

*I’m sure it wasn’t him who paid the price.* Valeta thought of Reinhart for a moment before shaking her head. Someone as cruel as him would never sacrifice anything.

“Terion, Iren, let’s go.”

There was no point in clinging to the past.

“Okay!”

"Coming."

Valeta slowly left the market, holding both the boys' hands. The day was a peaceful one, despite her anxious thoughts.

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*It's coming back? Valeta thought to herself as she lay in the living room while the boys slept. The whole country? How in the world is it coming back? Is it possible to bring someone back from the dead? How can a country just come back like that? It simply didn't make sense. How did Iren find that out?*

Then again, it was possible that he'd overheard it, given where Iren had come from. People were always coming and going in those sorts of places, so it wouldn't be strange to come across such rumors.

"Maybe I should check..." Valeta murmured to herself.

*He wouldn't have risked his life like that, surely... She still wasn't entirely convinced. Valeta didn't know why Reinhart was so obsessed with her. He had an immense amount of power. Wasn't he doing just fine before he met her?*

Surely he didn't think that what they had was love? Even if he did, why would he do something so insane? Valeta had never once been able to understand Reinhart. She couldn't understand him because he never told her what he was thinking or doing.

*My head hurts... She wished that she could forget him, but all she had for her troubles was a headache. Was she stupid?*

Maybe she was.

Or maybe she still had feelings for... No, that's impossible. Valeta didn't have it in her to finish that thought.

"I'd better go to sleep."

"Already?"

"I have to get up early in the morning..." Valeta responded absentmindedly before she abruptly froze. She slowly turned around.

"It's been a while, Valeta."

Whipping around toward the familiar voice, she found a slightly haggard-looking man standing in her kitchen.

"I missed you so much," he said, his left arm and right eye still missing.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 23

“You...” Valeta’s jaw dropped. She swallowed, not bothering to hide her surprise.  
“How did you...”

“I wanted to see you,” Reinhart said with a smile.

Valeta took a step back as the man took several long strides toward her. Reinhart froze mid-step though, noticing how wary her eyes had grown.

“Do you hate me?”

“I’m scared of you. How did you find this place...?”

“I’m a magician. Anything’s possible as long as I pay the price.”

“What price did you pay?”

The man’s price. The word bothered her.

Reinhart smiled. “It’s a secret.”

“What do you mean, a secret?”

“It’s all right. It’s nothing that will cause you any harm, Valeta.”

He’d stopped a few arm’s length away from her. Why did it bother her so much? He looked perfectly fine, no longer seeming haggard at all.

“I returned the country back to normal. Or to be more precise, it’s slowly returning to normal. Most things will be fully restored after a month at the

most."

"They said that you'd need to pay the right price in order for that to happen."

Reinhart grinned. He didn't say anything that would make it sound like a heroic tale. It only made Valeta even more nervous. It was almost like he wanted her to praise him for his actions.

"Valeta."

"What?"

"Can I hold you?"

"What utter nonsense are you on about..." Valeta furrowed her brow. She looked at him, bewildered, before shutting her mouth.

"Hm? I haven't been able to sleep properly since you left me."

"Hey, I... Don't you remember that I said I didn't want to see you again?"

"Yes. You didn't want the boy to have a criminal for a father, right? That's why I restored the country before I came."

Valeta's mouth shut with a click. He was missing the point. "You kill people when you're mad, right?"

Reinhart said nothing.

"You take what you want by force with no regard for people's lives."

Reinhart stared at her. He smiled as he took a seat at the empty table, tapping his fingers against the table several times. Valeta tilted her head to the side before taking a seat opposite him.

"We don't know anything about each other."

"We can learn. Should we start by introducing ourselves?"

Valeta swallowed as she watched the man sitting across from her with his fingers laced, chin resting on his hands. "I'm being really patient right now."

"What...?"

"Right now, I want to strip you of all your clothes and eat you up from head to toe..."

He was holding himself back, his voice full of desire.

Valeta was speechless. "If you're hoping to roll around in bed with a woman, I'd suggest you go elsewhere."

"I can't if it's not you."

"Show me some respect, then. I don't belong to you. I'm not your toy, and I'm not your pet!"

"Of course not." He reached out, gently stroking Valeta's bottom lip with his thumb. "I love you, Valeta."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe that."

Reinhart smiled. He gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders and leaned back in his chair.

"Darn."

The corner of Valeta's mouth trembled at how attractive the small gesture was on him. "I hate how cavalier you are. You know how I feel, but you still..."

Her expression twisted. Reinhart rose from his seat, rounding the table to come to Valeta's side.

"What do I have to do, Valeta?" He knelt in front of her and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. "Everything is my fault. I'll apologize." He looked up at Valeta, his eyes begging to know if this was what she wanted. "Should I kiss your feet? Should I put a collar around my neck? If that's not what you want... then you can be the one to treat me like a toy this time."

He was as arrogant as ever, even on his hands and knees as he was. Valeta gaped down at the man crouched at her feet, finally closing her mouth after several long moments. It wasn't a satisfying feeling at all.

"I want you, but I don't know how to get you. So, tell me."

Reinhart took Valeta's hand and brought it to his chest.

"Do you want me to die? I'll give you that."

Valeta said nothing.

"Do you want me to resurrect your parents? You said you wanted to take revenge with your own hands, right?" Reinhart babbled, listing everything he could think of.

"Why? What are you going to give up? Your other arm?"

"If that's what you want."

"You really are the worst." She rose from her seat. She had to get out of here. The more she talked to him the more disappointed she felt. "Isn't there anything you can do that doesn't involve magic?"

"What do you want me to do?" Reinhart asked.

Valeta remained silent. Reinhart sounded like a lost little boy.

"There are things you can do without using magic."

Reinhart was still on his hands and knees, kneeling on the cheap wooden floor and looking up at Valeta.

"I know how to make drugs and medicine. And clean, too," he said. "Is that what you want?"

Valeta was silent.

"Oh, also..." He drummed his fingers against Valeta's ankle. "I'm good at sex. Valeta, do you need a male prostitute?"

Valeta was utterly speechless as she looked down at the man's curved smile.

"Why...?"

"That's all I knew how to do before I was a magician. What do I have to do to satisfy you?"

She didn't know what to say to that.

"Just let me stay by your side for a month. I'll only come at night."

"And after that month?"

Reinhart quietly stared at Valeta for a moment. "I'll never show my face in front of you ever again," he said.

Valeta struggled to find her voice. "Is that the truth?"

"I promise."

"You can't show up during the day."

"Okay."

Valeta stared at Reinhart for a moment before she held her hand out to him.

"Get up. You're embarrassing me."

"Okay."

Reinhart beamed as he took Valeta's hand and got up off the floor.

"My name's Valeta. Valeta Delight. I was the only daughter of House Delight."

Reinhart's eyes widened at Valeta's words. "I'm Reinhart. I don't know any of my siblings, but I'm sure I had some."

"What does your name mean?"

"I wanted to give myself a name, so I found it in a book. It doesn't mean anything. It just seemed like a cool name."

"You named yourself?"

"Yes."

Valeta lips parted wordlessly at the man's unexpected response. "What about your parents?"

"I don't know my father. As for my mother, well, I have nothing good to say about her. I... I was born in the den."

"The den?"

"You know, a place where people and drugs are sold."

Reinhart carefully studied Valeta's face before he shrugged.

"I don't know. Maybe it was lucky that I was born there."

"Why would it be lucky...?"

"It was always smoky in there and most people were high out of their minds."

Nobody recognized me for what I was.”

Reinhart explained that he'd had an easier time growing up than most magicians because nobody had bothered to make eye contact with him.

“For me, love has always been something that can be bought with money, so...”

Reinhart grabbed Valeta's hand and used it to tug her into his chest. “I didn't know the value of your words, Valeta.”

Valeta remained silent, just listening to the man's whispers. Eventually, she snapped, “Stop saying things like that, especially when you don't believe them.”

It was easy to tell when he was just acting. Reinhart's smile vanished at Valeta's words.

“You're so difficult, Valeta.”

“You've had it too easy.”

“But Valeta,” Reinhart started.

“Yes?”

“You gave me permission to be with you for a month.”

“And?”

Reinhart wrapped his arms around Valeta's waist and pulled her in close. Valeta's eyebrows knitted together.

“Can I kiss you?”

“I really hate you...” Valeta planted her hands on the man's shoulders and pushed him away.

“Don't hate me. We only have a month.”

"And it will be only a month."

"Yes, one month," he agreed.

"You can't touch me if I don't want you to."

"Does that include hugging...? That sounds like it'll be hard."

"I'm going to bed now. You should go back to wherever you came from."

"Can't I sleep with you?" Reinhart asked.

Valeta pressed a hand to her forehead, a weary expression settling over her face. "Reinhart, I'm still very mad at you. You know that this isn't us starting over again, right?"

"I know. I know that you hate me. You're just putting up with me so that you'll never have to see me again." Reinhart's voice was very soft. "I'll do what you say," he said. "But it's true when I say I don't know what to do. I want to have you, but I don't want to break you, either."

He always got what he wanted. Anything that was not given freely, he took by force. So, Valeta was a conundrum for Reinhart.

"If you want to talk to me like I'm a human being, you can start by not treating me like I'm an object."

Reinhart's lips stretched into a complex smile.

"That's hard."

Valeta turned around. "I'm going to bed. I'm really tired."

"Sweet dreams, Valeta."

Valeta said nothing in response.

She slowly climbed the stairs, but she could still sense his presence on the first floor. She glanced back to find Reinhart looking up at her. Their eyes met, and Valeta scurried the rest of the way up the stairs, locking her bedroom door behind her.

*I really don't know what I should do... She slid down the door until she was sitting on the floor and buried her face in her hands. It could all be an act.*

She felt stupid for being unable to reject him.

It was a very long night.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 24

“Hello, Valeta.”

Valeta had just put the kids to bed and was in the process of tidying up the house when he appeared. She frowned when she heard his familiar voice.

“Isn’t it a fine evening?”

“I suppose.”

Valeta said nothing more than this. Her head was filled with thoughts that were only made more complicated by his appearance.

“Do you want to take a walk? I feel like I’ll only have lewd thoughts if I’m left alone with you here.”

“Seriously, you...”

He smiled when he saw the weary frown form on Valeta’s face. “Don’t you like evening walks?”

“I do. It’s just that I can’t be out for long. The boys are home, and...”

Reinhart nodded in response. He definitely seemed more gentle than she remembered him to be.

“This is strange,” he said.

“What is?”

"Just being with you like this."

She thought it was stupid and pathetic of her, but she didn't hate it, either. Valeta locked the door behind them and stepped outside, shivering a little in the chilly night air. Reinhart snapped his fingers. Instantly, the chill disappeared.

"Oh..."

"I put a thin, almost imperceptible barrier around you. You won't be cold anymore." Reinhart slowly strolled down the street. If anything, he looked colder than she did. His clothes were thin, and his skin was so pale that it almost seemed translucent. "Valeta, what do you think about when you see the world like this?"

At his abrupt question, Valeta glanced at the scene around them. All the stores were closed at this hour. There wasn't a soul in sight. It was peacefully boring—just the way she liked it. She breathed in the cool night air, enjoying the way it filled her lungs and the way the silvery moonlight shone quietly down on the street.

"I think it's nice. It's peaceful, secluded, and refreshingly cool."

"I don't think anything. It's just an empty street. I think about how if I used magic here, I wouldn't kill anyone."

Reinhart's lips moved slowly as he spoke. Valeta was silent as she absorbed the man's dreary words. She gazed out at the street again, thinking about how she didn't find it at all boring. In fact, she liked that she was able to walk around at night like this.

"When people look at an animal, they tend to think it's cute. But not me. I think about how it'd die if I touched it. That's what I think about."

Reinhart spoke so slowly that Valeta felt he was being more honest with her

than he'd ever been. She held her breath. Just as Reinhart couldn't understand Valeta, Valeta couldn't understand Reinhart.

"I have these dangerous powers, so that's all I can ever think about."

Valeta recalled Kaios, the vampire who'd helped her. Although he didn't show it, she could tell that he was constantly bored. The difference between him and Reinhart was that Kaios had Eliza and Larg. They chose to give up their human lives to be with Kaios, who had been doomed to remain alone forever. That's how Kaios was able to live a boring, yet not so boring life.

*Is that how Reinhart thought of me?* The thought suddenly occurred to her.

"I constantly need stimulation. The easiest way to get that, to feel any pleasure, is by killing."

Reinhart explained that he'd grown tired of bloodshed, but it continued to be one of his few sources of pleasure. He had a lot of toys over the years, though he had ruined most of them.

Valeta didn't really understand it. She wasn't the sort of person who needed a lot of stimulation or pleasure. She just wanted to live a normal, peaceful life. As long as she was able to avoid experiencing any significant misfortune, she was happy with the little things in life.

*The little things in life... Oh, can he not feel that?* She didn't know if that was the right term for it, but the little things were enough for her. However, it seemed to her that Reinhart was unable to appreciate that feeling.

*I see...* The world was a colorless place to him.

"You were the only thing to ever make me feel a fresh sense of excitement," Reinhart said.

Valeta's eyes widened. She wanted to say something, but the words were

caught in her throat.

"You don't have any idea how I felt... how I felt when I first met you," Reinhart said.

Valeta smiled hollowly as she strolled along the empty street.

"That Valeta from another world."

"Our worlds are a little different, but not you..."

"We're different," Valeta said firmly. "I'm different from the Valeta in your memories. Stop trying to compare me to her."

It didn't matter if she was from a parallel world or an exact copy of this one. Either way, she was different from Valeta because they had grown up in different worlds and environments. Even if they shared the same face and voice, they were different in nature.

"If I was in love with a version of you from another world... would you be satisfied with that because it's you?"

"..."

"It's rude to think of me as someone else when you're with me," she said. "It's disrespectful to that other person, too."

Reinhart gazed at Valeta for a long moment, then nodded. "Yes, you're right."

It was strange how docile the man had become. It was to the degree that Valeta was becoming disconcerted by his new attitude.

"I guess people do change."

"I know you hate me, so I've been studying. I'm glad that you like the change."

Reinhart's eyes grew soft. She felt like she was looking at a completely different person. *Studying, huh?* Did he think that studying was the answer to everything?

"It was miserable being treated like a toy." After a long moment, Valeta cautiously added, "Still, I was fine with it because I liked you. I was going to die anyway, so I thought I might as well die in the arms of the man I loved."

She realized now how cowardly that was. And how patient Reinhart had been, being sweet to the girl who stayed by his side because she wanted to die.

"But once I found out I was pregnant... Once I realized I was going to have a child... I felt very weird."

She'd never had an attachment to life, nor had she ever wanted to pass her blood down to someone else. A child? If she was being honest, not even in her wildest dreams had she ever contemplated the idea of having a child of her own.

"I thought you were going to kill me..." Valeta trailed off as she turned to face Reinhart.

Sometimes, she thought about what would've happened if she'd just told him the truth. Maybe it wouldn't have been too late to try and make an escape after talking it out if things didn't turn out well.

"I'm curious now, about how you would have reacted."

"I don't know, either." He shrugged. "I would've done whatever you wanted."

At the time, Reinhart wanted nothing more than to tie Valeta up and keep her by his side. Still, he wasn't entirely sure. *Would I have killed it?* If Valeta had focused more on the baby, he probably would have. But if doing so would have made Valeta want to die, he might've spared it, too.

"Is that what you think?"

"Probably," Reinhart said with a smile.

"Have you seen Terion?"

"Yes. He's growing up well. A bright, innocent kid. He must take after you because he doesn't have that unique aura magicians have," Reinhart said.

"Unique aura?" Valeta repeated.

"I told you that magicians tend to be ostracized, right? He doesn't have the aura that typically unnerves people."

Valeta's eyes widened. She had never thought of it that way. It wasn't something she had to think about since everyone liked Terion.

"I see," she said. This was interesting new information to her.

"Valeta."

"Yes?

"Can I be honest?" Reinhart leaned in close and whispered.

Valeta's face immediately turned red. "Why are you so close?!"

"Because I want to eat you." Reinhart's eyes curved. "You smell so sweet, Valeta." He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close to him. "If I can't kiss you, how about letting me leave a mark?"

His long fingers traced along Valeta's shoulder. Her eyes widened.

"You...!"

"I know that you hate me..." His lips hovered near her shoulder. "We only have a month."

Valeta said nothing in response to this.

"You'll never see me again. So give me just this much, okay?"

Valeta's eyelashes fluttered. The sensation of their warm breaths mingling was strange. Frowning, she slowly closed her eyes.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to put it in."

As soon as he said that, Reinhart's tongue slipped into her mouth.

Valeta immediately grimaced.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 25

Reinhart pressed his lips against hers, pushing her back against the wall. He slid his knee between her legs, trapping her in place. His arm snaked around her waist, gently stroking her sides.

Valeta's face twisted. *Was he not talking about his tongue when he said he wouldn't put it in?* She furrowed her brow as she tilted her head back, the kiss growing increasingly wet. Her frown grew deeper as it became harder to breathe.

"Did you forget how to kiss since we last met? You're struggling to breathe," Reinhart said as he lightly bit at her bottom lip.

They broke apart, giving Valeta some room to breathe.

"Oh, maybe you did forget. After all, you wanted nothing more than to throw me away," he added, sounding resentful.

Valeta frowned. She was about to say something when Reinhart pressed his lips against hers once more. His tongue licked into her mouth. Their breath mingled, saliva mixing. The wet, almost obscene, sound of their lips meeting was loud in the quiet of the night.

"Valeta."

The way Reinhart said her name was gentle as his hand slid up her back and began to slowly caress the nape of her neck. He ground his knee between Valeta's legs.

“Mmph!”

She gasped. All they’d done was kiss, but she could feel the heat pooling in her belly. It was almost painful. Her cheeks were burning, and she could feel her head growing numb and fuzzy. It was hard to focus. His other hand slid up Valeta’s thigh before taking her hand, hanging limply by her side, in his.

Reinhart laced their fingers together as she struggled, holding her hand tightly in his.

“Rein... Your arm!”

He used his other hand to effortlessly pull Valeta into his arms.

“It’s just temporary magic. I can’t hold it for very long.”

He captured her lips again, sucking her tongue into his mouth. He swallowed her moans like he was starving. Reinhart’s eyes snapped open as he gave her lip a final tingling tug with his teeth. He stared down at Valeta intently.

She felt like his red gaze was going to burn her alive. He took in the way she was limp in his arms. It was hard to believe that her saliva was so sweet. He held her steady, his arms wrapped around her neck and back.

The way his hands roamed over her, his teeth nibbling at her ears and neck resembled the manner of an animal. He burrowed his hands under her clothes, biting at her collarbone. He trailed light kisses along her cheeks and the side of her neck before biting down on the soft, ample swell of her breasts through the fabric of her dress.

“What do I do, Valeta?”

He pulled their interlaced hands toward him. She had begun to relax, thinking the kiss was over, but tensed again.

"I'm getting all riled up."

"You're crazy," she snapped.

She glanced down at the tent in his pants, then quickly looked away, her cheeks turning bright red. Reinhart smirked at the way she averted her gaze before finally letting go of her hand.

"I'll be right back. I'm going to go cool off."

Valeta watched as he turned around. *What's going on?* She followed him with her gaze, eyes wide. They widened even further at the terrifying sound she heard. There was a crunch, then blood splashed across the floor. Reinhart was holding what seemed to be a large shard of glass in his hand, clearly made using magic. He had stabbed himself in the thigh with it.

*What the...?* Startled, Valeta rushed toward him. "What do you think you're doing?!"

Reinhart, who was about to stab himself again, slowly turned to face Valeta. His lips curled into a thin arc. For the first time, Valeta thought his smile looked grotesque.

"It's more effective this way."

"No, but why do you have to..."

"Because you hate me?" Reinhart replied nonchalantly, as though the answer was obvious.

Valeta was struck speechless by this answer.

"I promised that I wouldn't force you to do anything you don't want. It's just that I have a lot of desires. I tend to be quite impulsive if I don't keep firm control over myself."

His eyes curved like crescent moons, giving him an otherworldly appearance—he truly was beautiful. At the same time, his actions had left her speechless. Blood was pooling on the ground. He looked like he should be in pain, but he merely glanced at his wound with an impassive expression.

His bored eyes lit up when he saw Valeta watching him.

"If you run away from me again, I..." Suddenly, his arm disappeared once more. He reached out with his remaining arm and stroked Valeta's face. His fingers left sticky streaks of blood on her cheek. "I don't think I could live if I didn't kill you."

Valeta's breath hitched at the possessiveness in his voice.

"So, keep your promise. Don't run away, Valeta."

Chills ran down her spine, but Valeta tried not to let it show. "Why would I do that? It won't be long before I'll never have to see you again."

"Yes, that's true," Reinhart said with a satisfied smile. "Don't run away for this month then."

After a moment, Valeta said, "Okay. Can I ask you a question, though?"

"Anything."

Valeta glanced at Reinhart's wound with a worried look.

"Why a month?"

At her question, one immaculate eyebrow arched. Seeing his expression, Valeta opened her mouth again.

"Is that your question?" he asked.

"Yes. I don't see why it has to be a month."

"It just felt right, you know? Clean and easy." Reinhart brushed off her question with a shrug. "I'll take you home. It's getting late."

"If you wanted something nice and clean, a year could've worked, too. You probably have it in you to ask for that much."

"What do you mean, Valeta? I have a conscience, you know," he said, the corner of his lips drooping downwards in a pout.

Valeta frowned at the man's contemptible expression. "Let me treat your wound before you go."

"I'm fine."

"Well, I'm not."

Valeta grimaced, as if she was the one in pain, and took Reinhart by the hand. *What in the world am I doing?* She dragged Reinhart back to her home. She hated herself. She should have just ignored him, but she couldn't. *Why is he always just standing in front of me?*

It bothered her because he was like a puppy left out in the rain. Valeta sighed as she turned her head. Reinhart had been watching her, a dazed look on his face, but brightened as soon as they made eye contact.

"Are you worried about me, Valeta?"

For a split second, his question reminded her of Iren. More specifically, it was the awkward look on his face.

"I feel like you'll haunt me for the rest of my life if I let you bleed to death."

"Yeah," Reinhart replied, laughing as though he knew she was lying. "You're worried about me."

"I feel like it's only common sense to worry about someone when they're bleeding out right in front of you."

"There are a lot of people in the world who wouldn't worry, Valeta. They can't talk to me with their heads held high, drag me around by the hand, or worry about me." Reinhart suddenly leaned in and pressed his lips against the nape of her neck. "It's only you. And only you can."

