The Broken Ring: This Marriage Will Fail Anyway

Chacha Kim

Prologue

“Your Majesty, Your Majesty Escalante…!”

As he turned the corridor that split into two, a scream-like cry from a noblewoman flew into the back of his head. As he stopped walking without thinking, the sound of quick footsteps and a voice suddenly came closer.

“Excuse me, but could you help us? The Countess has suddenly complained of extreme dizziness and I don’t know what to do. There are only weak women here…”

Before any more excuses could be made, Cassel had already put his half-off gloves back on. A look of boredom crossed his tired face for a moment