Valeta pressed her lips together, affected by how close they were to one another. "Stop talking nonsense. Just come inside already. Who the hell stabs themselves just because they were getting riled up?"

He was out of his mind. She resisted saying more. For some reason, Reinhart continued to only smile. Once inside, Valeta sat him down at the kitchen table and began to prepare a poultice.

"You shouldn't just bring a beast into your home, Valeta. What if it eats you?"

"You said you wouldn't."

"And you believe that?"

"If I don't believe you, then who would?" she responded evenly.

Reinhart's eyes widened slightly. "You're too much..."

Valeta kneeled between Reinhart's legs. She was carefully applying the poultice to Reinhart's leg when he spoke.

"I feel like you're trying to seduce me," he said as he stroked her head.

Valeta swallowed hard, her entire body going tense.

Reinhart rose abruptly. "What's with that face? Did you think I was going to do something?"

"Wh-what are you...!" Valeta leapt to her feet.

"Do you want me to f\*ck you?" His fingers trailed along her collarbone. "I'd do anything that you want... anything for you."

"Get out..."

At his shameless words, Valeta coldly shoved him through the front door, her head hung low to hide her blush. *He's such a snake...* she thought as she clenched her fists. *I hate him so much.*

She hurried to her room.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Special Side Story: Chapter 26

Time flew, and the days passed by faster than Valeta had expected. *I guess there's only two weeks left.* Her question regarding the mysterious one-month deadline remained unanswered.

“Mama...”

“Good morning, Terion.”

“G’morning... Did you have a good night’s sleep, Mama?”

The boy rubbed his sleepy eyes, barely able to keep his head up as he floated through the air to his seat.

“Seems like you’re getting pretty good at using your magic now.”

“Yes, I think it’s working better now.”

“That’s good.” Valeta finished setting the table and looked around. “Why isn’t Iren up yet?”

“He must be really tired. He’s still sleeping.”

“Really? That’s unlike him. He’s usually the first one up. He should eat, though.” Valeta frowned for a moment, lost in thoughts. Then, she ruffled her son’s hair as she took a seat herself.

“Iren must be busy. I woke up last night, and he wasn’t there.”

“He wasn’t?”

Terion nodded in response, his bedhead out of control. "Yes! Maybe he went to use the bathroom."

"I see..." Valeta thought for a moment before getting to her feet again. "I'll go get Iren so we can eat together. You can start, Terion."

"Okay..."

The child picked up his spoon and began shoveling food into his mouth, immediately chewing enthusiastically. Valeta patted the boy's cheeks before going upstairs. She found Iren snoring in the boys' room. *I guess that guy's not the only one with a face so pretty.* Iren would grow up to look a lot like that man.

Her thoughts turned to Reinhart unbidden. She shook her head. *What the hell am I thinking?* He showed up every night, saying all sorts of nonsense and trying to get familiar with her. No wonder she was slowly losing her mind.

"Iren." Valeta carefully shook the boy's shoulder. "Iren, I know you're tired, but you have to eat."

Iren began to stir. He gave a small groan as he slowly opened his eyes.

"Valeta...?"

Valeta's eyes widened at Iren's words.

"Big sis..." Iren added, his voice drowsy with sleep.

Valeta nodded, an awkward smile on her face. "Good morning. You couldn't sleep last night?"

"No."

The boy rubbed his eyes as he sat up. Valeta ruffled his hair as he crawled out of bed, immediately starting to make the bed. "I can clean up here. Why don't

you go down and join Terion?"

The boy blinked. His eyes seemed more clouded than usual.

"Iren?"

"Okay," he replied, a little belatedly.

Valeta frowned as she watched the boy trudge from the room. She turned and sighed softly.

After making the messy bed, she headed back downstairs. The boys were sitting side by side at the kitchen table. Iren gave a small bow when Valeta entered. She took a seat opposite them, taking a bite of her toast, and watching the boys.

*Huh?* Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Iren."

"Yes?"

"You seem smaller... Weren't you a little taller than Terion just yesterday?"

Valeta racked her brain.

Iren froze halfway through a bite of his toast with cheese, egg, and ham. "Is that so?"

His eyes widened as he tilted his head to the side. Valeta started to nod but stopped.

"Are you sure I shrank? Maybe you're just getting us mixed up."

"You think?"

She was sure that Iren was a little taller than Terion. Valeta thought for a moment. By the time she looked up again, Iren had put down his utensils, done with his meal. Valeta bit her tongue as she watched the child put away his plate, fork, and knife.

For some reason, he looked a little melancholy. Valeta awkwardly scratched her cheek. *Was it insensitive to say he looked shorter?* Maybe that wasn't the best thing to say to a child who was still growing. Valeta was about to open her mouth to say something when Iren spoke.

"You don't have to worry, big sis. I don't really mind."

"Huh? Oh..." Valeta closed her mouth with a click, surprised by the boy's words.

"I'm thinking about leaving soon."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Valeta asked.

"I mean, I can't stay here forever, so I found another place to stay."

Valeta was silent following Iren's words. She felt like she had been struck upside the head.

"You're leaving, Iren?"

"Yeah. I found a place to stay."

Terion's eyes immediately filled with tears. He jumped from his seat, breakfast forgotten. "Does that mean... I'll never see you again?"

Iren reached out and ruffled the tearful boy's hair. "It was bound to happen someday..."

"Nooo..." Terion whined.

He burst into tears. Valeta grew concerned because this was uncharacteristic of

Terion, who had always been very mature for his age. Terion had never cried because he had to part with someone, even if he was close with them. That's just how he was, even when he'd had to say goodbye to Kaios. He was sad, but he hadn't cried over their parting.

"Stop crying, Terion. You're making Iren uncomfortable."

"It's all right, big sis."

"Noooo!"

Terion bawled as he clung to Iren. Iren flinched and looked down at Terion with an unreadable expression on his face.

"No, no... Don't go, Iren..."

Terion shook his head furiously. Iren awkwardly patted the other boy on the back, as if it were his first time comforting someone.

"Terion."

"Wah, Ireeeeeeen..."

"Stop crying."

At the boy's firm command, Terion immediately stopped crying. Valeta's eyes widened. *Does he like Iren that much?* Although it didn't seem like it, Terion had been spending all his time with Iren lately. He had been stubborn about it, always sharing his food with Iren and insisting on sleeping in the same bed as him. Fortunately, Iren was always willing to humor Terion, constantly watching the other boy with a curious expression.

"You have to stop crying. It won't solve anything," Iren said honestly.

Valeta was surprised by Iren's blunt words. It didn't feel like something a child

would say, but was very similar to what she had told herself in the past.

"If you want something, you have to grow stronger in order to get it," Iren said as he wiped the tears from the younger boy's cheeks.

"Are you really leaving? Where are you going?"

"I'm going to join a merchant guild that travels the world."

A merchant guild?

Of course, Valeta had heard that merchant guilds often took on young children as apprentices or to use them as cheap labor. But was a merchant guild an appropriate place for him? There was no way to know.

"When are you leaving?"

"I think... I'll probably leave in two weeks' time."

Valeta's expression hardened upon hearing the boy's response. His departure would overlap with the end of Reinhart's deal. "I don't mind having another mouth to feed. Why do you want to leave?"

He hung his head, a troubled look on his face.

"I'm sorry, big sis."

He didn't have anything to apologize for, and Valeta's heart sank. "No, Iren. We still have some time, so just give it some thought."

"Yes."

However, Valeta got the feeling that Iren wasn't going to change his mind. *They all leave in the end.* It wasn't pleasant watching the things she loved leave her behind.

A gloomy air hung over them for the rest of the day.

\* \* \*

Once the boys were tucked into bed, Valeta took out some alcohol, which was very rare for her. It was cheap liquor from the liquor store, but the strong stench of alcohol that wafted from within suggested that it was quite strong.

*I don't like to drink, but...* She didn't know why she suddenly felt like having a drink today. She poured herself a small glass, the way she'd seen people do in the past. She took a small sip, feeling the alcohol burn its way down her throat.

Valeta's face scrunched up. "It burns," she said aloud.

She sighed, a weary look crossing her face.

"It's cheap liquor," a voice said. "Of course it burns."

She was all too familiar with hearing his voice suddenly by now. Valeta lifted her head.

"It's bitter, right?"

"Is there alcohol that isn't bitter?" she said.

"Of course. Do you want to know how to make it sweet?"

Valeta raised an eyebrow as she regarded Reinhart. She nodded. She didn't know if she had the courage to take another sip.

Reinhart took the glass, downed the remainder of it, and pressed his lips against hers. The hot liquor passed from his mouth to hers. When they broke apart,

Valeta stared at the thin trail of saliva that connected their glossy lips.

Reinhart's eyes curved with his smile.

"What do you think? Sweet, right?" he asked Valeta as she gasped for breath, strongly resembling a mischievous fox.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 27

Valeta managed to catch her breath as she stared at the man. She had put together a few things about him and Iren.

“Is something going to happen to you in two weeks’ time?”

“The end of our promise?”

“What are you going to do after that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll find a new toy to play with.”

Reinhart’s eyes curved. Something felt off. She could sense the strange possessiveness in him. Valeta knew that he was the kind of man who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. So why was he acting like this?

She couldn’t believe that he was being genuine. He wasn’t desperate or angry. How could he act like he had no regrets when he was obsessed with her? When he’d been so sweet to her? He didn’t try to appease her or bargain. He hadn’t even tried to talk about it. It was fascinating.

People with a lot of love to give always said things like, “I can’t live without you.” Reinhart wasn’t that expressive with his feelings, so Valeta didn’t have any expectations of him. Still, how could he act like he didn’t care?

*And all this after he wanted to kill me for running away... Did that mean all those emotions had disappeared completely in just two weeks? Or is all of this just an act?*

Was this just another way for him to play with his toy? She had what felt like

thousands of questions. Suddenly, the worst-case scenario flashed through Valeta's mind.

"Really?"

"What?"

"Are you really acting like this because you found a new toy?" Valeta asked.

If that wasn't it... What if he was going to a place where he's no longer capable of having feelings for her...?

"What do you want to hear, Valeta?" Reinhart asked, sweeping a thumb over Valeta's glossy lower lip.

"The truth."

"The truth..." His eyes narrowed before he smiled lightly.

"Be honest with me. Are you going to die?"

Valeta opened and closed her mouth several times before she finally managed to say these words. Reinhart wasn't surprised by Valeta's question. He just looked curious, his lips pulled up into a smile.

"Why do you want to know the truth?"

His large, cold hand cupped her cheek.

Valeta looked up at him. "I hate being in the dark. I've been locked up my whole life, not knowing anything."

Reinhart quietly stared down at Valeta for a moment. "I hope you aren't too happy about it."

"About what?"

"About the fact that I'm going to die."

Valeta's eyes widened at Reinhart's nonchalant reply before she rapidly paled.

"Are you really going to die?" she breathed.

"Yes. I may be a genius, but it's not easy restoring an entire nation after killing tens of thousands of people."

"You're going to die?" Valeta repeated, gaping in disbelief, before finally closing her mouth.

"Yes, I am," Reinhart replied. "So you don't have to worry about me not keeping my promise."

"Are you insane...?" Valeta asked.

"I've always been insane. You should know by now that I take it as a compliment."

He was smiling as if what we were talking about wasn't a big deal. He was acting like he wasn't at all bothered by his impending death.

On the contrary, Valeta found his nonchalance infuriating.

"Don't you care that you're going to die?"

"The thought of you rolling around with another guy makes me sick, but..." Reinhart said, grimacing. "Well, there's nothing I can do about that once I'm dead."

"You...!"

Valeta reached out and grabbed Reinhart by his collar. Reinhart just let it happen.

"You're really...!" Valeta's eyes were burning.

Reinhart's expression abruptly hardened, the smile vanishing from his face.

"Why are you crying, Valeta?"

"I'm not crying."

"I thought you'd be happy to see me dead."

The corner of his lips quirked into a smile.

Valeta grit her teeth. "You should avoid spending time around people who are happy to see others die. They're not human."

"Are you sad I'm going to die?" he asked.

"Of course!"

"I'm happy to hear that."

Reinhart's face lit up, and Valeta froze.

"Everywhere in this world there are people who want me dead," he said. "I've lived that way for a very long time without any regrets or feelings." Reinhart leaned down and kissed Valeta on the lips. He kissed her softly several times, before backing away. "But you're special."

Valeta remained silent.

"You're probably the only person who's ever seen me as a human being."

Valeta was about to point out that of course she considered him to be human, but found she couldn't. She'd only had a few glimpses into his past, but she didn't think he'd lived a happy life.

"So I guess I'm the only person who'll cry for you."

He laughed.

Valeta didn't think it was anything to smile about. She pressed her lips together.

"You." Valeta gritted her teeth. "Don't come here again."

After a moment, Reinhart said, "What? But we made a promise."

"Why should I keep my promise if you're just going to disappear in two weeks time?"

"Do you have to be so stingy, Valeta?" Reinhart asked, his voice fierce.

Valeta didn't budge. "Then find a way to survive."

"That's impossible. I already gave up an arm and a leg. I don't think my remaining limbs would be enough to bring back an entire country," Reinhart explained, looking troubled.

Valeta couldn't stand listening to the gruesome words coming out of his mouth.

"I thought about giving up one of my legs, but I didn't think that would be enough. So, I decided to just sacrifice my life."

"I can't believe I've been meeting with a man who willingly amputated his own limbs," Valeta muttered.

Reinhart's brow furrowed as if he were troubled. "But I look normal."

"Yeah, but that's because I'm not a magician. I don't know anything."

Reinhart stiffened when he heard her words.

Valeta dropped her head, exhausted. "If you liked me, you should've tried to woo me."

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Then learn.”

“No one taught me how.”

“Have you tried?”

“What?”

“Have you tried asking anybody?” she pressed.

Reinhart’s mouth shut with a click. Of course, he’d never asked anyone for advice. He had long given up on asking questions. No one had ever answered when he’d asked about the things he was curious about as a child.

“And here I was thinking that I grew up in a dreary world...” Valeta furrowed her brows. “But you lived in an even more hellish world than me. I feel sorry for you, Reinhart.”

Reinhart’s eyes widened. He sucked in a deep breath, feeling like he’d just been struck by lightning. “Can you say that again?”

“What?”

“My name.”

“Reinhart...?”

Reinhart’s expression was one of joy. Calling someone by their name wasn’t a big deal. Why did he look so happy?

“I gave myself that name, but no one ever calls me by it.”

“Oh, well... People don’t usually call their superiors by their name.”

Also, maybe because he never had a name in the past, people just hadn't thought to call him by one.

"Well, this is a little disappointing."

"What is?"

"Dying," Reinhart said with a smile. "But... It's what I wanted."

"It's what you wanted?" Valeta echoed, disbelieving.

"Yeah. If not for this exchange, I would have had a hard time dying. I feel more alive spending this short month with you than I ever could from living forever."

"Does that mean you don't want to see me anymore? You don't wish to see Terion grow up?"

Reinhart's eyes widened. His lips turned up in a small smile. "Do you want me to live?"

"I don't think anyone should want someone to die... especially not after having a child together."

"I see." Reinhart tilted his head, thinking for a moment. "But it's hard to stop magic that's already been put in motion."

Valeta remained silent.

"But killing another transcendent could change that."

Valeta frowned at Reinhart's comment. "Could you stop thinking about killing people for once?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Can't you find a way to live without having to kill anyone?"

Reinhart frowned. *Solve a problem without killing anybody?* That option just didn't exist in Reinhart's book. He thought for a short moment before he shrugged.

"I guess imprinting could work."

"What?"

When one person imprints on another, you both live for the duration of the longer-lived one's life. It's possible to extend your life this way."

Valeta frowned.

"That means we'd have to live together, with eyes only for each other." The corner of Reinhart's lips curled into a smirk. "Are you confident you can do that, Valeta?" he asked, with an air that said he didn't expect her to agree.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story:

### Chapter 28

“What about your missing limbs?”

“Oh, you won’t lose any. You’d be giving life, not limbs.”

“Does that mean you’ll live as long as I live?”

Reinhart gave Valeta a questioning look before he shrugged. “If I had a hundred years, I’d be able to restore my broken body...”

Valeta frowned. She didn’t like that Reinhart was implying that he’d live longer than that. Did that mean she’d have to live with him indefinitely?

“Can you break the imprint?”

“No. And even if you could...” Reinhart grabbed Valeta by the wrist and pulled her to him. “Do you think I’d let you go?”

His voice was soft as he said this. Valeta took a deep breath, words escaping her. Sometimes, his endless obsession with her was both embarrassing and pleasing. The idea that someone had such a strong desire for her was so exciting that it was almost too much to bear.

*I guess I must be a little out of my mind, too.* Valeta worried her lip as she took a slow deep breath. “Well, I can’t answer that right now.”

“About the imprinting?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t care. Do whatever you want. That wasn’t even part of the plan in the

first place," Reinhart said mirthlessly. He clearly had no expectations of her.

Valeta's mouth shut with a click.

"Do you want to keep kissing?"

"What did you just say?"

"I just want to stay with you a little longer, Valeta. So, let's kiss." Reinhart wrapped his arms around Valeta's waist and pulled her in close as if they hadn't just been talking about his impending death.

"Hm?"

"Aren't you scared of dying?" she asked.

"Everyone dies."

"You said that you couldn't."

Reinhart lifted an eyebrow.

"Are you saying that you aren't scared of death because you've never thought about it?" she asked.

"Hmm" His eyes crinkled beautifully as he smiled. "I'll tell you if you give me a kiss."

"What...?" Valeta asked in disbelief.

"Or you can just remain curious. If I die, no one will ever answer your question..." He gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

Valeta scoffed at his nonsense. "Forget it. What makes you think I like you that much?"

"Hmm..." Reinhart leaned in close, bringing his face close to Valeta's. She quickly took a step back.

"I'm not interested!"

"This is your last chance..."

He smiled cheekily as he leaned in closer. She didn't like how he always had to be so sneaky about everything, like a snake.

"You're so annoying..." Valeta muttered under her breath before quickly grabbing Reinhart by the collar and pulling him toward her. She quickly pressed a short kiss against his soft lips before pulling away. His face twitched for a moment, then he doubled over laughing.

"Pfft! Hahaha, seriously?"

With a loud laugh, he quickly tugged Valeta into his arms and gave her a proper kiss. He nibbled at her lower lip, and Valeta unwittingly opened her mouth. She gasped at the sudden intrusion. Their tongues tangled together, making wet sounds as they mingled.

Valeta raised her fists, ready to hit Reinhart, but she stopped. He grinned. His tongue swept around the inside of her mouth, roughly exploring. Their tongues intertwined, making it hard for her to breathe. Her face began to turn red from lack of oxygen. The feeling of his hands stroking her sides was a peculiar one. Valeta struggled, squeezing Reinhart's shoulder roughly.

Not wanting to miss out on this chance, Reinhart slid his knee between Valeta's legs, pinning her against the wall, then greedily nibbled at her delicate lips.

The groans that escaped Valeta's lips made Reinhart's gut clench. He smiled a little awkwardly, feeling heat pooling in his stomach.

"Haa..."

He gave her a second to breathe before greedily claiming her lips once more. Their bodies grew heated, pressed close against one another as they were.

*I can't breathe...* Valeta couldn't catch her breath. She desperately panted, trying to get more oxygen every chance she got. There was nothing she could do about the saliva pooling in her mouth. Whenever Valeta moved her tongue, trying to escape his, he would chase her.

The sound of their lips meeting was lewd. Her whole body tingled with excitement. Much to her chagrin, Valeta's lower half was throbbing. She'd been celibate for a very long time as she had been busy raising a child, and the vampire world didn't engage in that kind of thing.

The wet sound of their lips meeting echoed in Valeta's ears. Reinhart's firm knee ground between her legs. She felt stimulated and ready to explode, and her expression began to soften.

"Valeta."

Valeta gasped, trying to suck in a mouthful of air in the tiny reprieve he gave her. She looked at Reinhart, her rims of eyes growing red. Reinhart smiled.

"You're like a dog in heat."

Instead of being offended, Reinhart straightened up, a rush of excitement washing over him. He felt his knees go weak from pleasure.

"That expression makes me want to eat you alive," he said.

Valeta pressed her mouth shut. He smiled, kissing the corners of her lips. His hand slowly fumbled for her dress. As soon as his hand brushed over Valeta's tense stomach, he throbbed.

"How does it feel after so long?"

Valeta stiffened. She gaped at Reinhart before biting her lower lip. It was clear he had hurt her pride. Reinhart reached out and slowly swept a thumb along Valeta's lower lip. When she glanced down, she was made speechless by the hardness she found there.

Reinhart laughed when Valeta averted her gaze.

"Why are you avoiding me? You weren't like this before."

There was something sweet in Reinhart's curved eyes. Valeta swallowed before shaking her head. Reinhart smiled as he turned her around, pushed her down on the kitchen table. Valeta laid back on the clean wooden surface. Her eyes widened as Reinhart's lips curled into a smile.

"You look delicious," he said as he slowly stripped her of her clothes. He felt like he had a lavish banquet laid out before him. A smile spread across Reinhart's face at the sight of her soft, milky skin. "I want to hold you in my hands and do whatever I want."

He kissed her once more before grabbing her by the ankle and pulling her closer to him.

"This is good enough."

His fingers ghosted over Valeta's inner thigh before squeezing it. A red handprint was left behind, like footprints in the snow.

"Valeta." He kissed her as he lowered his hand. "Can I do it?"

He pressed their bodies together. She could feel his hard length, and Valeta clenched her fists. Reinhart's fingers trailed over her chest. Valeta froze as he raked his nails over the most sensitive parts of her body. There was a heat consuming her. She felt like an overripe peach laid out on the table, about to burst and split open at any moment.

Reinhart licked his lips.

"Hm? Think of this as my last wish before I die."

Valeta frowned as he used his looming death as a shield.

"You're really the worst," she muttered as she turned her head away.

Reinhart pressed his lips against her collarbone. "Thank you for the compliment."

"It wasn't a compliment."

"But you like me the way I am," Reinhart whispered mischievously as he pushed into her.

I Failed to Oust the Villain!  
Special Side Story:  
Chapter 29

\* \* \*

“Ow... Reinhart, you bastard...” Valeta’s hips and back throbbed. She gritted her teeth as she rubbed her face against her sheets.

“I’ve lost it...”

What sort of dirty things did she let him do to her on the kitchen table? With the children in the house? Not only that, but with the crazy bastard she had sworn she would never associate with again? *I must be out of my mind...* She felt insane for letting herself get swept away by that bastard.

“Oh, I need to make breakfast...”

She didn’t want to do anything. The table had been too hard. Plus, she’d gotten swept up in it because it had been so long since she’d had sex.

Valeta sighed. *Still, I shouldn’t have gotten so carried away.* She wanted nothing more than to bury her head in the sand, but what could she do now? *What’s done is done. He gave up his limbs and his life for me...* It would be ridiculous to get mad at him.

*Imprinting...* He was probably talking about imprinting as romantic partners. *Forever? With that man?*

Honestly, she couldn’t imagine it. What if something like this happened again?

There was Terion to think of, too. Valeta slowly rose from her bed. Her body throbbed all over, but she was clean. *I passed out halfway through...* Still, the one thing she liked about him was how he always cleaned her after they were done.

"Are you awake, Valeta?"

"What are you still doing here?" she asked.

"I don't know. Wooing you?"

Reinhart was wearing an apron that didn't suit him as a frying pan and a ladle moved over the stove by itself. *What's the point of the apron, then?* He was utterly ridiculous. He wasn't even doing anything.

Valeta sighed as she watched the way Reinhart used magic like it was his hands and feet.

"Leave before the kids wake up."

"Oh, our son already went to wash up," Reinhart said, his eyes smiling.

Valeta froze. His words... it was almost as if...

"You already met him?"

"Yes, Valeta. It's almost noon now. Don't you think he'd have found it weird that you weren't up?"

Valeta's jaw dropped.

"Seriously?"

"Yes. He was waiting, so I started cooking."

Valeta opened her mouth to say something but quickly closed it again. How long had it been since she'd slept in like this?

“Move. What the hell are you doing?”

“I don’t know. Trying to be a family man?”

“You’re using magic...”

“Yeah, but I’m still doing it with my power,” Reinhart said.

He wasn’t wrong. She couldn’t win an argument against him—he was too smart.

“I thought you didn’t care if you died.”

“Yes, that’s true, but...” Reinhart smiled as he ducked his head. Without warning, he pressed a kiss against her lips softly. “Just the thought of you moaning under another man...” Reinhart’s eyes flashed with a frosty glint. “It pisses me off. I thought, maybe I shouldn’t die.”

“Seriously, is sex the only thing you ever think about?”

“I can’t say no. Every time I look at you, every time I look at this table, I’m going to think of you clinging to me with tears streaming down your face.”

Valeta pressed her lips together. She thought Reinhart might be the worst of the worst man in the entirety of the human race. Valeta clutched her throbbing head. Reinhart gently put his hands on her shoulders and led her to the table.

“Sit, Valeta.”

“Do you know how to cook?” she asked.

“Well, I can. I have a lot of memories stored in my head.”

Reinhart explained how the previous heads of the Magicians’ Tower had a variety of different hobbies, but he stopped using magic and picked up the frying pan using his hand.

"You're actually cooking..."

"I can if I want to. I'm also capable of living here in this tiny place if you want me to."

"You're the head of the Magicians' Tower..." she said.

"That's true... But they'll be fine without me."

"What about me?"

Reinhart froze at Valeta's question. He studied her face for a moment before he slowly opened his mouth.

"You'll be fine without me, too," Reinhart said after a short pause.

Valeta stared at him for a moment. "Do you really think so?"

"Yeah, but I don't think I can live without you. I'm here because I feel sad about just the idea of it," Reinhart said as he started to plate the food. Valeta blinked when she saw the appetizing food.

"I should wake Iren, too."

"Oh, he left this morning," Reinhart said.

"Left...?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"I don't know. He just looked at me and left," Reinhart replied nonchalantly.

Valeta was about to frown when she heard a noise behind her.

"Huh...? Big bro... You didn't leave yet?" Terion yawned, rubbing his sleepy eyes

with one little hand.

"Terion? What do you mean, 'didn't leave yet'? 'Big bro'?"

As far as Valeta knew, Iren was the only one Terion called Big bro. *I thought Iren had already left.* Reinhart said that he'd been gone since early that morning. Valeta turned to Reinhart. He was sitting there, smiling like nothing was wrong.

Terion toddled over to Reinhart.

"I'm done washing up!"

"Good. Now take a seat."

The magician nodded. His voice wasn't exactly gentle, but Terion rushed to take his seat at the table, looking pleased with himself.

"Reinhart, you..."

"You should eat too, Valeta."

Reinhart fed her a warm piece of sautéed meat. She couldn't speak now that her mouth was full of food.

"Iren..." she murmured.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Valeta. She realized something when she rearranged the letters of Reinhart and Iren's names...

*Iren...* Were Iren and Reinhart perhaps the same person... She was suddenly almost certain. Valeta's expression grew stiff as Reinhart quickly set a feast down before her.

"Let's eat, Valeta."

Valeta frowned at Reinhart's behavior. He ignored her, shoveling food into his

mouth. Every time she tried to speak, a new dish would appear in front of her, so she never got the chance to bring it up. Valeta couldn't say anything for the duration of the meal. She ate until her stomach felt like it was about to explode.

"Seriously...?"

Valeta grimaced.

"Aren't you going out to play today?"

"No, I'm going to stay here."

Terion was sitting right next to Reinhart. The last time they met, Terion had called him stupid. Kids were hard to understand. *Maybe Terion likes Reinhart for the same reason he liked Iren. Maybe it was because they're both magicians... Wait, if Reinhart is Iren...*

Valeta scowled. "Wait, when you were Iren, was your injury..."

"It's not like that," Reinhart quickly replied.

Valeta's eyes narrowed.

"I was just trying to help, but I failed."

"Really?" Valeta asked.

Reinhart hesitated before he said, "Um, really."

Valeta's expression hardened hearing Reinhart's evasive tone.

"I really hate it when people lie to me," Valeta growled.

"It was partially intentional." Reinhart tucked his tail between his legs. "I won't do it again."

"What's there for you to do? You're going to die in two weeks," Valeta replied, her voice icy.

Sensing the shift in her tone, Reinhart pulled her into her arms. "I just wanted to see you again."

Valeta remained silent.

"Ah! Me too! Terion wants a hug, too!"

Terion bounced in his seat, his arms held wide open. Valeta glanced at the boy before she pushed Reinhart away, a troubled look on her face.

"Get off me."

"Why? I know how to hug a child, even if I am an idiot."

Reinhart bent down and hugged Terion. Valeta was shocked by how natural the gesture seemed for him.

"Why are you...?"

"Isn't this what you dreamed of? A normal family?" Reinhart asked. "I can fit the mold if that's what you want."

Still holding the child in one arm, Reinhart leaned down and kissed Valeta on the cheek. Terion's eyes widened, shocked to see his mother and father interacting in this way. Embarrassed, Valeta took a step back and averted her gaze. Suddenly, his face was very close to hers.

"So, save me, Valeta," Reinhart said seductively, his eyes smiling.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story:

### Chapter 30

"After you die, I'm sure your mouth will still be moving," Valeta muttered as she shoved at Reinhart's shoulder.

"This is my first time hearing that particular compliment."

Reinhart grinned. Valeta was at a loss for words. She gave up on the conversation, turning away from him.

"You never take anything I say seriously, do you?" she asked.

"That's not true."

"Not true, my ass..."

"I listen to everything you say, from start to finish. I'm trying my best not to forget anything... How unfortunate."

"You should stop focusing on trying to remember and start listening."

"I'll do that," Reinhart answered obediently.

Valeta opened her mouth before shutting it with a click.

"I'll listen to you from now on."

"..."

"I won't do anything you tell me not to do. If you want, I won't even kill..."

Reinhart stopped speaking abruptly when he saw the way Valeta's eyes hardened. "Well, I don't think I can promise that. After all, I was born a terrible

person. But if I do kill someone I'll make sure that you don't find out about it."

Valeta knew he was being sincere. This was probably the best promise Reinhart could give. Still, she appreciated that he wasn't lying to her. "Are you going to stop treating me like a toy, too?"

"If that's what you want. But honestly, Valeta, I know how it turns you..."

Valeta quickly clapped her hand over Reinhart's mouth. Valeta glanced at Terion, who had been watching them closely with large shiny eyes.

She frowned. "Watch what you say."

The corner of Reinhart's eyes drooped a little as he began to sulk. Valeta was about to frown at him when she felt something wet brush against the palm of her hand. A chill ran down her spine. She almost gasped as she felt his tongue swirl against her palm.

Reinhart set Terion down on the ground before leaning down to whisper in Valeta's ear. "See, Valeta? You're already clenching down here."

Reinhart's hand pressed against her lower belly. She bit her lower lip. She hadn't even realized that she was throbbing already.

"This is all..."

This was all because the conversation had gone off the rails. No, this wasn't the first time they'd gone off on a tangent like this... As Valeta rubbed her face, she noticed Terion watching them with wide eyes. She reached down and ruffled the boy's hair.

"This is all what?"

Reinhart looked no different from a sly fox, what with his wicked smile.

"Please go away." Valeta put her hands on Reinhart's shoulders and pushed him away. He relented obediently. She glanced down and noticed that his pants were tented. She pretended not to notice and busied herself with clearing away the dishes.

"Valeta."

"What?"

Valeta turned to face Reinhart. Before she knew what was happening, his lips were on hers. She stared with wide eyes.

"I just wanted to say your name," Reinhart said.

When Valeta registered the sweet smile visible in his eyes, she sank to the floor, bringing her knees to her chest.

"Ha..." She ran her hand over her face. "Seriously, you..."

Reinhart smiled as he turned his attention to Terion. "Do you want to play, son?"

"Yes!"

"I'll teach you magic. Show me what you can do."

"If you're going to do that, do it someplace where no one can see," Valeta said.

"Yes."

"Yes!"

Reinhart and Terion replied at the same time before they both slunk from the kitchen.

Valeta sighed. "Seriously...?"

She was baffled by how quickly they'd moved past everything. It was ridiculous to think that Reinhart was the child she had been raising for the past month, but equally ridiculous to think that her own son had just turned a blind eye to it.

"I guess I'm the foolish one here."

She was the only one among them who took anything seriously. Valeta shook her head. She knew she still had a lingering attachment to Reinhart. She also knew he was very serious about her thanks to how aggressively he'd pursued her. It was harder to convince herself that he wasn't serious about her after seeing him crossing dimensions, severing his own arm, and gouging out his own eye.

*He's sneaky, just like a snake.* That's why she couldn't agree to go along with his plan. Valeta moved slowly as she cleared away the dishes and cleaned the house. After that, she began to sort through her medicinal herbs.

By the time she finished organizing, figuring out what ingredients she still needed, and tending to her garden, the sun was about to set. Valeta waited by the window for a long time, staring out at the evening glow, before she finally rose from her seat.

"When are they coming back?"

She was going to suggest eating out together, but they had yet to return. Valeta had just grabbed her purse and opened the door when she found Reinhart entering through the small front gate. Terion was sleeping in Reinhart's arms, obviously exhausted.

"What's this? Were you coming out to get us, Valeta? It feels like we're a real family." Reinhart smirked as he pressed a kiss to Valeta's cheek.

"You seem like a real father."

It was a little unexpected. Terion was sleeping soundly in Reinhart's arms, a strong case for how comfortable it must be in the man's arms.

"Why do you say that? Are you falling for me again?" Reinhart asked with a smirk.

"You'd honestly be a hundred times better without a mouth."

"But if I don't have a mouth..." He leaned down and pressed his lips against hers. Lightly biting at her lower lip, he then slid his tongue past her parted lips. His tongue captured hers, sucking deeply before allowing her to escape. "I wouldn't be able to do this."

"..."

"Plus, I wouldn't be able to eat you—" Valeta scowled at Reinhart, prompting him to immediately shut up. "Stop!"

"I have no choice. You'll never see me again if I don't do this."

He sounded rather forlorn as he said this. Valeta felt her resolve wavering again, but her gaze quickly hardened.

"I won't be fooled by you playing weak anymore."

"Darn."

"But..."

Valeta gazed at the sleeping boy in Reinhart's arms. "If you promise to stop treating me like a toy and start treating Terion like your son... and if you restore both the Magicians' Tower and your body back to normal..."

"That's a lot of demands."

"Then, I'll imprint on you and enter a relationship with you."

"A relationship?" Reinhart pursed his lips. He was so annoying.

"We can think about marriage later."

"We're going to imprint, but you only want to be in a relationship? You realize you're going to be with me forever, right?"

"If we imprint, it doesn't matter who we date. We just need to be alive, right?"

"That's..." Reinhart's eyes curved as he smiled.

"If you don't want to, then forget it. Feel free to die, then," Valeta threatened.

Reinhart quickly stepped in front of her. "Fine, let's do that then."

Valeta narrowed her eyes at Reinhart. He hesitated for a moment before snapping his fingers, using magic to send Terion somewhere, before approaching Valeta.

"Let's do it."

"Right here and now?"

"Yeah, so you can't change your mind." He leaned over and nibbled at Valeta's earlobe. Then, taking her hand in his, he made a small cut in her finger. He licked the wound before taking her finger into his mouth and sucking deeply.

"Ngh..." Valeta winced as he brushed against the cut with his canines. "What are you..."

"Now you have to drink mine."

Reinhart made a large wound on his own finger and pressed it into her mouth. Reinhart slowly rubbed his finger against her tongue, watching intently as his blood stained Valeta's lips. She swallowed, her throat shifting as she did so. She grimaced as she drank down both her own saliva and his blood.

"I love you, Valeta," Reinhart murmured as he removed his finger. He brought his lips to hers and kissed her softly for several long moments. "I'm glad I found you that day."

Valeta's eyes widened slightly.

"Back then, I wanted the Valeta I first met, but not anymore," Reinhart whispered against her lips. "I need you. I'll be your loyal dog. Only you're allowed to leash and command me." He nibbled at her neck. "You're the only one for me." Reinhart's beautiful, ruby-red eyes were fixated on Valeta. He laughed. "Keep me in hand for the rest of my life."

His words were utterly shameless. As Valeta was about to retort, Reinhart's lips parted.

"Hmm?"

Once again, his lips met hers. Valeta sighed and closed her eyes, parting her lips obediently for Reinhart. Her only thought was that she had been captured by a truly cunning fox. *Still...* Reinhart had been the one to save her from that hell. Valeta wrapped her arms around Reinhart's neck. His eyes widened.

"Good. As long as you keep your promises and promise to live more demurely," she said.

"Demurely?"

"Yes."

His eyes crinkled beautifully, like a child who had heard a fun story. "Of course."

However, Valeta had overlooked one very vital thing—why this man was largely considered insane.

I Failed to Oust the Villain!  
Special Side Story:  
Chapter 31

The very same day they imprinted on each other, Reinhart suddenly disappeared for an entire month.

“What are you doing?”

“Playing the role of a caring husband.”

What kind of demure husband would lounge on the bed, legs spread with their lower half on full display while wearing only an apron? After work, Valeta had returned to her room only to find Reinhart lounging on her bed in all his naked glory.

“You insane...”

“I told you, Valeta. That’s a compliment to me.”

Reinhart’s curved eyes were full of emotion. He no longer had an eye patch over one eye or an empty space where his arm should be. He had one arm tucked behind his head as the other stroked his hard member.

Valeta frowned at the way Reinhart was majestically lounging. He laughed.

“Your insane husband lives to serve you, my dear wife.”

“When did we get married?”

The terms of endearment he had settled on were ridiculous. Valeta’s face turned bright red, looking like it was about to explode. Her eyes kept drifting downwards.

"What in the world..."

Valeta swallowed without meaning to as her mouth went dry.

Reinhart grinned. "I did everything you told me to. I restored the Magicians' Tower. There's no head right now, but if you want... I can go back," Reinhart said in a low voice. "I also got my eye and arm, too."

Valeta didn't ask how he'd managed to do this. For some reason, she felt certain that Reinhart hadn't used a particularly humane method. Valeta's lips twitched before she nodded.

"Also, I've returned to you, all demure."

"And how the hell is this demure? This is promiscuity, pure and simple."

Valeta closed the door, locking it behind her and slowly approaching the bed. His thighs were clenched as she wandered closer. When Reinhart saw Valeta's face, he let out an excited gasp. He looked as though he could devour her with his eyes alone.

He sighed softly, and Valeta swallowed hard as Reinhart's cheeks began to glow red. *What the... hell is this?* He tilted his head back to look at her, his eyes curving with a smile. Reinhart's cheeks grew more flushed the faster his hand moved. He exhaled.

Valeta took another step closer. Before she knew it, she was leaning over Reinhart. *How can a man who looks like him be so seductive?* Who could resist being lured by this man?

"You're so cunning."

Even a seasoned courtesan would be less racy than he was being now. Reinhart knew how to use his strengths to his advantage. He knew what he looked like, how he sounded, and what Valeta's weaknesses were.

"Was it sweet?"

He didn't specify, but she knew exactly what he was talking about. Valeta's cheeks flushed.

"I'll make breakfast for us tomorrow morning."

"Are you sure you don't have the definition of demure wrong?" she asked.

"I'm doing my best to be faithful to you, both day and night. Why? Don't you like it?" Reinhart asked as he reached out to wrap an arm around Valeta's shoulders. He immediately captured her lips in a kiss. Heat pooled where their bodies were pressed together. Valeta's face began to turn bright red. *What is going on? I don't know anymore.*

"You just disappeared, and now you've decided to just show up again out of the blue?"

"I just went to do everything you told me to. Do you want to live here forever?"

Valeta's eyes narrowed. Reinhart took his hand from himself and pulled her onto his lap. He began peppering kisses all over her body as he began to undress her.

"Ngh..."

Red marks blossomed on her pale skin. The marks he'd left before had disappeared during his month-long absence, but were not replaced all over her body.

"W-wait...! Stop, that's...!"

Valeta squirmed in Reinhart's lap. Her breath hitched as he nibbled on her most sensitive areas. Her eyelashes fluttered. She took several gasping breaths before yanking Reinhart closer.

"Valeta." Reinhart whispered, his lips parting. "Your whole body is so sweet."

Valeta's eyes widened upon hearing his whispers. Her womanhood throbbed. She tried to cross her legs.

"The country's back to how it was. Let's go back."

Reinhart pushed Valeta onto the bed, climbing on top of her and continuing to leave marks all over her body. Red flowers bloomed beautifully against her pale skin.

"If we go back, will you be okay?"

"Me?"

"It's not like everyone has lost their memories, right?" she said.

She was sure that Reinhart had become enemy number one. He paused and opened his mouth before closing it again.

"You're worried about me," he said.

"Who else would I be worried about?"

"Ordinarily, you should be worried about yourself or our son."

"I have the world's most powerful magician, who destroyed an entire country, by my side. What's there to be afraid of?"

Reinhart's eyes widened. He blinked a couple of times as if he heard something unexpected. Then, his jaw dropped.

"Yeah, you're right. I am by your side. I'm part of your future," Reinhart murmured in a very quiet voice. Then, he smiled as he buried his face in Valeta's shoulder.

*I feel so sorry for him when he's like this... As this thought registered in her mind, Valeta shook her head violently. It was possible that this was all part of his plan, that it was just an act for him.*

“Also...”

Still, it was impossible not to fall for his crazy good looks.

“I’m a pretty capable alchemist,” Valeta said. “It’s not all that easy to hurt me.”

She wouldn’t have thought of leaving Kaios’ world if that weren’t the case.

“Valeta.”

“What?”

“I never really felt like I was alive before, but I do now that I’m with you.”

He took hold of her legs and began kissing along her inner thighs. She felt pricks of pain as he nibbled at the delicate flesh. However, pain quickly gave way to pleasure.

“I always accuse you of being vulgar...” He pressed his body against hers. “But I might be the vulgar one.”

He kissed her deeply as he slid inside. Valeta gasped, her back arching. Reinhart comforted her, gently stroking her back.

“Valeta.”

“Ngh... What?”

“I feel like a beast when I’m with you. I seriously... feel like I’m losing my mind.” He whispered how he wanted to bite into her flesh and gnaw on every fragment of her bones before biting at her ear.

“Let’s go back.”

“Yes, let’s...”

It’s not like she was particularly attached to this place. She had just needed a place to escape to. Also, if he was going to remain the head of the Magicians’ Tower, they needed to return.

“Do you want to live outside the Magicians’ Tower? You can always commute.”

“Live somewhere else?”

“Yes, we could get a house somewhere.”

Reinhart laughed. “If that is what you want. Should we take over the imperial palace?”

“A house this size is fine.”

“Of course.”

“Also, I want to invite some friends.”

“Friends?” he said.

Reinhart’s expression immediately twisted unpleasantly. Their bodies had become one, and he groaned as they moved against one another.

“Yes, a friend hid me. He’s also a transcendent...”

“So that bastard was the reason I couldn’t find you.”

Reinhart smiled radiantly. Valeta gave him a level look that wiped the smile off his face.

“I won’t do anything.”

"Do you mean that?" she asked. "He's my friend, and he helped me out during hard times. I'd like to invite him over once I have a house."

Reinhart nodded. Valeta pursed her lips, an expression of distrust on her face. He kissed her on the cheek and began to move. Before long, sparks of pleasure began exploding behind her eyelids.

"I like you," he said.

"Is that so?"

"Let's go back, Valeta."

"All right."

"Yeah, let's go back and start over again. I'll do better this time."

"You don't need to put pressure on yourself like that. Just keep your promise," she said.

Reinhart kissed her while wearing a mournful look on his face. Valeta still couldn't tell whether the expression was genuine or not. *Still, what can I do?* She couldn't just throw away the man she had already lost her heart to.

"Are you going to confess to me again?"

"What?"

"I've been waiting for you to call me by my name again while you confess your feelings."

Valeta frowned. She hesitated for a moment before wrapping her arms around Reinhart's neck and pulling him in close.

"Reinhart," she said.

His eyes widened.

"I love you."

As soon as she said the words, Reinhart grew hard again. Valeta glanced down and paled.

"Wait..."

"I love you, too. You can relax today."

"What do you mean by 'relax'? You insane..."

"Thanks for the compliment, Valeta."

With a sweet smile, Reinhart settled on top of her. Before long, her shouts turned into cries of pleasure, as the room grew warm around them.

Side Story 2: The End

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story:

### Chapter 32

"Are you okay, Master?"

"You beast. Does it look like I'm okay?"

Reinhart smiled as Valeta scowled at him. He buried his face in Valeta's nape as he pressed himself against her back. Reinhart admired how the marks left by his mouth bloomed like red flowers against her pale skin. Then, he promptly rolled her up in a blanket and rose from the bed.

"I'm done for today."

"I was thinking about running away if you didn't wrap it up soon."

"I don't want that."

He entered the bathroom with Valeta cradled in his arms. The steamy bathroom was as large as the living room one would find in a normal house. A large stone bathtub sat in the center of the large space. Reinhart abandoned the white blanket he'd wrapped Valeta in and dipped her feet in the tub. Her pale skin bore the signs of last night's activities.

"Ngh..."

"Is it too hot?"

"No, it's fine..."

Reinhart held the relaxed girl firmly around the waist as he lowered her until she was settled between his legs. She furrowed her brows feeling the extra heat of his body against hers. Her hips were still throbbing.

"Aren't you going to put that away?"

"Well... I'm not doing anything. I'm a genius, but it's not like I can control my carnal desires." Reinhart rubbed his forehead against Valeta's shoulder. "Master."

She remained silent.

"Master?" Reinhart whispered in her ear when she didn't respond. "Valeta."

His low voice sent shivers down Valeta's spine.

"What?"

"Kiss me."

Huh? Valeta looked away, unable to stomach the falsely cute way he begged for affection.

"Close your eyes and stick out your tongue."

Valeta obediently followed Reinhart's instructions. Before she'd even completely opened her mouth, Reinhart's tongue was coaxing hers into his mouth.

"Hngh..."

He sucked, his tongue twining with hers.

"Huu..."

The ringing in her ears drowned out the wet sound of their kissing. Their breaths mingled. His tongue pressed against hers firmly. Normally, Reinhart was a relaxed man and willing to do anything for Valeta, but that all went out the window when they were in bed.

He bit down on her tongue, just hard enough to hurt. His eyes curved into

crescent moons at the sound of Valeta's low groan.

"Ha, what are you thinking about, Valeta?"

Her head was tilted so far back over his shoulder that it hurt. He forced his tongue inside her mouth as if he was trying to swallow her alive. Reinhart reached out to support her head only after a trickle of saliva slipped down Valeta's throat. His tongue explored her mouth, sweeping across her teeth, dancing along the roof before it finally slipped from her mouth.

Reinhart took her by the waist and turned her around so that she was facing him.

"What are you made of, Master? I lick, and I lick, but you never melt. And you taste so sweet. And no matter how much I eat you up, you don't disappear."

He leaned forward and greedily mouthed at her skin as she sat perched on his knees. Valeta squeezed her eyes shut against the tiny spikes of pain caused by his teeth. She sighed, reaching up and clamping her hand over Reinhart's mouth.

"Stop... Ah...!"

Reinhart licked her hand before biting it. Valeta's eyes widened when two of her fingers disappeared into his mouth. He smiled as he sucked on her fingers like they were hard candy.

"Reinhart, that's enough," Valeta ordered sternly.

Reinhart pouted.

"I need to get going. Eldian is waiting. We made plans to have lunch together."

"Ahh, right," Reinhart murmured as he shifted Valeta to his side.

She sighed when she saw the look of disappointment on his face and cupped

his cheek with a wet hand. Reinhart, who had been stubbornly looking elsewhere, looked back at her.

"Could you please stop being jealous of your son?"

"I've fulfilled all my duties as his father."

Valeta couldn't help but sigh when she saw he was still pouting. "I know, but couldn't you be... more..."

"Valeta, I'm doing the best I can. If you want me to try harder, I can, but..." He looked down before bringing his face close to hers. "Loving you is already a lot. I don't know what a parent's love looks like."

Reinhart didn't know what feelings were. To him, they were nothing more than concepts he'd learned in books, not something that he felt naturally in his heart. She knew that. Warm parental affection was too much to ask from him. She knew that but still felt bad whenever she saw their son trying to get closer to his father.

"I'm sorry for pressuring you."

"No. I wish I could be normal so I could please you, Master."

Reinhart smiled as he spoke. However, he didn't mean a word of what he was saying. Valeta shrugged.

"Shall we go?"

"Sure."

Valeta stood up. Before she knew it, Reinhart had appeared with a towel in his hands. He slowly dried her.

"Valeta."

"Yeah?"

"Want to wipe me down?"

It sounded like a question, but she already had a large bath towel in her hands. Valeta sighed when she saw the way his lips curved into a smile and obediently patted him dry. As she did so, she noticed his little problem. Finished with drying his hair and upper body, she had leaned down to dry his lower body, but suddenly squeezed her eyes shut.

"Why are you such a pervert?"

"It's just a physiological reaction, Valeta. How can I control myself when I have you naked in front of me like this? If I could, I'd be in a temple somewhere, enlightened by now."

He was utterly shameless. Valeta kept her gaze on the ground as she finished drying him off.

"You're all done," she said.

"What do you mean, Valeta? You missed a spot."

"Where...?"

She followed his pointed gaze, then pressed her lips together and turned away.

"Get out."

Valeta threw the towel at his chest, quickly slipping on a robe and leaving the bathroom.

Outside, a maid bowed.

"Your Majesty, I'm here to help you dress."

"Okay, but let's go to a different room."

"What? Oh..." The maid caught a glimpse of Valeta's bruised skin through her robe and nodded. "Yes. I'll prepare the next room."

"And where's Edan?"

"Prince Eldian has finished his morning studies and is currently waiting in the dining room."

"Oh, no. I'd better get dressed quickly. Keep it simple."

"Yes."

The maid grabbed the dress she had already prepared, locking the door behind them. She quickly helped Valeta to dress, ignoring the bright red marks all over her body. However, it still took thirty minutes to get dressed.

Valeta sighed.

*This is so annoying.* Reinhart becoming king was ultimately a good thing. The Magicians' Tower had finally reached a point of stability, too. She had gotten used to the ridiculous name he'd chosen—Valrein Kingdom. She'd also gotten better at overseeing the civil service examinations that happened every four years.

Things were going well. However, being king and queen meant that they'd had to give up some of their freedom. *I wish I could just wear anything I want...* Compared to ladies in other countries, Valeta didn't wear corsets, lace, or other ornaments, but she still hated that she had to wear a dress.

*I hate dresses...* She sighed and squashed her childish thoughts as she hurried to the dining room.

"Valeta."

Reinhart was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He held out his arm for Valeta, and she took it in hers.

“I’ve been waiting for you. Let’s go together.”

“Sure,” Valeta replied as she lay her hand on top of Reinhart’s.

Luckily, Reinhart had stopped addressing Valeta as his master everywhere they went. They now had a time and place for that. The door to the dining room opened, and the child within immediately jumped down from his chair, ran to Valeta and buried his face in her skirt.

“Mother!”

“Edan!”

Valeta quickly mustered emotions she didn’t really feel, as she smiled brightly and greeted her son with open arms.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story:

### Chapter 33

The little boy's face lit up upon hearing Valeta's call. Eldian, who had rippling silver hair like Reinhart and violet eyes like Valeta, smiled.

"I missed you!"

"Even though we saw each other just yesterday?"

"Yes!"

The adorable child smiled, his soft, fair cheeks turning red. Valeta pulled him into her arms and kissed his cheek.

"Good morning, Papa!"

"Yeah," Reinhart answered indifferently, his eyes narrowed. He wrapped an arm around Valeta's waist and steered her toward the table. After she'd set the little boy in his chair, Reinhart pulled out a chair for Valeta to take a seat herself. Finally, he followed suit.

"Mama!"

"Yes?"

"I picked a pretty flower today! I want to give it to you. Is that okay?"

Upon closer inspection, Valeta could see a bundle of roots attached to a small, white wildflower sitting on the table next to the boy's spoon. Her eyes widened slightly.

"Of course."

Eldian carefully picked up the flower with both hands and placed it in Valeta's outstretched hand. Seeing the intact roots, she realized how hard the boy must've worked to unearth the flower carefully. It was an odorless bloom, but she pretended to smell it regardless.

"It's so pretty," she said. "And it smells good, too. Thank you."

The boy had been nervously wringing his hands and his eyes widened in response to her praise. He beamed.

"I'm glad you like it!"

In reality, Valeta couldn't smell anything. It wasn't like wildflowers had a particularly heavenly scent. But she tried her best to play the part of an ordinary parent. She read books and observed other people with children. She was determined to be a better parent than her father was. She and Reinhart weren't all that different from one another, so if she didn't at least try, she was of the opinion that she would never become a person that even remotely resembled ordinary.

"Yes, I'm very happy."

"What's so great about a wildflower?"

Valeta glanced at Reinhart as he squarely ruined the mood. His brow furrowed, and he shut his mouth with a click.

"Oh... You don't like flowers, Papa?" the boy asked.

"Something like that."

Was it possible to like or dislike inanimate objects?

"I've never bothered to even glance at that sort of flower..." Reinhart started to say, before trailing off. He shrugged, figuring he'd be on the receiving end of

Valeta's glare if he said anything more. "Come to think of it, Terion said he was visiting today."

"He is?"

"Yes."

"I'm so happy! Terion!" The child smiled happily. "Papa! Look what I can do! The teacher said I'm amazing!"

Eldian held out his hands. A fireball blazed to life in the center of his tiny palms. The fireball flickered before splitting into smaller fireballs. His face lit up, unafraid of the blazing fire. It was the equivalent of a third-level magic spell and amazing, considering Eldian was only four.

"That's great," Reinhart said with an uninterested expression on his face.

This was Reinhart trying his best. To him, this sort of magic was completely unremarkable. He expected this much and more from a child who grew up in a good environment without any hardships.

"Reinhart."

At Valeta's call, Reinhart turned to look at the child. Reinhart clicked his tongue when he saw the boy's shoulders had slumped like a wilting plant.

"You'll be a good magician with a bit more practice. Try your best," Reinhart added.

The child's face lit up as if he had never been sad at all. "Yes! Edan will try his best!"

Reinhart's expression was strange as he looked at the boy, who was staring back at him with sparkling eyes, his tiny fists clenched.

He nodded. The boy beamed, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

“What are you going to do today, Edan?”

“Oh, I’m going to play with my friend after I study!”

“A friend?”

“Yes! My friend is going to tell me a secret today,” Eldian whispered.

Valeta chuckled at the look of determination on the boy’s face. “Really? Now I want to know.”

“Ah! But I can’t tell you, either...” Eldian looked down as he fidgeted.

“I see. That’s a shame. But you have to tell me what you learned in your lessons today, okay?”

“Yes!”

As they continued their sweet conversation, the round table filled with food. Valeta ate slower than the other two as she was busy cutting Eldian’s food for him.

“Valeta.”

“What?”

“You should eat,” Reinhart said. “You haven’t touched your food.”

“Oh, I will.”

“It’s going to grow cold.”

“He needs to eat first,” she insisted.

Reinhart pouted. He began to cut the food on Valeta’s plate into smaller pieces.

“Reinhart...”

“Yes, Valeta?”

“Are you a child?” she asked.

“Yes.”

He didn’t miss a beat.

“Mama!” Eldian cried.

“What?”

“I can eat by myself!” Eldian, who had been watching the pair, said as he picked up a fork and spoon, one in each hand.

Valeta gave Reinhart a look as they watched Eldian try to eat, fork clenched awkwardly in his hand.

“I’ll look after him. You eat.”

In the end, Reinhart conceded defeat and moved to sit by Eldian. Eldian’s eyes widened as if he couldn’t believe what was happening. He started to eat faster. It felt like he was seeking praise for being able to feed himself.

Reinhart looked at Valeta, who began eating her own meal despite the worried look on her face, then turned to the little boy, who was the spitting image of himself when he was young. The boy’s face made Reinhart feel like he was looking into the past. He would be a perfect replica if not for the fact that he had Valeta’s eyes. The child was beginning to look more and more like him. He reminded Reinhart of his miserable past, in which he had nothing but Valeta. He poked the boy’s cheek with a long finger.

“Papa...?” The boy tilted his head to the side, still chewing diligently

"Slow down. Your mother will worry if you make yourself sick."

"Oh, yes!"

The boy obediently listened to Reinhart. He slowed down, glancing at his father every once in a while.

And so, their meal resumed.

Reinhart looked around the table for a moment. He cut a few pieces of food before putting them on the child's plate.

"Thank you!"

Reinhart watched as Eldian happily ate what he was given.

*It's strange. He didn't know how anyone could be so blind to his true nature. Reinhart had an objective view of himself. He was not an affectionate parent. He didn't know what a loving parent was like and didn't want to know.*

It was different with Terion. Reinhart didn't feel the need to hide who he was around Terion. He'd had to grow up quickly and had seen a lot of terrible things from a very young age. Maybe that's why Terion was easy to talk to. But Eldian was different. This child was a blank slate, the purest white and completely unstained.

Valeta was trying her best to make sure that he stayed that way. She allowed only good, beautiful, clean things in his presence. *This child doesn't know anything.* That's why Eldian always smiled when he saw Reinhart. The child had smiled at him for the first time not long after he was born.

*It's probably because he's sensitive to mana, but... It was natural for magicians to be drawn to anyone with a lot of mana. Reinhart felt strange whenever he saw the child. When Valeta had told him she was pregnant, he'd felt mildly curious, but that was it. There was nothing new or interesting about the birth of a child.*

All he'd been able to see was Valeta, who had been lying there, motionless.

"Do you like magic?"

"What? Yes! I'm going to be a great magician like you!" the child said, his fists clenched.

A great magician... Those words didn't describe Reinhart at all. He was actually the complete opposite of what Eldian described.

"Is that so...?"

But if he made fun of the child, he'd earn himself a vicious glare from Valeta once more. He made a noncommittal noise in reply. The little boy ate until his plate was empty. Eldian politely waited until Valeta had finished eating before hopping down from his chair.

"He's grown a lot."

It seemed like just yesterday he was still a baby who couldn't even crawl, and now he was running around on his own two feet.

"He's learning how to use a sword."

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Um, um... I had a dream..." The child smiled shyly, his expression as pure as fresh snow.

"A dream?"

"Yes, but it's a secret. Shh!"

Eldian's eyes curved as he smiled, effortlessly cute. His face was full of

innocence and affection. It felt like he could get away with anything while wearing that smile. Sometimes, Reinhart would get this unexplainable feeling in his gut when he saw it because that part of Eldian looked just like Valeta.

The child hesitated for a long moment before he whispered in Reinhart's ear.

"Papa, I need your help..."

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“Help? With what?”

Eldian glanced at Valeta before he spread his arms out to Reinhart for a hug. Valeta and this little boy, who knew nothing, were the only people who interacted with him without any reservations whatsoever.

Reinhart looked down at the child. Eldian looked back, clearly expecting to be picked up. He snapped his fingers. Occasionally, Reinhart would get the urge to show the child his true self. He wanted to see the faith in his innocent little eyes crumble and die.

*But she'd hate me for that.*

“Whoa!”

The child rose into the air, wrapped in Reinhart's arms. Eldian leaned into his father's ear, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Papa...” he whispered. “I want a little sister...”

“What...?”

“Ah! But you have to keep this a secret from Mama.”

Reinhart wore an odd look on his face as he watched the boy press a tiny finger to his lips.

“My friend has a baby sister, and she's so cute, and I would like one too...”

This was the last thing Reinhart had expected to hear. He didn't want anything

else to take Valeta's attention away. He couldn't even imagine how neglected he'd feel if they had another child.

Reinhart frowned. Just the thought of it was deeply unpleasant.

"Reinhart?"

"Yes, Valeta?"

"What's with that expression? What did Edan say?"

The child looked at Reinhart with wide eyes and shook his head.

"Shh! Shh!" he hissed.

Reinhart couldn't help but snort as he watched the way the child was pressing his finger to his lips. *He looks just like me, too...* But Eldian was certainly more childish. He was very good at behaving like a child, something Valeta and Reinhart had never been able to do.

"It's nothing... He wants to learn more magic."

"From you?"

"Yes."

"Really? But you're busy." Valeta looked at Eldian apologetically as if she were about to refuse on Reinhart's behalf.

"It's all right, Valeta. I can make time." He smiled. "You can go rest, Valeta. I'll stay with him. I'll think of it as a post-meal workout."

"Don't be too rough with him. Children are a lot more fragile than you think, understand?"

"Yes, don't worry."

Still holding the child, Reinhart leaned down and kissed Valeta on the cheek.

"Ah! Me too! I want to kiss Mama, too!" Eldian squirmed in Reinhart's arms until he let the kid kiss Valeta's other cheek. "Hehe, I love you lots, Mama."

Embarrassed, Eldian ducked his head and buried his face in Reinhart's shoulder. Surprised, Valeta tensed for a moment before she relaxed and gently stroked the boy's hair.

"I love you, too."

"Okay..." came his muffled reply.

Reinhart pouted as he quietly watched.

"Valeta."

"What?"

He leaned down and whispered softly. "Rein loves his master a lot, too," he said before giving her ear a sharp nip. The bite sent shivers down her spine.

"Ugh, you crazy..." Valeta was about to curse him when she caught sight of Eldian looking at them with sparkling eyes. She snapped her mouth shut. "I love you, too," she said with a sigh.

Reinhart's eyes widened. The corner of his eyes crinkled as he pressed another kiss to the side of Valeta's neck.

"Have a good time with your father."

"Yes!"

Valeta sighed as she watched the two walk away.

"Your Majesty, you have about seven requests for an audience."

“For me?”

“For Your Majesties.”

“Makes sense.”

The only time Reinhart could be found in his office was when Valeta was with him.

“All right, I’ll be right there.”

“Yes. I’m glad that you’re here, Your Majesty.”

“Why is that?”

“His Majesty always has a softer look on his face when you’re around. He’s more tolerant.”

“Really?” she asked. She thought he had a terrible personality, day or night.

“And His Highness is unbelievably smart and lovable.”

“Edan is very cute.”

Objectively, Valeta thought Eldian was the cutest. It seemed that he had inherited all of Reinhart’s genes. *The problem is that Reinhart’s jealous of his own son...* Actually, he felt that about everyone and everything, not just his son. He had been jealous when she first started taking care of the snowta. He was the same way when Terion had come along, too.

“It’s not like he’s a child.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

Valeta picked up her pace. The hardest part about raising a child was the fact

that she wasn't an overly expressive person. It wasn't easy for her to show her feelings because she had grown up having to suppress any pain or emotions.

Good times or bad, she always remained stoic. However, she wanted to show her child a variety of emotions. She felt like she had to exaggerate over the smallest things or respond exactly as the little boy was expecting. Valeta didn't want her son to grow up the same way she did. She hadn't raised him by herself, instead hiring a nanny and watching her closely, always trying her best when she was with the child. She'd read books and studied.

Reinhart also tried to be gentle in front of Eldian. He never got angry or annoyed with the child or raised his hand. In fact, the way he always kept his voice soft was probably his way of hiding his displeasure. Maybe that was why Eldian was as bright and happy as he was. *Still, I wish Reinhart was closer to him.* He could at least do a better job of holding back his jealousy if he couldn't show fatherly love.

"This isn't easy..." Valeta murmured as she entered the office.

Her shoulders slumped when she saw the mountain of paperwork waiting for her.

\* \* \*

"Papa, I like water magic more than fire, but I can't do it."

"Just think of water instead of fire."

"Um..." The child deeply contemplated Reinhart's careless advice before he smiled. "I see! You're so smart!" Eldian praised Reinhart. "I can see why Mama chose you, Papa!"

Eldian was saying what he thought Reinhart would like to hear.

"You're right. Who else would dare stand by your mother's side?"

And Reinhart fell for it.

"Hehe! So, Papa... Can I please have a little sister?"

"I don't know. I don't want another child because she'd take your mother away from me."

Eldian's eyes widened upon hearing Reinhart's honest words before he awkwardly crossed his arms, a serious look on his face. Suddenly, he raised his hand.

"I'll look after her! I can do it! I won't bother Mama!" Eldian pouted as he took in Reinhart's uninterested expression, before he brightened again. "Don't you want to see Mama as a baby?"

"Mama as a baby?"

"Yes! I look just like Papa, so the baby would look just like Mama!"

Reinhart looked shaken.

*A baby who looks just like her...* It would be incredibly adorable. Reinhart had met Valeta after she'd already turned ten years old.

*"You don't know how great having a daughter would be!"*

*"Ahh, if I had a daughter, I would just want to hold her all night. I'd never get any sleep! I'd always be worried about her... Ugh, a daughter would be just adorable."*

*"Do you hear that, Reinhart? Imagine a daughter crying out for her Daddy as she comes running to you!"*

*“Shut up and go back to your country, you lowlife pirate.”*

*“Tch, you wouldn’t understand. You only have a son.”*

Suddenly, Reinhart remembered a loud, unwanted visitor he’d had. Thinking on it, they’d mentioned they would be visiting soon. *I wonder if I can close the borders.* Just the thought was troublesome. However, Reinhart couldn’t do whatever he wanted as king.

“Father?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Yes! Thank you, Papa!”

“I didn’t say I’d do it. It’s not a decision I can make on my own.”

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“But... my friend said that all I had to do was talk to you, that you’d take care of everything...”

Reinhart calmly looked down at the child’s tearful face.

“Who’s your friend?”

“Damien!”

“That useless pirate’s son.” Reinhart’s face crumpled, a rare expression. “I can’t win against your mother.”

“Really? But you’re so strong, Papa...”

“Your mother is stronger. I’ve never been able to win against her.”

“Ah...”

Eldian covered his mouth with his hands as his eyes widened. Then, he looked at Reinhart and smiled again. *I really don’t know how to deal with kids. His own flesh and blood was so different from him when he was a child. I never thought about having kids, but...*

After Eldian’s sudden arrival, he had been thorough about using birth control. Occasionally, Valeta was annoyed by that, but it was all right. However, he’d felt bad whenever Valeta was depressed for no reason or had trouble falling asleep during her pregnancy, to the point that he’d thought about killing the child.

*But that little thing is now growing up.* Reinhart stroked the little boy’s hair as he babbled away next to him, taking a moment to examine these new feelings.

Even if he tried to strangle the child at that very moment, he'd probably look up at Reinhart with nothing but trust in his eyes—such blind faith.

"I'll show you how to do water magic. Come with me."

Reinhart held out his hand for the child to take. Eldian's eyes widened as he nodded enthusiastically, still cradled in Reinhart's arms.

*A daughter wouldn't be so bad, though,* Reinhart thought as he snapped his fingers.

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"Are you busy, Valeta?"

"As you can see..." Valeta replied, her voice utterly devoid of joy as she sifted through documents. "Where's Edan?"

"I played with him for a bit, then sent him on his way."

Valeta, who was buried under a mountain of paperwork, looked up at the sound of Reinhart's monotone voice and smiled. At some point, he had come and crouched down beside her. Valeta reached out and stroked Reinhart's hair.

"I'm proud of you. Reinhart."

"You don't have to treat me like a child, Valeta..."

"Still, I'm glad that it seems like you're becoming a real father."

Reinhart stared, mesmerized by her smile, before breathing in sharply. "I haven't done anything, though."

"But you're trying. It's more than enough for me, just knowing that Edan won't walk the same path as us."

She was pleased that he didn't have to keep his parents happy just to survive. Content that he didn't have to be submissive nor do anything terrible just to survive. Just knowing that they hadn't passed on the trauma of their terrible pasts to Eldian was more than enough for Valeta.

"If you're happy, then I'm happy." Reinhart gave her a smile that was warm enough to melt anyone's heart.

"You'll love him one day. You'll change, just like I did."

"Sure," Reinhart replied eventually. The look on his face indicated that he didn't believe her at all.

Valeta bit back a smile. Just then, Reinhart, who had been kneeling on one knee by Valeta's chair, leaned over and kissed her. Instantly, his tongue slid into her mouth, and he bit her lower lip, dominating the kiss. He rose from his crouch, sliding his knee between Valeta's legs. He pressed his knee against her.

Valeta's eyes widened as the corners of Reinhart's eyes crinkled. He pressed his body against hers, covering her lips with his.

"Master," Reinhart called in a breathy voice.

Valeta gasped softly.

"We haven't done it on the throne yet..." He picked up Valeta, setting her down on the edge of the desk, and gave a mesmerizing smile. "But I don't think this is bad, either."

Reinhart pushed her backwards until she was lying flat on the broad desk.

Valeta's eyes widened in surprise as she lay sprawled on top of the papers, but Reinhart quickly captured her lips in a kiss. His hand slipped under her dress as

he stared, taking in how helpless she looked laid out on the desk.

"You're so sexy, Master..." Reinhart said, taking in the girl's disheveled appearance as he pulled off his tie. "I can't resist any longer."

"Wait... Mmph!"

Reinhart took hold of her legs at the knee and leaned down.

"Agh, ah..."

Her dress shifted and rustled. Reinhart's thumbs gently stroked over her knees. Valeta covered her mouth with both hands as her back arched like a bow. Her legs twitched, dangling in the air as her toes curled. It was getting hard to breathe.

"Ah... P-please, stop..." She wanted to yank him away by his collar. "Ah...!"

A dull pain shot through her head. Reinhart straightened up and cupped Valeta's cheek with one hand.

"Master..."

"Seriously, you..."

"It must be raining outside."

He snapped his fingers. Immediately, it began raining outside. For some reason, the sound of the rain pounding against the window sounded erotic. Reinhart licked his shiny fingers and smiled. Valeta's face flushed red. As she struggled to free herself, the papers on the desk were sent fluttering to the floor.

"Oh, no. The documents are a mess, Valeta," Reinhart whispered against her neck.

His finger slowly trailed down the front of her dress. The fabric split down the

middle wherever his finger touched. Then, he pressed his lips against her milky skin. The faded red marks he'd left before blossomed bright red as his lips brushed over them.

"My master is always so lovely," Reinhart murmured as he left new marks all over her chest. His lips lingered, slowly exploring her naked body before coming to rest on her neck. "Next time, let's..."

"Ahh..."

Valeta's eyes grew three times in size as he suddenly thrust. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Do it on the throne," Reinhart finished.

"Haa..."

"I want you to sit on my lap," Reinhart whispered into her mouth.

Valeta wrapped her arms around Reinhart. Soon, the room was filled with the sounds of their passion.

\* \* \*

"I'd rather spend five minutes cleaning up this total disaster."

Valeta sighed. She was surrounded by crumpled and crushed documents. Some of them were illegible because the ink had smeared so badly, while others still were torn.

"You worry too much, Master," Reinhart said.

Sitting in the office chair, Valeta cradled in his lap, he snapped his fingers. The documents returned to their place as if they had never been disturbed. He even mended Valeta's dress before pressing a kiss to her cheek.

"Are you always going to do that whenever the fancy strikes you?"

"Um, I can't help that I'm always turned on when I see you."

"Don't you think you should exercise restraint occasionally? We're both only human."

"That's not true." Reinhart gave her a wicked smile. "Woof woof." His eyes curved beautifully as he barked beautifully for her. "I'm a son of a bitch."

"F\*ck."

"You're developing a filthy mouth, Master."

"You're the one who made me this way."

"Are you saying that you changed because of me? That's... quite a tempting thing to say," Reinhart whispered as he licked his lower lip.

As he was about to kiss her again, Valeta covered his mouth with her hand.

"You better behave yourself tomorrow. We have visitors coming from Kraken Kingdom."

"That's tomorrow? I thought we still had a month left."

"That's exactly what you said a month ago."

"Oh... I still can't get a grasp on human time," Reinhart grumbled.

Valeta gave his lips a light smack.

"Ow... That hurt."

"What are you talking about? You're human, too," Reinhart said nothing to this.

He rubbed his forehead lightly with a finger before smiling.

"Right, right."

Valeta poked Reinhart's brow.

"Does that mean that the whole family's going to be here?"

"I heard that Alola is coming. If Alola's coming, that means Damien and Arsha will probably be here, too. And King Kraken, too, of course."

"That means they're all coming," Reinhart said, looking suddenly exhausted.

Valeta smiled to herself. The Kraken Kingdom was an ocean kingdom that they'd established diplomatic ties with a few years ago. It was a large kingdom surrounded by the sea on all sides, but their countries had gotten closer after they had a few visits to one another. They were similar in age, but the king of Kraken Kingdom was a spirited, friendly man who had no problems approaching Reinhart with his usual enthusiasm.

*Reinhart thinks he's annoying, but...* They'd become something like friends, which made Reinhart seem more human. It was hard to compare King Kraken to Reinhart, but he was an exceptionally strong man who was tolerant of magic thanks to the blessing bestowed upon his kingdom by the sea. That's what Reinhart found so annoying about him.

*Still, he hasn't thrown him out yet, so...* This alone led Valeta to believe that he didn't hate him that much. In the past, he'd always killed anyone that bothered him even slightly on the spot.

*Reinhart probably doesn't know, but...* She could see that he was changing in the

smallest of ways.

“Are you unhappy they’re coming?”

“It’s just annoying. When is the child going to grow up?”

“Eldian?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I want to abdicate the throne and just live with you, Valeta,” Reinhart whined as he buried his face in her shoulder.

Valeta smiled weakly as she patted Reinhart on the head.

*We’ve got a long way to go.*

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\* \* \*

“The royal family and their emissaries have arrived!”

A knight’s voice rang throughout the royal palace.

“Long time no see, Reinhart!”

A tall, muscular man strode into the palace, walking along the red carpet. The muscled man with tanned skin was a handsome fellow. The only thing marring that handsomeness was the huge scar on his cheek. A man of the sea, he smelled faintly of salt, and his eyes were blue and beautiful like the ocean. His hair was a deep blue in color, resembling the deepest of waters, and his every gesture and movement was overflowing with energy.

The man’s name was Enric Von Kraken, and he was the king of Kraken.

Officials streamed into the room, lining up on either side of him.

“I wish you’d stop pretending to be friendly,” Reinhart grumbled.

“Reinhart,” Valeta warned.

“Oh...” Reinhart glanced at Valeta before he quickly dropped his hand away from his chin and straightened up. “You’ve traveled a long way. I’m sure you must be tired from your journey. These people will lead you to your rooms. A banquet will be held the day after tomorrow. Until then.”

With an annoyed and bored look on his face, Reinhart rattled off what he was expected to say like he was reading straight from a textbook.

Kraken listened, then burst into hearty laughter. "I see that you're as sociable as ever, Reinhart! What a friendly reception for a friend who has traveled such a long way."

"I feel like I'm being perfectly hospitable." Reinhart pointed with his thumb at the people gathered around King Kraken. "You've got a welcome party..." He gestured again, this time drawing their attention overhead. He was pointing at a banner that read *Welcome, Kraken Kingdom!* "...and your stupid banner."

Reinhart's hand moved again, this time, pointing to the door. "I'm sure you saw the fireworks on the way in."

He crossed his legs, rested his chin on his hand, and leaned back in his chair as he looked down at the other king arrogantly. "What more do you want?"

"Haha! What more do I want? There's only one more thing, of course!"

Reinhart aimed a quick glance at his administrators. They paled under his glare. *What did we miss? Did your department forget something again? No! We've done everything right this time! Remember what happened last time? We don't want that horror to happen again!*

The administrators glanced at each other in a panic.

*Is he trying to nitpick or something?* Valeta brought a hand to her forehead. She had planned everything according to the king's tastes. She'd even had a banner made because of what he'd said during his last visit.

"No banner? I'm disappointed!"

Reinhart, who had been harassed by King Kraken all throughout his last visit, had turned on his administrators as soon as he'd left. All the administrators had

to retake their civil servants exams in the name of reeducation.

“And what’s that?”

“Friend! The very first thing we need to do... is drink! A welcome party must have drinks!”

“I told you that the banquet’s the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, but a welcome party and a banquet are different. So, I brought alcohol as a gift!” As soon as King Kraken finished speaking, his people began carrying barrels of liquor into the palace. They promptly cracked open the oak barrels, one by one. “Everyone, come get a drink!”

His emissaries began to fill wooden cups with the liquor and handed them out to the Valrein people.

“Ha... F\*ck...” Reinhart cursed under his breath as he rubbed his hand over his face. “Valeta, you can go now. I’ll take care of... Huh?”

Reinhart turned to see Valeta accepting a cup from a smiling woman. She was a beautiful woman with alabaster skin. Her eyes were a brilliant deep blue, and her hair was a beautiful shade of azure.

She was Alola, the queen of Kraken.

“I hope King Reinhart will humor my husband. Enric was really looking forward to this.”

Reinhart’s gaze narrowed as he watched Alola wrap her arm around Valeta’s. His red eyes burned with rage. The moment he tried to reach for Alola, an arm wrapped around the woman’s waist and pulled her away.

“Reinhart,” Valeta warned.

Reinhart slowly looked up upon hearing her cold, gloomy voice. Enric, the king of Kraken, drew his wife further away. Despite the intensity of Reinhart's aura, he stood firm, undaunted. The people of Kraken, who had been pouring drinks for everyone, were all standing now.

Valeta sighed. She slowly closed Reinhart's eyes with one hand.

"Rein."

"Yes, Valeta?"

"You don't want me to drink?"

Reinhart said nothing. After a long pause, he slowly shook his head. Valeta carefully removed her hand. He sighed, then nodded.

"Enjoy yourself, Valeta."

"I won't drink a lot."

"Okay."

He leaned down and kissed her neck before stepping away. Enric released Alola and wrapped his arm around Reinhart's shoulder.

"Haha! You're whipped for your wife, aren't you? That's no fun."

"Take your arm off me."

"Oh, I know you're just too shy to approach me first."

Reinhart calmly stared at Enric's neck as the other man persisted in draping an arm over his shoulders. Then, he closed his eyes. "You can be testy around me, but leave my wife alone. She's so weak that I can't even hold her too tightly at night."

"You call that weak?"

Reinhart suppressed a snort. He distinctly remembered the time she had flattened a man who tried to flirt with her, not knowing who she was. "Yeah. She can only last two rounds with me before she's done. Any more, and she can't even eat the next day."

"That's probably just because of your ridiculous stamina..."

Enric chuckled. He dragged Reinhart through the palace like it was his own, shoving the other king into the drawing room, then ordering more food and drinks from the nearby maids.

"Make yourself right at home," Reinhart said dryly.

"I feel at home in all of my friends' homes."

"Ridiculous." Reinhart took a seat on the couch, his face weary.

Enric sat on the other side. "Seems like you're doing well."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I heard that you've been harassing other countries."

"Valeta takes care of most of the work. If there's anything she can't take care of, then I step in."

"And that includes invading an annoying kingdom and threatening their king?"

Reinhart smiled an utterly apathetic grin. "I don't have to respect people who don't know respect themselves."

"You treat me the same way."

"You aren't respectful, either." Reinhart clicked his tongue.

Enric laughed loudly. He snatched up one of the drinks that had been brought for them and started downing it, evidently in a good mood.

"Ahh! This is the cleanest brew I've ever had!" Enric continued to talk. "I brought one of my finest brews just for you, old friend. Here, drink!"

Reinhart took the drink and sipped it, unable to bear the man's booming voice. His eyebrows twitched.

"Good, right?"

"It's not bad."

The drink was cool and refreshing. It was hard to believe it was alcohol. *Even Valeta might like this.* He hated to admit it, but it was a delicious beverage.

"So, how often do you make love to your wife?"

"What?"

"We usually do it four times a week, but I feel like Alola is avoiding me these days."

Enric spoke with a serious look on his face. *F\*ck, here we go again...* At the end of his rope, Reinhart glared at Enric. King Enric was the reason behind his increasing vulgarity.

That was Reinhart's opinion, anyway.

"Do you know what the best part about Alola is? When I press on her most intimate parts, she..."

And so, Enric began to brag about his wife while Reinhart sat, frozen and horrified.

Special Story: The End.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain

### Special Side Story: Chapter 37

\* \* \*

“I’m sorry. Reinhart is a bit much, right?”

“Not at all. I didn’t feel as though I was in any danger, actually.” Alola shook her head at Valeta’s apology. “I don’t think he’d hurt one of your friends when he’s so in love with you.”

“The problem is that he always reacts like that whenever something irritates him.”

“Oh, it’s probably just because we outsiders are always bothering him. Enric truly does like King Reinhart.”

“That’s a relief,” Valeta replied as she led Alola to her personal sitting room.

In reality, she wasn’t all that interested in drinking, but she didn’t want to turn down a glass offered by a friend, either. *I’m sure Reinhart knew that, but...* He was just acting like a spoiled child.

“Hi, pretty lady!”

“Hello!”

Aloha’s two-year-old daughter, Arsha, and her six-year-old son, Damien, both greeted Valeta politely. Damien looked just like his father, while Arsha looked

just like her mother. It was like their parents' DNA was perfectly split between the two children.

"It's been a long time, Arsha, Damien."

"Hello!"

"Where's Eldian, Your Majesty?"

Damien shuffled from foot to foot, as if he was itching to see Eldian.

"I've already sent word. He should be here soon."

"Mama!"

"And here he is."

Eldian burst into the room, beaming when he caught sight of Damien. He began to run to the other boy but froze when he saw Alola. He quickly dropped into a bow.

"Oh! Hello, Queen Kraken!"

"Hello, Eldian. You certainly have your father's genes. I'm sure you'll be getting marriage proposals soon enough..."

"Alola."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Valeta." Alola covered her mouth with a smile.

"Eldian!"

"Damien!"

The children hugged each other like they were long-lost brothers.

"Are you that happy to see each other? But you're always writing letters to one

another.”

“Yes, Mama!” Eldian’s eyes were bright as he answered Valeta’s question. A wooden sword hung at his waist, since he had no doubt just been training.

“Tada! This is my sister, Arsha.”

“Arsha!”

The tan boy picked up his fair sister and stumbled over to Eldian. The baby, who sat in her brother’s arms without any fuss, smiled at the other boy.

“Wow...”

“Isn’t she adorable?”

“Wooow!”

“Yeah, she’s so cute...”

Eldian’s eyes sparkled. Alola leaned over to take Arsha from Damien’s arms since the boy looked like he was beginning to struggle under his sister’s weight.

“Did you tell them?”

“Yeah...”

“Edan. Why don’t you show Damien around the palace?”

“Oh, okay!”

“Mother, can we take Arsha with us?”

Alola smiled and shook her head.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Well, Damien. Where should I begin? Remember the time you let Arsha fall down?”

“Yes,” he said, his shoulders slumping.

For some reason, Valeta swore she could practically see dark energy swirling behind the woman’s smile. *Alola has the potential to be a villain, too.* Though she’d probably be a very different sort from Reinhart.

“Well, have fun.”

“Okay...”

Eldian must have been looking forward to spending time with Arsha because he looked disappointed. *Does he need a sibling...?* Valeta rubbed her cheek as she watched the boys leave hand in hand.

“Well, shall we have our fun now?”

She called a maid and ordered that food and drinks be bought.

“What about Arsha?”

“It’s almost time for her nap, so I planned to leave her with a nanny.”

As soon as she said this, a woman who was clearly the little girl’s nanny appeared and carefully took the girl from Alola’s arms. Before long, the table between them was filled with food.

“So, do you have any plans to have a second kid?” Alola asked as she handed Valeta a fragrant glass of fruit wine.

“I’m not really sure. I don’t think I could handle any more of Reinhart’s jealousy.”

“Ugh, I suppose all men are the same.”

Alola had loosened her corset after sending everyone away, and now was sitting very comfortably as she raised an oak goblet to her lips with little in the way of grace.

“Haha... Was King Kraken like that, too?”

“Yes. You won’t believe how needy he was after Damien was born.”

“Hmm...”

“He pretended that he wasn’t, but it was just so obvious. He’d become unbearable whenever I wanted to spend time with Damien.”

“That’s just like Reinhart,” Valeta said with a small sigh. She took a small sip of her drink. Her eyes widened when she registered the sweet smell and pleasant aftertaste.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes... It’s very good.”

“That’s a relief. Everything we brought is good, but I made sure to secure a few bottles of the best just for us.”

“Thank you. It’s delicious.”

Valeta smiled as she leaned back against the sofa. She’d only had a few sips but could feel herself beginning to relax.

“But you know, things changed after we had Arsha.”

“Really?”

“Yes. As you can see, Arsha is adorable and looks just like me.”

This was true, but Alola had said it so proudly that Valeta didn't know how to react. She smiled awkwardly.

"Oh, you don't think so?"

"No, I fully agree."

"Anyway, after that, he started spending more time with Damien, though I feel like he's always preaching to Damien how cute and precious our daughter is."

"Hm... Is that so?"

Valeta didn't mind the idea of having a second child, but she wasn't sure she was capable of raising them as well as she did Eldian. Valeta had really tried her best with Eldian. She'd worked hard to muster all the love she never received as a child and channel it into her son.

"Reinhart and I had twisted childhoods, so it's a miracle that Eldian turned out the way he did. A second child would be..."

No matter how she looked at it, it seemed impossible. As Valeta trailed off, Alola tapped her chin several times with her finger before she smiled.

"Valeta, children can tell when you're trying your best. They understand even if you can't show them much love."

"What?"

"Even if you struggle to express your love with words, hugging them tightly can convey the same thing. Haha."

Valeta scratched awkwardly at her cheek as Alola laughed. She and Alola were around the same age, but for some reason, she felt like the other woman always treated her like a kid. *It's not like I'm young, either.* Valeta finished off her first cup.

"Come to think of it, how are your nights going these days?"

"Oh..." She felt like she was dying every day. "My back is going to give out at this rate. It would not be inaccurate to say I want to separate my upper half and lower half."

"Really...?" Alola replied. "It's also really rough for me, too..."

Their expressions grew dark. They knew that they were loved, but they were painfully paying the price for that love every night with their lower bodies. In fact, it felt like they were paying with their entire bodies every night.

"Of course, I do enjoy it. He has a lot of stamina... and is big... and always engages in foreplay... It's all good," Alola whispered softly.

"But once or twice a week is enough." Valeta nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly.

"Once he starts, he won't stop! I actually feel like I'm going to pass out sometimes!"

"I know. And when you're about to pass out, he asks if I'm going to sleep without him and starts all over again."

Alola's eyes widened at Valeta's words. She slapped her knee. "That's exactly it! And then he acts like an oversized, kicked puppy!"

"Yes, that's right. And then he tries to start over like a child who has to start counting from the beginning when they forget what comes next." Valeta began to blush at Alola's excited words.

"You know, Valeta."

"Yes."

"How do you feel about just getting away from it all? It's all the rage nowadays!"

Those men need to realize how precious we are.”

“Get away?”

“We’ll run away. What do you think?”

“Run away? So suddenly?”

“It has to be sudden! Actually, I already made the preparations. Fake identification, emergency funds, and powerful magical items will stop them from detecting us while we’re on vacation. I’m sure the men will look after the children.” Alola climbed onto the table as she leaned in close to Valeta. “All you have to do is say yes.”

Valeta felt incredibly pressured by how close Alola was. There was barely any room to breathe.

“Let’s leave their members dry for a little while!”

“Alola, your language...”

“It’s all right! We’re still young! I can still beat men up!”

*She’s definitely drunk...* Valeta carefully considered her suggestion. *I feel like he’d go insane if I ran away, but...* He might also like it because it’d remind him of old times. To be honest, she had been growing weary ever since the kingdom was founded.

“Fine, shall we go? How long will we be gone?”

“Until they find us.”

The wicked smile on her face made Alola look most villainous.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain

### Special Side Story: Chapter 38

\* \* \*

“Wow, Valeta. Look at that!”

“That’s beautiful.”

Valeta gasped when she got a clear view of the ocean.

The air horn blared as the large passenger ship set out. The waves glistened in the sunrise. She felt the faint smell of alcohol clinging to her be washed away by the wind. Valeta closed her eyes, enjoying the cool breeze on her cheeks.

“What do you think? Are you feeling good?”

“You seem used to this, Alola,” Valeta said as she opened her eyes.

“I’ve run away once. It was after a huge fight we had not long after we got married. Have you ever done this before?”

“I have.”

Valeta slowly closed her eyes as she spoke. She had tried to run away from Reinhart many times.

“I’ve never been successful, though.”

“Well, you will be this time. You have a magic nullifying bracelet this time!”

Alola smiled as she shook her own bracelet, which was dangling from her wrist.

"You're right. I hope I succeed this time."

She had only rarely been apart from him since they'd gotten together. However, she'd noticed his obsession with her was only getting worse. Lately, she wondered if she was ruining him rather than helping. *It'd be nice if he got closer to Eldian while I'm gone.* She knew the chances of that happening were very low, but still...

"I haven't been out in so long. It's nice."

It felt good to leave all her work behind and just enjoy the sea breeze on her face.

Alola yawned. "Well, shall we take a nap?"

"That sounds good. Do we have a cabin?"

"Yes. I got us a double room. This is a nice passenger ship."

Alola wrapped her arm around Valeta and led her into their cabin. *Reinhart won't lose his mind, right? He wouldn't... He was older now, and he had a kingdom to rule. This timing works out. I've been meaning to organize my thoughts.*

Valeta yawned as she lay down on the slightly hard bed. The cabin was dark because it had no windows, so she fell asleep almost immediately.

\* \* \*

"Valeta, I'm sorry I'm late... Valeta?"

Reinhart staggered into their room, clutching his throbbing head, but then immediately froze. He couldn't sense anybody in the room. It was like she had never even returned here for the night.

"Is she still in the sitting room?"

If she'd drank, it was possible she was still there. Reinhart immediately turned on his heels. His pace quickened. Before he knew it, he'd reached her sitting room. He opened the door. The room was empty, but he could sense the leftover traces of Valeta's presence.

"Valeta..."

Reinhart's eyes narrowed. He had a bad feeling about this. He began to reach out with his magic. Before long, it shrouded the entire imperial castle. Those who were sensitive to magic would be able to sense it. *She's not here.* He couldn't sense Valeta. She wasn't anywhere in the imperial castle. He glanced around the sitting room. All the jewelry he'd gifted her was scattered across the table.

"Valeta..."

He checked Eldian's room, too, but the only people there were his nanny and Eldian, who was still sleeping.

"Your Highness...?"

"Have you seen Valeta?"

The nanny stiffened at the murderous aura coming off Reinhart in waves, but she shook her head. "The last time I saw her was when Queen Alola handed the young princess over to me."

"When was that?"

"Right after you separated, Your Majesty."

Reinhart turned on his heels. No... No, it couldn't be. He could feel his fingers growing cold just thinking about the possibility. He clenched his fist. Magic crackled wildly all around him.

"Why...?"

Why had she disappeared without a word? *She even abandoned her child?* All of a sudden? He thought that she'd never leave him if she had a child. Was that not the case?

"Reinhart! Have you seen Alola anywhere?"

Reinhart said nothing as he watched Enric approach, his expression anxious. Enric froze when he sensed the murderous aura coming off of Reinhart.

"You look like you're about to kill a few unfortunate souls. Relax. Reel in that energy."

"Valeta's gone."

"Alola, too. It seems like they left together." Enric sighed as he scratched the back of his head. He also seemed frustrated with the turn of events. "If I never accepted that drink from you in the first place..."

"I'm sure they just wanted to get some fresh air. Alola sometimes expresses her frustrations like this."

"Why would she leave without telling me? I would've let her go if she just asked."

"You mean, as long as you're with her, right?"

Reinhart glared.

Enric sighed deeply. "You're a little... overprotective. I know that you're deeply in love with your wife, but she probably ran away because she felt suffocated."

"Are you saying that she left to get away from me?"

"She probably just wants a break. And it's our job to find them."

"They left behind anything that we could track them with. I can't feel any traces of their magic."

It was clear that they were determined to disappear.

Enric scratched his cheek. "I knew it. I was too rough with her in bed. Maybe I should've only tried for two rounds instead of three." He sighed deeply "She just looked so cute as she was pleading for me to let her sleep. I couldn't stop myself. I'm pretty sure I hurt her feelings."

"I don't want to hear about what you do in bed."

"Oh, I'm sure you don't leave your wife alone at night, either. Don't you think that might have bothered her?"

Reinhart stiffened at Enric's words. He frowned as he thought.

*"Rein, that's enough for today..."*

*"But... I haven't come yet. Look. Don't you feel bad for me, my cruel master? I'm about to burst."*

"Haa... Just once, then."

"Of course."

What had he done?

He kissed her and left marks and bruises all over her pale body. When that wasn't enough for him, he'd pressed himself even closer to her.

"I-I told you only once!"

"But... Isn't it cruel to ask me to only do it once when you're so wet?"

"Hngh...!"

"Look. You're dripping."

In the end, they had done it three or four times that night. He felt like he had done this same thing a fair number of times. In fact, it happened almost every time. *What was I supposed to do? She's just too cute.* He would've calmed down if she'd stopped showing him new sides to her.

"Of course."

Reinhart snapped his fingers.

"Where are you going?" Enric asked as he lightly kicked at the magic circle that had appeared under their feet. The king of Kraken was resistant to magic, so doing so instantly destroyed the magic circle.

"Are you crazy?"

"We'll be able to find them easily if we really want to. Why don't we leave them alone for a bit?"

"What if something happens to them?"

"Alola's not weak. And your wife isn't, either."

"If something happens, we'd be too late."

"See? You're too overprotective. Do you want to see your wife wither away at such an early age?"

Enric sighed as Reinhart glared at him with exhausted eyes. *He acts like a child without his wife.* He looked like a child who didn't know what to do with something he'd been given. It was only a matter of time before he'd break said item.

Enric was also an obsessive man, but whenever Alola disappeared like this, he left her alone for roughly two weeks. It usually took him about two weeks to find her after that, so it gave her a whole month of freedom.

Alola had always been a free spirit trapped inside the castle, so Enric figured that he just had to accept this about her. However, it seemed like the young man standing in front of him didn't see it that way. *I heard they have an unusual relationship.*

Rumor was that they used to have a master-servant relationship. He heard that the arrogant and powerful king used to be a slave who bowed before others. He had chased and been chased, nearly died a couple of times, and had seen a lot of terrible things.

"There are rumors that your wife hasn't been able to experience freedom for a long time." Enric knew he'd hit the nail on the head when Reinhart's shoulder stiffened. He continued. "If you don't give her room to breathe, she really will wither away. Alola was from a free-spirited family on Kraken Island. I was in love with her. We have an emotional connection, but she's given up her freedom and is now trapped in the castle with me. I clipped her wings."

"What do you want me to do then? Are you telling me I should let go of Valeta?"

Reinhart asked with a scowl on his face. If freedom was what she wanted, he could give her that. He'd do anything for her. "I should just buy her a resort island."

Reinhart snorted.

"I'm just saying that you should give her some space to breathe. And let her form other relationships."

Reinhart remained stubbornly silent.

"You're too obsessed with her. If I were your wife, I would've run away screeching about how I can't live with you years ago."

Reinhart's face twisted at Enric's terrible impression of Valeta. "I really want to kill you."

Valeta would've been shocked if she'd seen the disgusted look on Reinhart's face. Unfortunately, she wasn't there.

## I Failed to Oust the Villain!

### Special Side Story: Chapter 39

\* \* \*

“Ah, I slept too much.”

By the time Valeta woke up, the boat had already come to the dock.

“Valeta, wake up!”

“Okay,” Valeta rubbed at her eyes.

*When was the last time I slept so deeply?* Valeta rubbed her cheeks, very clearly having needed to rest.

After she collected her things, she went outside to find Alola already dressed and ready for a vacation. She wore a flowy white dress, a straw hat, and was clutching a small bag. Alola looked both beautiful and cute, but it was painfully obvious that she was a tourist.

“We’re at a resort that isn’t well known, but it’s very open-minded!”

“Open-minded?”

“Yes! I heard that people walk around half-naked! What a great way to enjoy your youth?”

Half-naked? If they were going to a resort, would it be something like Hawaii?

Valeta tilted her head. To be honest, she had never been to Hawaii in her past life, but she knew what it looked like because of the media she'd seen. However, she had lived in this world for so long that she couldn't really recall what it was like. Still, she knew a place that resembled Hawaii in any way didn't quite fit in with this world.

*I mean, bikinis were the norm in my old world. Is that what people are wearing here?*

"But Valeta," Alola started.

"Yes?"

"You're going dressed like that?"

"Like what? Oh... Yes. Is there a problem?" Valeta asked, looking down at her dress.

"A problem?" Alola's eyes widened. "There are so many layers to that dress!"

"What do you—"

"This is a summer island! You'll boil to death if you go out wearing that! And that's not even the worst of it. That stuffy dress doesn't match the mood of the island." Alola grabbed Valeta's hand and dragged the other woman to her bag, where she produced a dress. "Here!"

"Oh..."

"Put this on."

"Alola, I..."

"I'm not taking no for an answer!"

*Bang!*

The door slammed closed behind Alola before Valeta could finish speaking. Valeta stared helplessly at the dress before eventually sighing.

“Well, I’m sure it will be fine.”

She would just enjoy herself a little before going back home. *He’ll probably find me before long.* She didn’t think that a magic bracelet would stop Reinhart, who was a transcendent, from finding her.

Valeta changed into her new dress before venturing outside.

“Oh my god, Valeta. I know I have a good eye for this sort of thing but that dress looks amazing on you.”

Alola was struck with admiration upon seeing the Valeta emerge. She took the other queen’s hand and led her off the ship. Seagulls and other birds Valeta had never seen before were floating above them, riding the breeze. The vast endless sky and the deep blue sea made for a breathtaking sight.

“Wow...”

A gasp slipped from Valeta’s lips unbidden. The island was incredibly beautiful. Excited people began to pour from the ship. The crowd surrounded Valeta and Alola.

“Are we going to the inn?”

“No, I rented a manor for us.”

“A manor? How did you get the money...”

“That’s what my secret emergency fund is for.” Alola grinned as she and Valeta stepped foot onto the sandy beach.

“This is lovely.”

Everyone was wandering around wearing airy clothes that rustled in the warm breeze. Most were holding a fan in one hand and food in another. The instinct to let loose tugged at her heartstrings. *When was the last time I relaxed like this?*

Never, really.

She had been imprisoned by her father when she was young and then immediately found herself in Reinhart's hands following that.

"What do you think? Isn't it nice, Valeta?"

"It is." Valeta nodded. "I hope he doesn't find me for a couple of months."

"He won't."

"Oh?"

"We're on a resort island. It's completely disconnected from the rest of the world."

Alola held Valeta's hand as she led her around the island with the ease of familiarity. Valeta slowly trailed behind her. For the first time in a long time, she felt like she could breathe.

\* \* \*

"Papa... Mama's gone... I can't find her... Waaaah!"

Eldian had come looking for Reinhart first thing in the morning in tears. Reinhart was already cranky from not getting any sleep and thus was unable to hold back his irritation.

"So?" he snapped, his voice cold.

"Hngh, Mama..."

The little boy collapsed to the floor, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Stop crying," Reinhart snapped sharply.

Eldian's shoulders trembled upon hearing the harsh edge in his father's voice.

"Papa... Don't you care that Mama isn't here? I do... I miss Mama..."

The child said through heaving sobs. Reinhart frowned as he watched Eldian, the spitting image of himself, cry.

Reinhart had already been thinking of ways to get Valeta back. That damn Enric had already made himself at home in the castle. The older king had told him he should leave Valeta alone for a few months. When asked when the last time he had given Valeta time to herself was, Reinhart couldn't answer. Because he never did. He'd never given her a moment to herself since they'd gotten married and become king and queen. Reinhart wanted to be with her 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. He always knew where she was and returned immediately to her side when he was finished with his work every day.

*Finding her would be easy. Even if she'd used magic to block her location, it posed no problem for Reinhart. He could listen to every voice in the world if he wanted to. He could track her down through her voice alone if he had to. It would take no more than three days. In fact, it'd only take him a single night to find her.*

*She probably left with Alola, knowing full well that I'm capable of finding her. That she'd left without a word and had yet to return meant she was resolved to go through with whatever this was.*

"Papa..."

“What?”

“Can’t we go find Mama?”

“What?” Reinhart frowned.

“Let’s follow Mama on her vacation...” Eldian whined as he clung to his father’s leg.

Reinhart quietly looked down at the boy before folding his arms. “I’ll think about it.”

“Okay...”

Reinhart sighed as he watched the sniffling boy shuffle away, his head down. “I still don’t understand kids...”

However, he could definitely say he no longer had the immediate urge to kill the child if he irritated him. Did that mean he could tolerate minor annoyances when it came to his son?

“I’ll have to find Valeta’s location first.”

Reinhart locked the door with a snap of his fingers, sat on the bed, and closed his eyes. Instantly, magic enveloped him. Every sound in the world, from the smallest to the furthest away, began to creep into his head.

It took him only eighteen hours to find exactly where Valeta was hiding.

\* \* \*

“Some chicken, please.”

"Oh, Leta! You look stunning today, more radiant than the sun itself! I'll catch a fresh one for you."

"Yes." she said evenly.

Valeta and Alola had met the man, who was probably in his thirties, early on in their stay on the island. He would flirt with her whenever he saw her, which she found incredibly annoying. While the quality of the meat sold at this butcher shop was very good, she couldn't say the same about the owner. However, this was the best place to get meat, so Valeta had no choice but to frequent it. *Still, I like it here. It's peaceful.*

Valeta sighed. She had been living on the island for a month already. Her life here was peaceful, slow, and relaxing, and she felt like she was slowly coming to embody this same energy.

"Hey, are you free tonight?"

"No," Valeta replied coldly as she took the packaged meat from the freckled man.

"I know a few places around the island..."

"Until next time," she said in farewell

"Huh? Oh, uh... Come back again! Oh, and uh, don't forget the party tonight! You better come, okay? I'll buy you a drink!"

"I'm good."

Valeta turned and went on her way. She stopped by a few more places, and before long, her arms were laden with groceries. *It'd be nice if Reinhart and Eldian were here.*

As she bought some fruit, she thought about how her husband and son would

have enjoyed a few months relaxing on this island. Once she was finished making her purchase, Valeta turned and suddenly someone bumped into her shoulder. The fruit she was holding tumbled to the ground and began rolling away.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 40

“Oh... I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s all right. Here. Your fruit.”

“Thank you...”

Valeta paused upon hearing the sweet voice, then bowed her head quickly.

“May I escort you somewhere?”

“I’m fine,” she said.

She liked the island but the way it felt like every man here was trying to constantly flirt with her was uncomfortable. However, women always tried to flirt with men they were interested in, too. *I know that they sometimes call it the Island of Love, but...* Other than that, the island was great.

“Hmm, really? Have a good day, then.”

The man’s voice rang in her ears. Valeta turned to face him, but he was already gone. *He seemed familiar somehow.* Was she imagining things?

With a frown, she turned to go back to the manor.

\* \* \*

"Papa! Where's Mama? Did you find her?"

"I saw her. She seems like she's doing well."

The same man who'd picked up the fruit for Valeta slipped into an alley, drawing back his hood as he did so. The child, who had been crouching on the ground waiting, sprung to his feet and hugged Reinhart's leg.

"When do we get to see Mama?"

"I don't know, but I want to tease her a little." Reinhart smiled as he snapped his fingers. "There's a festival happening tonight. If you stay in our room, I'll bring your mother to you."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Reinhart ruffled Eldian's hair. The boy's face lit up, a smile spreading across his perfect little face. Reinhart had set out on his journey a month ago. It was the longest trip he'd ever been on. He could have come straight here, but he chose to travel across the continent without magic instead. They'd traveled in an ordinary carriage.

Even though Eldian was a bright child capable of many things beyond his years, he wasn't an adult. He required a lot of care, and there were many aspects of taking care of him that were inconvenient or difficult without magic. However, Reinhart wanted to give Valeta time.

If he'd used magic, her vacation would have been over within a day or two. So, Reinhart made a deal with himself—he promised to give her the amount of time it took him to physically track her down. Reinhart knew that he was an obsessive person. There were times when it frustrated Valeta. *I don't want her to*

*get tired of me.* That's why he'd decided to travel by land, taking the longest route possible. It took him a whole month to arrive.

"She seems less cranky."

Reinhart could feel something swimming in the pit of his stomach when he saw how well Valeta was doing without him.

He sighed.

Changing Eldian's clothes and putting him to bed, he sat at the boy's side and rested his chin on his hand.

"Why are you smiling?" Reinhart asked the grinning child bluntly.

"Because I like you, Papa! I like you a lot."

"Go to sleep," Reinhart responded to the child's earnest confession bluntly.

He flicked the boy in the forehead. Eldian giggled as he crawled under the blanket and closed his eyes. Reinhart signed once more as he gently laid down next to his son.

"This is the end, Valeta."

It was time for her to come back home. Reinhart was at his limit. He closed his eyes. He'd heard that the island was throwing its biggest festival of the year tonight. He was thinking about searching out Valeta in the crowd. Traveling here had been very stressful for him. Not having Valeta by his side or in his arms unsettled him. Was that why he now felt a little more relaxed, having seen her with his own eyes.

Reinhart had meant to only close his eyes for a moment but nodded off. It was a strange habit he'd developed after traveling with Eldian for a whole month.

\* \* \*

“Valeta! Hurry! The festival’s starting.”

“Okay.”

Alola had become tan after a whole month of walking and exploring around the island Valeta laughed a little when she saw Alola. She almost blended in with the locals by now.

“You’re going to live here forever at this rate.”

“No, they’re going to find us soon.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. My husband knows that I need time to breathe every once in a while. He knows and so he lets me go. Three months was the longest, but it’s usually about a month.”

Valeta’s lips lifted in a small smile. She had been working hard for her freedom.

“Go on ahead. I’ll catch up later,” Valeta said.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, you have plans.”

“Haha, right. I’ll see you later, then!”

Alola, armed with two large bottles of alcohol the size of her torso, shouldered open the door and left. *How did I not know that she liked drinking so much?* She

could definitely hold her liquor.

Valeta tidied up the room, which had become a mess throughout the process of them getting ready, and opened the door to leave for the festival herself. The wind blew in through the open door, blowing out all the candles. The festival was held at night, so the room was immediately plunged into darkness. A chill ran down Valeta's spine. She tried to shake off her sudden fear. A familiar scent greeted her nose, coupled with a familiar ghost of breath.

A hand shot out of the darkness behind Valeta and wrapped around her waist, pulling her against them.

"Good evening, Master."

Valeta blinked slowly in response. She sighed.

"Good evening, Reinhart."

The man's arm tightened around her waist in response to her calm response.

"Yeah. Didn't you miss me?"

"What do you think?"

"Well, you look like you're doing well." Reinhart's blunt response gave her the impression he was hurt. "Did I really make your life that hard?"

"No. I just wanted to get some fresh air."

"I would've let you go if you just asked."

"And then you would've found me every night."

Reinhart's mouth shut with a click. He probably would have.

"Master."

“What...?”

“Am I getting in the way of your freedom?”

Valeta’s eyes widened in surprise. She hadn’t expected him to ask that. “What makes you think that?”

“You ran away.”

“I’m on vacation.”

“Were you planning on coming back?”

“Where would I go without you or Edan?” Valeta retorted, her tone clearly conveying Reinhart had said something ridiculous.

As Reinhart continued to hug Valeta from behind, he tugged her in even closer and buried his nose in her neck.

“Valeta, my master.”

Valeta sighed. *I don’t think I’m going to be going to the festival...* She was nervous that she’d have to spend the entire night soothing Reinhart instead. Slowly making her way to the bed, Reinhart still clinging to her back, she took a seat on the bed and patted the mattress beside her. However, Reinhart got down on his knees and rested his cheek on her knee instead.

“You never listen,” Valeta grumbled.

“What about Edan? And the country?”

“I brought him with me. And I got someone else to watch over the country for me.”

“I can already hear the aids complaining.”

"This is what they're getting paid to do."

Valeta shrugged.

"Valeta."

"What?"

"Do you want to have a daughter?"

"Why this all of a sudden?"

"Do you think my obsession will fade a little if we have another child who looks like you?" he asked, his eyes curving into crescent moons.

Valeta reached out to stroke Reinhart's hair. "Even if I had a daughter, she would be my daughter, and I would be myself."

"I feel like I'll go crazy without you."

"I know."

Reinhart slowly rose to his feet. He pushed Valeta back on the bed, climbing on top of her. His silver eyes sparkled as his long silver hair spilled around his shoulders and around her.

"This means nothing to you, but I feel like I've been going insane all by myself."

"Why don't you think it means anything to me?"

Valeta stared at Reinhart.

"You ran away. What if you do it again?"

Reinhart collapsed on top of her, his body pressed against Valeta's.

"I told you. I was on vacation... And I missed you."

Reinhart flinched violently.

"I missed you too, Reinhart."

"You're lying," Reinhart spat, but there was an air of expectancy in his voice.

Valeta chuckled quietly. "Seriously. I was thinking about going back soon. I thought about you and Edan every day while I was here, and how nice it would be to see the sights and enjoy the food together," she added.

Reinhart burrowed further into Valeta's arms like a child.

"Let's go back, Rein."

"Yes. But before that..."

Reinhart smiled as brought his face close to Valeta's face.

"Our beloved son wants a younger sister."

"What?"

"And you have to be punished a little, too." Reinhart's lips captured hers. "You should prepare yourself, Master."

"Wait, Rein..."

"If we were to conceive a daughter tonight..." Reinhart's eyes curved with his smile. "That's just the way the cookie crumbles."

His hand slipped under her clothes.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 41

\* \* \*

“Ugh...”

*I. Really. Hate. This.* Buried under the covers, Valeta sighed. The manor remained quiet because they hadn’t hired any maids. She suddenly recalled that Reinhart had used magic to lock down the entire manor.

“Oh! Alola!”

Surprised, Valeta tried to scramble from the bed but fell back with a groan.

“Mama, are you hurt?”

“Edan...?”

“Yes! Mama!”

Eldian beamed as he leapt into Valeta’s arms. She frowned slightly.

“Did you come with your father?” she asked.

“Yes! We traveled together!”

“Traveled...?” Valeta repeated.

Her eyes widened slightly.

"Yes! We saw the sea! A-and a huge elephant, too! And, and...!"

The child's face lit up with excitement as he chattered about their journey. Valeta blinked as she watched her son sprawl out on the bed, talking animatedly.

"Also, we saw some bad people, too! Papa was the best!"

"Do you like your father?"

"Yes! I'm going to be a great magician like him when I grow up!"

Valeta reached out and stroked Eldian's hair. He seemed to have grown a lot in the month that had passed since she'd last seen him.

"I see. You like your father."

"Valeta. Are you awake?"

"Yeah."

"I was wondering where you got to." Reinhart reached out and placed his hand on Eldian's head.

*Well, my hips hurt, but...* Disappearing for a while might just have been the right decision. She felt some kind of subtle, unexplainable emotion growing in her chest as she watched the two of them together.

Valeta sighed shortly.

"Oh, Alola."

"She's already been captured. She went back this morning."

"Captured? What do you mean?" Valeta's eyes widened.

"King Kraken already came for her."

Valeta's eyes narrowed as Reinhart whispered. "No..."

"I heard that he whisked her away while she was still passed out, drunk. He looked quite angry," Reinhart said as he set down a tray containing a simple breakfast. The soup was a broth made with a good variety of ingredients.

*I don't have indigestion. It's my hips that hurt.* Valeta thought with another sigh. Still, she was proud of her husband for thinking of her. How many transcenders out there would go out of their way to make soup from scratch for a single person?

"Thanks."

Valeta sat up in bed in order to eat more easily. Suddenly, Reinhart snatched the tray of food from her. He dipped the spoon into the soup and held it to Valeta's lips.

"What are you doing?"

"Don't be mad."

"What?"

"You're still mad. So, just sit still and eat."

The smile on his face made it hard to tell whether he was being serious or not. As Valeta looked at the spoon with obvious reluctance, Reinhart dragged Eldian to a chair, depositing him in it with one hand.

"Come on, Valeta."

Valeta slowly opened her mouth, allowing him to pass the spoon that was filled to the brim with soup into her mouth.

"That's a good girl."

Reinhart continued feeding Valeta the soup with a satisfied look on his face.

"Do you really have to bully people like this?"

She had thought she was going to die the night before. She didn't get a wink of sleep until after she'd seen the horizon beginning to grow brighter through the window. Reinhart had left bruises and bites all over her body as if he was trying to make up for lost time.

*And I still feel sticky inside...* Her skin was clean, but her insides were not.

"Valeta... Say ah."

Why was he doing this in front of their son? She couldn't tell if he was genuinely upset with her or simply trying to tease her.

"Valeta." Reinhart called her name as he held up the last spoonful of soup.

"What?"

"Please don't hate me."

"What are you talking about? Our son is here."

"Yeah, Mama! Please don't hate Papa!"

"Ha..."

When Valeta looked down at Eldian, she found him looking back at her as he clung to Reinhart's pant leg. *What in the world is happening...* What kind of conversation had the two of them had to arrive at this moment?

"Papa loves you so much, Mama! More than me!"

"What?" she asked, bewildered.

"But I love you very, very much, too, Mama!"

"I love you, too."

Eldian nodded, looking pleased. Then, he looked between Valeta and Reinhart, his eyes sparkling. He fidgeted expectantly as if he was waiting for something. Reinhart glanced at Valeta and smiled.

"I love you, too, Reinhart."

Eldian immediately squealed. He crawled onto the bed and hugged Valeta around the waist. "Papa was really hurt because you didn't love him, Mama!"

"Oh... Is that so?"

Reinhart was using their son against her now, huh? Valeta glared at Reinhart, who simply shrugged.

"I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. There. Happy now?" she asked.

Reinhart's eyes widened slightly.

"You're so mean, Master," he chuckled as he set down the tray.

"I never hated you. I just wanted to get some fresh air. I thought it would be good for us to have some time apart," Valeta said as she carefully shuffled Eldian around into a more comfortable position on the bed. He must have been tired because he was nodding off, still hugging her tightly. "I realized that I love you more than I thought."

"Valeta...?"

"Living apart wasn't so bad, but I didn't run away because I hated you."

They'd even imprinted on each other as a show of their devotion to one another.

"You pretend you're not, but you're secretly very anxious. I guess I have to say it out loud more," Valeta said as she ruffled Reinhart's hair.

"But you enjoyed being here without me..."

Valeta sighed. "Still, I wanted to enjoy this place with you and Edan. Let's go back, Reinhart."

Reinhart's eyes widened upon hearing her words—the same words he had been dying to say himself. Reinhart had forced Valeta to endure his long, boring, endless life. He became more and more nervous the more of their lives they spent together. He often wondered if she was getting tired of him already.

He couldn't help but let these insecurities eat him alive as he watched her stroll peacefully through the beautiful island scenery. She was a free spirit who could choose to leave him at any time.

*"Alola was from a free-spirited family on Kraken Island. I was in love with her. We have an emotional connection, but she's given up her freedom and is now trapped in the castle with me. I clipped her wings."*

Reinhart was annoyed that he could still hear that man's voice echoing in his head, but had grown uneasy because he knew Kraken wasn't wrong.

"Go back where?" Reinhart asked petulantly as he rubbed his face against Valeta's shoulder, the same thing he used to do when they were young.

"Home," Valeta replied. "Let's go back to our home."

Reinhart's eyes grew wide once more. "I would have destroyed the world if I didn't have you."

"Don't say things like that. It's scary."

She fully believed that he actually would have. Reinhart pressed his lips against hers. Eldian was fast asleep, the sound of his soft breathing the only sound in the room.

"Let's go back, Valeta." Reinhart pressed his lips against her forehead in a kiss that was almost reverent. "To our home."

Valeta's eyes widened for a moment before they curved to match her smile.

"I wanna... go home... too..." Eldian mumbled as he snuggled closer to his mother.

Valeta and Reinhart laughed as they watched Eldian.

"Reinhart."

"What is it?"

"We have a home now."

Reinhart's eyes widened—they finally had a home to return to. He smiled as he thought about the home, complete with a sense of stability and everything else it entailed, that he'd always wanted. He'd thrown away his nature and instincts to live in Valeta's small world, but it had all been worth it for the sweet reward that was a life by her side.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Special Side Story: Chapter 42

### Epilogue

One year later.

*Waaah! Waaah!*

A cry rang through the quiet castle. Valeta sighed as she slowly opened her eyes.

“Shh. You can go back to sleep, Valeta.”

“Mmm... But Elina...”

“I’ll settle her.”

Reinhart cradled the baby in one arm as he rearranged the disheveled blanket so it was tucked around Valeta.

“Ngh...”

Valeta’s eyes slowly fluttered close. However, she couldn’t fall asleep now that she was awake. *I didn’t expect this to happen.* She had fallen pregnant after that crazy night, and now they had a second child. She had given birth to a baby girl two weeks ago.

Following the birth, Valeta found herself constantly without energy. She slept more and was up and moving far less. Reinhart poured his magic into her every day and made sure she ate only the best food, but her recovery remained slow. She'd barely managed to calm Reinhart down enough to stop him from turning back time. That was a week ago. They usually napped together, but occasionally, the baby would fuss like this.

Reinhart, who had been so ready to get rid of their child because Valeta had been listless for a couple of days following her birth, was now diligently taking care of their daughter. Valeta slowly opened her eyes and looked at her husband. He was gently rocking the baby with magic, using it to make her float above them.

"Is she that amazing?" Valeta asked, her voice thick with sleep.

"What do you mean?"

"Elina. You're always looking at her."

"She looks just like you," Reinhart replied calmly.

"Me?"

"Yes. I feel like I'm looking at a younger version of you."

*Is that so? Then again, she thought the same about Eldian, since he looked like a younger version of his father. Maybe it wasn't strange that Reinhart saw a younger version of Valeta in Elina. Valeta always thought of Reinhart as a child whenever she looked at Eldian. But...*

"Elina's just a baby."

Although she wasn't wrinkled like a newborn anymore, her only real distinguishing features were her ruddy cheeks and soft, fluffy hair.

"You see me in her?"

"Yes. You share the same hair and eye color."

*Are you sure you aren't just blinded by love?* Valeta smiled as she watched Reinhart gaze down at the baby as if she were an unfamiliar sight. *I honestly don't think I could have another...* But having a second might have been a good idea.

Eldian was over the moon. He would sit by Elina's cradle every day after he was done with his studies. He'd watch her, talk to her, and let her play with his fingers for a long time. Eldian was still small, so he had to stand on tiptoes on a box in order to see the baby, but that didn't seem to bother him. Terion also came by to see Elina whenever he had the chance.

*Still, having a second child was hard.* She thought she might actually die at this rate. Valeta opened and closed her heavy eyelids.

"Do you like her? Elina."

"I don't hate her," Reinhart said after a pause.

"But you tried to kill her."

"Nothing's more important in the world to me than you, Master."

Not even his own flesh and blood. Valeta smiled. She wished Reinhart would one day understand his role as a parent and save the children first instead of her if they were ever in danger. That's what Valeta thought she would do. Reinhart would always find a way to make it out alive. And if he didn't... She'd save her children first even if it meant dying with Reinhart.

Valeta considered herself an ordinary parent. She had recently come to this realization.

"But after you..." Reinhart smiled as he smoothed back Valeta's disheveled hair "I

have to protect these little ones.”

“What an honor.”

“You’ll always be my top priority, Valeta.”

“I know,” Valeta said as she slowly sat up in bed.

The world was spinning. After she’d given birth, she began to feel dizzy more often. She briefly wondered if she had anemia.

“You’re good at getting her to go back to sleep,” she said.

“This is our second baby.”

“I’ve always thought you were rather immature, but you’re really starting to look like a real parent.”

Reinhart’s eyes widened.

“Valeta.”

“What?”

“Don’t ever get pregnant again. Do you think I should cut my member off?”

“Can you please not use that kind of language in front of the baby? We’re not even in bed.”

“Technically, we are.”

Valeta frowned at Reinhart, but he only smiled wildly. “What would you have going for you without it?”

“My face?”

“Ugh, you’re so annoying,” Valeta said as Reinhart leaned in, pressing his face

close to hers.

"Well, you like that part of me, don't you?"

He commented on how well Valeta took him, and she put her hand on his face and pushed him away.

"Fine! Cut it off," Valeta snarled.

"Really?"

"Yes."

How could she say something like that so carelessly?

"Hmm." Reinhart pouted. "No, I'll just leave it alone. I remembered how much I like seeing you squirm under me."

"Take Elina and get out."

Reinhart chuckled, leaning down to press his lips against hers. "I'm serious about the pregnancy part, though. I'll get you medicine if I have to."

"Have you ever thought about abstinence?"

"I could never deprive myself of your love."

"Bullsh\*t..."

When Valeta reached out, Reinhart placed Elina in her arms. She was a very lovely child. Valeta smiled as she gazed down at the baby girl.

"I'm glad we had a daughter."

Even though he didn't show it, Reinhart seemed quite happy. Sometimes, he would stare at Elina at night, just like Eldian did. Did either of them realize just

how similar they were?

"Sometimes I get this strange feeling when I look at the children or you when you're sleeping."

"A strange feeling?"

"I wonder what things would be like if I'd given into my impulses and killed you that day." He reached out. His large hand seemed to be aimed for her neck, but instead softly cupped her cheek. "Or what would have happened if you managed to abandon me that day."

Valeta pressed her lips together. Then, she laughed. Sometimes, she felt like she was living in a dream. She constantly felt like she was standing on thin ice and never knew when she might die. She had spent her whole life just trying to survive, trying to get away from him. However, she could confidently say this now.

"I'm glad I failed to abandon you," Valeta said.

Reinhart smiled. "Even if you did, I'm sure I would've kneeled by your feet and begged you to take me back as your slave."

A breeze drifted through the open window. It circled around the room, brushing gently against their cheeks.

"I never would have thought things would turn out this way."

"What do you mean, Valeta?"

"It's nothing."

Valeta smiled and patted her knee. Reinhart slowly approached, getting down on his knees, and resting his cheek against her thighs. Valeta stroked Reinhart's hair, just as she had always done.

“Nngh...”

The baby, cradled in Valeta’s arm, began to fret.

“Papa! Mama! Baby!”

Eldian rushed into the room, done with his studies.

“Shh, Edan.”

“Oh, shh!”

Edan had grown a lot in the past year. He looked more and more like his father with each passing day. Reinhart picked Edan up and set him on the bed. It wasn’t perfect, but they’d built a decent little family.

*I never thought I’d end up here after failing to oust the villain.* A villain would never get this sort of ending in a novel. It was an ending that Reinhart and Valeta had created out of desperation, but she liked it just the same.

*I don’t know how I ended up with three kids, but... This wasn’t a bad ending.*

“I’m glad I didn’t abandon you.”

Valeta smiled as she reached out and pulled all three of them into a hug. As a gentle breeze swirled around them, she felt it was a rather pleasant day.

**I Failed to Oust the Villain!**

Special Story: The end.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Surprise Special Side Story

### Chapter 1

#### You Promised

“You promised,” Reinhart said.

Valeta frowned upon hearing this sudden complaint.

“What are you talking about?”

“You promised that we could do it on the throne.”

“Are you insane?” she asked after gaping at him silently for a moment, her eyes widening in disbelief.

Reinhart smirked in response, his smile causing the corner of his eyes to tilt upward.

“You’re always showering me with praise. What do you think? The castle’s pretty much empty because it’s Foundation Day.”

“I swear, you’re growing more insane the older you get.”

“You don’t mean that. So...”

Reinhart loomed over her. He slowly looked her up and down, a smile twinkling in his silver eyes.

“You always say no, but in the end, you cling to me so lovingly, master.”

“What? No!”

Valeta's expression twisted into a scowl directed at his straightforwardness. Despite her annoyance, Reinhart smiled as he kissed the woman's nape.

"Hm? You don't want to?"

"I don't. Do you have any idea what's been going through my mind every time I'm in the office after we did it in there?"

"I know..."

Reinhart put down the cup of tea he was drinking and stretched his long legs out under the table. One of his legs snuck up Valeta's skirt and slid up her leg.

"You imagine yourself moaning under me, don't you?" he asked coyly.

She stared at him with wide eyes, startled by his vulgar words and the sensations unfolding under her dress. She bit her lip.

"Reinhart."

"Yes, master?"

He smiled as he pressed down with his foot. Valeta nearly dropped the cup of tea she was holding when she felt a tingling sensation shoot through her.

"Have you grown tired of me?" Reinhart asked.

*No wonder he's been so quiet lately...*

Valeta bit down on her abused lip as pleasure shot through her. For the past few days, she'd been wondering why he hadn't made a move. Reinhart had a habit of crawling into bed, slipping a hand under her dress, and kissing her deeply just because he was bored.

*No wonder he gave everyone except essential personnel the day off for Foundation Day...*

She was speechless, unable to believe he'd done so for this reason. As she regarded Reinhart, who was still playing footsie under the table, she placed her chin in her hand and smiled. She took a bite of cookie and chewed silently for several moments.

"Absolutely not."

He pouted at her callous refusal. It was hard to believe that the man before her was in his thirties.

"Valeta."

"What?"

"You don't want to?"

"Not on the throne."

"I'll ensure we aren't caught."

"You know that's not the problem. This is about preserving my sanity."

They gathered in the throne room every time there was an event. Valeta couldn't spend her whole life flushed red and blushing.

"You're a cruel woman."

Reinhart pouted, but Valeta's gaze hardened as she shook her head firmly.

"My answer is no."

"There are so many things that my lovely master says we can't do. It breaks my heart."

"And you have far too much stamina."

"But you always end up clinging to me because you love it," he grumbled, staring at her.

*It's hard to convince her these days.*

Reinhart rested his chin on one hand. He had worked extra hard to finish going through a pile of troublesome documents just so he could make time for his plans.

"I love you," he said.

Valeta froze, his unexpected confession catching her off guard. She glanced at Reinhart with a sour look on her face.

"Hmm? If we don't do it today, we never will," Reinhart said, gently coaxing her in a whisper. "I'll make you feel good. Or I can sit quietly on the throne and let you use me as your toy."

Suddenly, he was next to her, pulling her into his embrace. As he sat on the couch with Valeta in his lap, Reinhart shrugged off his coat.

"You can blindfold me if you want. You can use me however you like. I won't do anything, just like an object."

"Why is it that the more you speak, the more vulgar you become?"

"You don't respond anymore. Is it that you're getting tired of my face? Should I change it?" Reinhart whispered as he began showering her cheeks, forehead, and nose with butterfly kisses. "Do you have a different type? I can change myself to look however you'd like."

Valeta frowned.

Pressing his lips to her collarbone, he murmured into her skin, "Hm? How could you get tired of me so soon, master?"

"I honestly can't tell if you have any self-respect. You act like you lack nothing in front of everyone else."

Reinhart quietly chuckled and began peppering kisses all over her cheeks.

"I don't have any self-respect around you, Valeta. That's why you have to take care of me."

He nibbled at her earlobe as he began caressing her hips.

"Even the kids aren't here. Terion took them to see those bastards."

Valeta knew immediately to whom Reinhart was referring—she was sure he was talking about Carlon Delphine and Dreux Leon. The two of them had taken it upon themselves to act as their family. Thankfully, both Carlon and Dreux seemed to like it when the kids referred to them as "grandpa."

"Are you going to keep pushing this?"

"I am," Reinhart murmured. "Can't you see I'm doing my best? I'm nothing without you."

Valeta sighed when she saw the way he was staring at her with his silver eyes.

"You're the only one who can command me, and you're the only one who can claim to own me. You're also the only one who can kill me. You know that."

Valeta knew all this was true, but she also knew he was bringing it up now very deliberately, and she hated how she always fell for it. Reinhart didn't hesitate to reveal and use his weaknesses—at least not in front of her. She also knew he was being completely sincere.

"Hmm? You'll do it?" he asked again.

"If you keep your hands behind your back and don't move."

"I won't move until you say so," Reinhart assured her with a smile.

"Right..." she grumbled.

Reinhart's lips captured hers in a kiss as soon as she said this. His tongue worked its way past her firmly closed lips as he wrapped his arms around her waist. After his fingers had loosened the strings holding her dress closed, he traced his thumb down the curve of her spine, causing her breath to hitch.

Reinhart's tongue explored every inch of her mouth, savoring the moist warmth. His tongue traced the roof of her mouth before capturing hers. Despite his forceful entry and the firm grip he had on her waist, it was a very tender kiss, so different from his usual dominating kisses that it made her whole body tremble. Reinhart's soft tongue lingered in her mouth, slowly mapping the inside, and Valeta was able to breathe easily.

*This crazy bastard. What is he up to this time?*

Finding the situation unfamiliar, she opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was the hint of a smile in Reinhart's purple eyes. Valeta froze. At the same time, her eyes drank in the sight of short, black hair—his usual long silver locks were nowhere to be found.

Valeta realized that they were now in the throne room. Reinhart was still showering her in kisses. This was all very strange for her, and she desperately wished to escape. To make matters worse, when she grew short of breath, Reinhart backed away, allowing her to breathe. Valeta panted, trying to regain her composure, before glaring at him.

"What are you scheming now?"

"I'm trying to make sure you don't get tired of me. Being a warmhearted tyrant isn't so bad, right? I'll be the warmhearted tyrant while you're... my one and only mistress."

Valeta frowned. Reinhart's purple eyes caught the way her lips parted as she struggled to catch her breath, and he didn't miss the chance to slip his tongue between her lips again. Shivers ran down her spine. It felt like she was being kissed by someone unfamiliar.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Surprise Special Side Story

### Chapter 2

The kiss was breathtakingly hot, sending tingles through her body. Valeta could feel herself growing wet. At the same time, the heat coursing through her went straight to her head. A strange, tingling sensation ran up her spine—it was a combination of pleasure, but also dread about what the man before her was planning. He always did things his way, and this new direction left her feeling strange. Her body was beginning to burn hotter than usual. Valeta furrowed her brow, her eyes fluttering open at the unusual feeling.

*Who is this guy?*

The man's cold yet warm eyes searched Valeta's face, studying each detail. He gently caressed her, but in contrast to his usual pattern, he avoided her most sensitive parts. It was strange. Really strange. She felt like she was with a different man. In her head, she knew that this was Reinhart, but... Her core throbbed. When she stole a glance at him, she could see that Reinhart had grown hard too.

"Play with me as much as you want," he said in an uncharacteristically demanding tone as he lowered her onto his lap. He leaned back on his throne, exuding dominance. "Go on."

Valeta couldn't help but laugh softly at the sudden turn of events and the way her body only grew hotter. She ran a hand through her hair, confused by Reinhart's change in behavior. Nonetheless, she slowly brought her face closer to his.

*Are we still playing tyrant and mistress?*

Valeta tapped her fingers against her lips, thinking for a moment.

Then, she smiled and said, "Your Majesty."

At her uncharacteristically gentle call, Reinhart's cheeks twitched a little. He frowned as he tilted his head, looking haughty.

"What's this?"

"You mustn't forget your promise. You said you wouldn't move today," she said softly.

Reinhart licked his lower lip. Hearing her speak to him so formally sent shivers down his spine. Valeta's fingers ghosted over the back of his hand. Then, they ran lightly up his forearm like she was playing a piano. His arms tensed, the veins bulging in his forearms. He couldn't say anything. Then, he took a deep breath.

After a long moment, he managed to force out, "I won't forget."

In his mind, Reinhart was imagining throwing her down and having his way with her on the throne. Valeta smiled as she observed the carnal desire growing in his purple eyes. She heard his breath hitch as she sank to her knees.

"What are you doing?"

His eyes widened as he watched her.

"Valeta...?" he repeated.

"I thought I was your mistress."

She smiled as she began to imitate Reinhart's common mannerisms. She gently rubbed her cheek against his knee with a sweet, seductive smile on her lips.

Reinhart clenched the armrests under his hands, veins bulging from his forearms. His nails dug into the throne.

"What's wrong? You don't like it?"

"It's not that I don't like it..." he said through gritted teeth, sounding almost pathetic.

*This is new...*

Reinhart had always taken charge whenever they were intimate. Just as Valeta was about to lean in, he quickly grabbed her shoulders, stopping her.

"Valeta!"

"What?"

He looked uncharacteristically flustered, his eyes unfocused, and he stared down at her. She smiled sweetly up at him, and Reinhart pressed a hand to his mouth.

"Damn it..." he groaned.

His deep voice sent tingles down Valeta's spine. She slowly rose from her knees and perched herself on his thighs.

"If it will shock you so badly, I guess I can't do it."

She shrugged, as if it couldn't be helped. Then, she shifted in Reinhart's lap, leaning forward to press her lips to his neck.

"This is good enough, right?"

She peppered kisses across his cheeks, which were steadily growing more flushed. This alone caused his fists to ball up, his knuckles turning white. Valeta bit Reinhart's lower lip, before slipping her tongue inside his mouth. Their warm

breath and saliva mixed. Reinhart blinked several times, wondering if he was dreaming. He flinched, unable to help it—Valeta's kisses were better than he could have ever imagined. He clenched and released his fists repeatedly, knowing he had to look pathetic.

*Damn it.*

Dirty thoughts flooded his mind. However, he'd made a promise—he couldn't move until Valeta permitted him. She captured Reinhart's tongue with hers, swirling it around his again and again. All he could do was hold the throne's armrests. It was becoming too much for him. A sensual moan escaped his parted lips.

"Damn it. Can't I touch you?" Reinhart rasped.

She let out a low chuckle at his desperation.

"No, Your Majesty."

"Valeta..."

She laughed as he voiced his displeasure in a deep, raspy voice.

"I love you, Your Majesty."

"Damn it."

His face crumpled and he sighed deeply. He reached out, took her hips in his hands, and kissed her.

"Oh, dear. Didn't you say you weren't going to touch me?"

"I didn't touch you, master."

Valeta's eyes narrowed. She slid off Reinhart's parted legs as she said nonchalantly, "Seems like I have a servant instead of a king."

She moved to turn, but Reinhart grabbed her by her waist, pulled her into his lap, and buried his nose into the crook of her neck.

"I'm sorry. I misbehaved, Valeta."

His hair grew longer, returning to its silvery hue again. At the same time, the purple in his eyes melted away to their original silver.

"Don't call for any man but me, master."

"Aren't you the one who wanted to play king?"

"I don't like you calling out to anyone else. Only call for me," Reinhart murmured as he left a love bite on her neck. "Also... Don't ever kneel in front of me again."

He stood and sat Valeta on the throne where he'd been sitting, then knelt among her skirts. He leaned against her knee, rubbing his cheek against it as his eyes curved into the shape of crescent moons.

"I like you better as my queen."

He pressed a kiss to her foot.

"Don't ever kneel before me. And don't step on anyone but me."

Despite his position under her, he was still making arrogant demands. Valeta took a deep breath at the sight of the beautiful man desperately pleading while knelt before her.

"This is my place, under your feet."

She couldn't say anything.

"I'll force the world to kneel before you, just give your command."

As soon as he said this, he hooked her knees over his arms, surging up to

capture her lips in a kiss.

"Can you bite my tongue?"

"Are you crazy?" Valeta asked, wide-eyed.

"Yes, I'm crazy for you," he whispered, a smile playing on his lips.

"I've always known that you were a crazy pervert."

As he sat against the armrest, Reinhart leaned down to kiss her cheek and whispered, "It's better that I'm the one sick in the head, instead of you. I'm going to eat you up."

*How did I end up with this lunatic?*

Reinhart was a father of two, but his stamina showed no signs of slowing.

*Doesn't he ever get tired of me?*

Realistically speaking, Valeta was the more unchanging of them—she was still as blunt as ever and struggled to be honest with herself. And, if she was being truthful, she was nowhere as beautiful as Reinhart.

"Reinhart."

"Ye—"

She suddenly bit his tongue. Valeta tilted her head back as she watched him wince.

"Don't you ever get tired of me?"

Reinhart straightened, trembling as he narrowed his eyes.

"Why would you ask me that after kissing me?"

"Then when should I ask?"

Reinhart furrowed his brow, his tongue still throbbing from pain rather than pleasure, as he said, "I could never get tired of you. You drive me crazy because every day with you feels new."

"We've known each other for over twenty years now. Isn't it hard to discover new sides of each other?"

Reinhart's eyes narrowed, and then he shrugged.

"Maybe...?" he said cryptically before capturing her lips.

He could feel Valeta's tongue retreat from his as if she was taken aback. He immediately captured her tongue, gently biting it. She moaned as she shuddered with pleasure. Her hips trembled, but Reinhart took them firmly to pull her close, as if he never wanted to let her go.

"Wai—!"

Valeta didn't even get a chance to finish speaking before Reinhart was crushing his lips against hers, taking her breath away.

"Listen well, master. I'm fascinated by all the new ways you can turn me on every single day, so the thought never even crossed my mind."

Reinhart drew her small, cute tongue from her mouth again and again, so much that it was beginning to hurt. He drew her tongue into his mouth, sucking as if he were trying to eat it. The sound of their saliva mixing filled the room. Valeta's eyes began to water from the pain. She couldn't stop herself from wrapping her arms around his neck. He was suffocating her, but she was the one who was writhing on his lap, hanging from his neck.

Reinhart wore a satisfied smile. He was so happy and proud that he rubbed her back in praise. Her cheeks turned bright red. When he finally allowed her to

breathe, Valeta found she couldn't draw her tongue back into her mouth. She sat there, eyes watering, her pink tongue protruding from her mouth, as she gasped for air.

"You look like a dog," Reinhart said, chuckling.

"You have such a way with words," she panted, her eyes watering as she tried to catch her breath.

"Such praise. I'm sure I could take good care of you. Put you on a leash and everything."

"Get out."

He nipped at her shiny lips before rubbing their noses together.

"Valeta."

"What?"

"Now that we've warmed up... Can I put it in?"

"Crazy bastard..."

She chuckled.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Surprise Special Side Story

### Chapter 3

Reinhart kissed Valeta. Their tongues intertwined again and again. Then he leaned down, pressing kisses along the column of her throat, his lips trailing over her shoulders and cheeks. She shivered when he nibbled at her collarbone.

"What do I do? I feel like I'm going to think about this during every morning meeting."

"That's why I didn't want to—"

"Can I put it in now?" Reinhart asked, cutting her off.

"I thought you were going to wait until I was ready!"

He smiled as he lazily stroked her knees.

"The way I see it, you're desperate to have me inside you..."

Valeta's cheeks turned pink. Reinhart slipped a hand between her legs, causing her to flush. Her hands gripped his shoulders, and her knuckles turned white. Valeta's legs tensed before they rose into the air. She tilted her head back, then realized that Reinhart was drawing away from her, causing her eyes to widen.

"What...?"

Surprised, she looked down at him with round eyes, her cheeks red.

"What? Do you need something, Valeta?"

"Seriously, you..."

"I what? Do you need me?"

"You're such a difficult man..."

Reinhart chuckled.

"I need you!"

In the end, Valeta permitted him. He flashed her a beautiful smile as he licked his lower lip.

"Yes!" Reinhart said brightly with a big smile.

"Ah, how could I ever tire of you, master?" he murmured, a satisfied smile playing on his lips. "If only the marks I left on you were permanent. Then everyone would always know that you're mine. Why do they always disappear?"

"What? Of course, human bodies heal..."

Before she could say anything more, Reinhart leaned in, covering her mouth with his. He pushed his tongue inside, running it along the roof of her mouth, before coaxing her tongue toward him. When Valeta frowned, he released her tongue and smiled.

"Take a hint, master."

"What?"

He kissed her again, starting with her cheeks before tangling their tongues together.

"I like you."

Reinhart lowered his head, looming over her as she sat on the throne. His long hair cascaded around her like a waterfall. As she thought about how this must be what it felt like to be trapped in a silky, silvery prison, they became one.

Despite herself, Valeta reached out to him. Reinhart happily met her embrace, wearing a satisfied smile. He pressed his lips against her neck and throat, leaving red marks there.

"You're squeezing me so tightly. Relax. It's all right."

He gently rubbed the small of her back. As she tried to relax, Reinhart smiled as he continued to leave bite marks all over her body. Suddenly, Valeta cursed, tears spilling from her eyes as she tensed.

"You crazy bastard..."

He pressed a kiss to her cheek before nibbling at her ear. The sound of their mouths meeting filled the hall. She clung to Reinhart like a cicada to a tree.

"Why are you so cute? You're driving me crazy. Valeta?"

Reinhart had been peppering kisses along her cheeks when they heard the sound of a door opening.

"I guess this is the last room."

A maid's voice drifted into the hall.

*What the...?*

Valeta stiffened, turning pale as a sheet. Reinhart wore a mischievous smile as he snapped his fingers once before kissing her.

"Ah," he said. "Did you get a fright?"

With a small chuckle, he switched their positions so that he was sitting on the throne with her in his lap.

"Why? Don't be scared. I wouldn't expose you like that. Isn't it more fun now that we have an audience?" Reinhart whispered between kissing her.

"No, you crazy bastard, this isn't..."

"Shall we get started?" he asked as a maid holding a mop walked in. "What should we do? How about finishing what we started?"

The color drained from Valeta's face. The maid wouldn't be able to see them. She knew that Reinhart had used magic to hide them from sight. Still, that didn't mean she wanted to do something so lewd while the maid was cleaning the hall around them.

"Do you like the idea that much, master?"

Valeta's nervousness only grew as Reinhart whispered in her ear. There was a throbbing sensation between her legs, perhaps caused by the high tension.

"I didn't know you liked this sort of thing," he said with a hint of laughter.

"Not me. You're the one who likes it!" Valeta snapped, her eyes flashing with anger.

Her brow furrowed—she didn't like feeling trapped.

"Oh, you're so lovely."

Reinhart pressed his lips against her neck.

"I love you, Valeta."

She tensed. He grasped her chin, forcing her to look at him as she held her breath in case they were caught. Reinhart bit her lip, swollen from all the biting and sucking, before capturing her mouth again. His tongue intertwined with hers, and they swirled around each other. Their saliva mingled together and Valeta drank him in.

Reinhart moaned as he watched the way her cheeks turned red as she squeezed

her eyes shut. Her skin smelled tantalizingly sweet. She excited him and was more appetizing than a lavish feast. All his life, Reinhart had never found any dish to be particularly delicious until he had tasted her—she was the only delicacy he had a taste for.

“You smell so alluring,” he whispered as he licked her ear.

Annoyed, Valeta was about to say something when the maid spoke.

“Huh? Something smells funny.”

At some point, the maid had drawn closer to them, a frown on her face. She had climbed onto the dais to clean the area around the throne. Valeta grabbed Reinhart’s wrist.

“Look,” he whispered.

He grabbed her hips harder and pulled her close to him.

“Did someone spill water?” the maid grumbled, clicking her tongue.

Valeta’s ears burned from shame as she threw a sideways glance at Reinhart.

“That should do it.”

After sweeping and mopping the floor, the maid finally left the hall. Valeta let out the breath she hadn’t known she was holding.

“Perverted bastard...”

“As long as it’s you, Valeta, you can say anything you like to me,” Reinhart said, nipping along the line of her shoulders. “Shall we switch positions?”

He lowered her down on the throne again. Droplets of sweat rolled down Reinhart’s body as he continued to diligently leave love bites all over her, clinging to her as if he were trying to make them one.

“F\*ck...”

Reinhart ran a hand through his hair as waves of pleasure washed through his entire body. They continued to press closer together. When they couldn't physically get any closer, Valeta threw her head back in ecstasy. Reinhart pressed a kiss to her exposed neck.

Soon, he was gritting his teeth, moaning as he rubbed his head against her shoulder. His long silver hair stuck to her red, sweaty cheeks. She lounged on the throne, basking in the afterglow of fireworks going off in her head, as Reinhart pulled her into his arms. His body trembled slightly as he looked at her with sated eyes. Valeta's face softened into a smile.

“You like me, don't you?”

There was a hint of a smile in her voice. Reinhart pressed a hand to his mouth.

He breathed out her name, “Valeta...”

“Rein.”

She looked up at him, studying the languid look in his eyes.

“Yes?” he replied obediently.

Valeta gently pushed him off and sat him back down on the throne.

“Do you want to feel even better?” she asked with a smile as she pressed a hand to him.

Reinhart swallowed hard. He licked his lower lips, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Anything you want, master.”

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Surprise Special Side Story

### Chapter 4

“Vale... ta...”

Reinhart gritted his teeth, keenly aware of the hand she was running over his stomach. His hips quivered slightly as he gripped the armrests, his silky silver hair draped over the back of the throne. He lowered his head instead of grabbing her shoulders.

“V-Valeta...!”

She calmly regarded his flushed cheeks and the way his body trembled beneath her. Valeta was beginning to see why Reinhart liked to tease her so much.

“Does it feel good?” she asked with a soft laugh.

Reinhart reached out but knew he couldn’t do anything to stop her. His gaze came in and out of focus, occasionally growing glassy. He wanted to devour her right then and there, but knew that he couldn’t put a hand on her, thanks to the rules of their game.

Despite herself, Valeta gulped at the sight. She always found him to be ridiculously beautiful, but the sight of him now, lips parted and cheeks flushed with pleasure, was something else. She let out a low sigh, making his eyebrows twitch.

Left with the lingering sensation, he panted. Unable to stand it any longer, Reinhart carefully took hold of her shoulders. He knew he couldn’t hurt her because he wasn’t using his magic to enhance his strength. Nevertheless, he was careful.

"Valeta, stop..." he said through gritted teeth.

She smiled and said, "No. This is fun. I like seeing you so flustered for once."

Reinhart looked down at her, a somewhat resentful look on his face.

"Please..."

His body began to shake even more until he suddenly went tense.

"Damn it..."

He cursed as he came, pleasure washing over him. Then, he buried his face in his hands. As he sat there, basking in the afterglow, Reinhart realized as he sifted through all his memories, that none of the former heads of the tower had ever felt anything like this before. He laughed under his breath.

"Do you like this too? You're laughing..."

"Master."

"What?"

"It hurts, but it feels good."

Valeta frowned.

"Mind your words. How old are you, and you're still—"

"You know how dirty talk turns me on."

Reinhart lifted Valeta and placed her on his lap. He grasped her chin, tilting it so their lips could meet, his eyes curving with his smile. She opened her mouth, granting him entrance, as she wrapped her arms around him.

"Hey, how do you feel about having two of me?"

“Crazy bastard,” Valeta said.

“What?”

Reinhart snapped his fingers. Suddenly, an identical copy of him emerged from his shadow.

“Oh, right... You’re a magician.”

Not to mention, he was a transcendent. How could she have forgotten that he could easily replicate a person?

“Very good. Don’t you think, master?” Reinhart said, nipping along the line of her shoulders.

Valeta grimaced—she had a bad feeling about this.

“Hey, you’re not serious, right?”

“What do you mean?”

Valeta stiffened as Reinhart’s doppelgänger sauntered toward them.

“You lunatic. Say it’s not true.”

“As I always tell you, name-calling is just praise to my ears.”

The color drained from Valeta’s face as she turned toward him.

“Hey... Did you eat something strange?”

Reinhart tensed. Then, he burst into laughter as he pulled her in by her hips.

“Master...”

The doppelgänger came to stand in front of Valeta. He leaned toward her and said, “We’re about to have a threesome, and you’re asking what I ate?”

The doppelgänger looked and sounded exactly like Reinhart.

“The throne’s too small for all of us. Shall we change locations?”

As soon as the words left his lips, their surroundings changed. They were in their bedroom. Valeta barely had time to process what had happened before her back met the soft bed. He hadn’t even snapped his fingers.

“Hey...”

Reinhart pressed her into the bed, while the other Reinhart lay down near the headboard.

“Let’s not do this.”

“But just the idea is driving me crazy, master. You’ve been riling me up.”

Reinhart smiled down at her.

“You’ll make me feel better, right?” he said with a wicked smile.

Valeta immediately rolled, trying to run away. She might have made it if he hadn’t been so quick to grab her hips.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Hey...”

“Master.”

Valeta remained silent.

“Get on all fours, like a dog.”

“Hey, you—!”

“Now, Valeta.”

She bit back a curse as she obediently turned over. She shuddered as Reinhart started nibbling at her body, starting from her earlobe before moving down to her nape and the small of her back. He looked down at her as he stroked the back of her head with a large hand, a loving look on his face.

"Master, have you ever seen a dog eat candy?" he asked, quietly.

"Dogs don't eat candy."

"I told you to take the hint. I have a treat for my master..."

This was how much he liked her.

"Open your mouth, Valeta."

Her breath caught as a chill ran down her spine. The Reinhart opposite her chuckled, before pressing his lips against hers.

"Don't forget about me," the real Reinhart murmured.

With that, he and Valeta became one.

"Ah, but it's a shame that we're doing this sober."

"What?"

"Shall we get a little drunk?"

The fake Reinhart snapped his fingers and a bottle of whiskey appeared. He took a swig before drawing her into a kiss. The strong stench of the liquor assaulted her nose as the doppelgänger pried her mouth open with his tongue, letting the whiskey trickle inside. The liquor found its way straight down her throat. She could tell how strong the liquor was from a single sip. It was far too strong for her, and she shook her head in protest as the doppelgänger continued to feed it to her.

"Valeta."

Her body grew hot, as if the alcohol he'd forced down her throat was already taking effect. Sounds began to grow distant as her vision grew hazy.

"How strong was that...?"

"Oh, it's a little strong. It's enough to make me drunk," Reinhart said. "Your body's burning, master. Your glassy eyes are so lovely."

When Valeta breathed out, she could smell the liquor on her breath. Reinhart looked into her unfocused eyes before kissing her eyelids over and over.

"I love you, Valeta."

"Seriously, you..."

She blinked several times, trying to clear her vision, but it wasn't working—her mind was hazy. She felt like she was on fire, but she couldn't tell if it was from the liquor or arousal. Her vision was spinning.

*What did he put in that stuff?*

In truth, Reinhart could hold his liquor very well, but Valeta only had an average alcohol tolerance. It wasn't that she couldn't handle it at all, she just wasn't a great drinker. She panted, hot breaths escaping from her parted lips. Reinhart tilted her head back, swallowing her heated pants, before pulling her into his arms.

"F\*ck... What am I going to do with you, master? I love this so much."

Valeta gasped, her breath hot and heavy, as he left another mark on her body, which was already flushed from the alcohol. Her chest heaved as she looked up at him. He gently wiped away the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I like it when you're as filthy as me sometimes, master," Reinhart said, captivated by the way she looked.

Suddenly, he bit her shoulder, unable to resist the impulse. Valeta flinched as the pain reverberated throughout her body. The world started spinning, the throbbing pain serving as the axis upon which it turned. Reinhart chuckled.

"We're like dogs when we're like this," he whispered.

Their steamy night continued.

# I Failed to Oust the Villain!

## Surprise Special Side Story

### Chapter 5

“What am I to do? I like this so much.”

Reinhart smiled as he watched Valeta blink drowsily. She heard his voice coming from two different directions. Valeta herself hadn’t noticed yet, but she had relaxed considerably.

“So cute,” Reinhart whispered.

Then, he turned to his doppelgänger. He leaned over and licked along the bottom of her eyes. Even her tears tasted sweet.

“F\*ck...”

She winced as his teeth sank into the nape of her neck. He watched her flinch helplessly before leaning in and claiming her lips.

*He’s maddening.*

Reinhart gritted his teeth, thinking she would wake up at an odd moment. He felt like he was addicted to the tight feeling pooling in his stomach—that he was addicted to *her*. Even the smell of her skin, glistening with pleasure, turned him on. He was overwhelmed with the desire to eat her, to drink her blood, to gnaw on her bones, and consume her flesh—he wanted her inside him.

Reinhart trailed a finger down her spine, one vertebra at a time. Highly sensitive, Valeta flinched under his touch like she’d been shocked.

“Did you like that?” he whispered as his fingers ghosted down her spine.

Valeta instinctively arched her back. The creaking of the bed grew faster. Her toes curled as her eyes began to roll back into her head. Reinhart moved his hand lower. Her body tensed as she writhed under his touch. Before long, she went still. Valeta sank into the bed, utterly exhausted. Reinhart gently laid beside her as he snapped his fingers, dismissing his doppelgänger.

"I feel like a dog," he said.

"Crazy bastard," Valeta grumbled, despite clinging to him so passionately not all that long ago.

She looked at him in disbelief as he smiled and lifted both of her legs.

"Hang on, what are you—"

"Who knows? What do you think I'm doing?"

The color drained from her face at the playfulness in his low voice. As he began to lean down and Valeta's thin ankles neared his shoulders, she tried to push him away. Of course, he barely moved.

"It makes me feel like f\*cking sh\*t when you look at some other bastard."

"Watch your mouth!"

"You're so fussy."

Reinhart tilted his head, a beautiful smile spreading across his face.

"I feel like crap when I see another dog wagging his tail at you."

Valeta was taken aback by his pleasant smile. She couldn't believe him. He'd changed a few words around, but regardless, they were no less filthy—he'd been only slightly less explicit.

"Anyway..."

Reinhart pressed his lips to hers.

"How are you so sweet? Have you been swimming in honey?"

He smiled, slipping his tongue between her lips. Valeta's hips quivered as Reinhart's tongue forcefully parted her lips.

"Hey... That's... Enough!"

Valeta glanced out the window. Dawn was breaking. She was pretty sure they'd started when it was light out, but the sky was now dark. As she thought about all the work she hadn't gotten to do, Reinhart captured her mouth in a kiss, still aroused.

Valeta's trembling legs started to squirm. Her toes trembled and curled, signs she was already at her limit. If Reinhart hadn't been holding onto her, she would have tumbled to the floor. He bit her lower lip, finding the way her legs flailed without purchase adorable. Valeta's hips trembled, static filling her brain. She tossed her head back, making Reinhart smile.

"Are you tired? Should we stop?"

She nodded slowly, too tired to respond. Reinhart grinned like a delighted little boy at the exhausted, desperate look in her eyes, before he nodded.

"In return, will you hug and kiss me every day?"

"What?" she asked, bewildered.

"Kiss me."

"You're an absolute lunatic."

"Don't you think it's unfair that only the kids get kisses? You're mine, master. Are you replacing me?"

Valeta furrowed her brow as Reinhart pulled her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"Yes?" he asked again.

"Seriously, go climb into a hole and die."

"If I die, who will take care of you every night?"

"I'm sure a lot of people could," Valeta retorted, annoyed after being teased all day.

Reinhart's body immediately grew stiff. He turned to her and smiled.

"Oh, so you're going to roll around with another man, is that it?"

Valeta said nothing. Then she frowned, knowing that she'd poked a crazy bear.

"Who is the son of a b\*tch?" Are you seeing someone behind my back?"

She looked at him like he was delusional before she ran a hand through her hair.

"No."

She sighed as she turned her head.

"Don't do that. I was ready to kill every man on earth," Reinhart said as he kissed her cheek.

Valeta pressed her lips together in a thin line. Reinhart was getting crazier by the day. He licked her.

"So sweet."

Worried that this would become a bad habit, she tried to squirm away, but he held her by her hips.

"It's you!" she suddenly shrieked, her voice hoarse.

He turned to her with a puzzled look.

"What do you mean?"

His lips left her skin and he tilted his head.

"You asked me who my type was. It's you. So, don't transform into someone else next time."

Valeta said nothing. Then, Reinhart's eyes widened in shock as her words sank in. He kissed her.

"It's me?"

"Yeah. Did you think I'd put up with all this crap if you weren't? I would've run away."

He smiled softly.

"I like you, Valeta," he said, his voice a breathy whisper.

"I know."

"I really like you. I don't know what would have happened if I never met you."

"What do you mean? You would've been a crazy tyrant or a lonely transcendent. One or the other."

"I don't like either option," Reinhart said as he burrowed closer to her small body, wanting to be held.

She wrapped her arms around his large frame and sighed.

*Is that better?*

Valeta sighed, hoping that Reinhart had calmed down a bit.

"Still, what we did today wasn't so bad..."

"What did you say?"

Reinhart looked up, her soft murmur catching him off guard.

"Every once in a while, I mean."

"That means you don't need me, right?"

"Why are you twisting my words?"

Reinhart grinned.

"I'm right. Or are you saying that one of me isn't enough?" he murmured into her neck.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, he climbed on top of her.

"I'm more than enough, right?"

A flicker of surprise crossed her face when she realized he wanted to join their bodies again.

"Yes, you're more than enough!" she exclaimed.

Reinhart smiled as he said, "I love you, Valeta."

He pressed their bodies together.

"You're joking, right?"

"I don't joke around. You know that."

Valeta paled. He kissed her pale cheek as he pushed in, making them one.

"Ha... F\*ck... You're wringing me dry," he groaned as he wrapped his arms around her.

Eventually, their lovemaking came to an end, but only because Valeta blasted him away using alchemy when he wouldn't stop, despite her assurances that a single Reinhart was more than enough. A bright, sunny morning dawned.

"Crazy bastard..." Valeta muttered before she passed out.

After that, she refused to let Reinhart touch her for an entire month, which sparked rumors of trouble in paradise throughout the castle.

<The End>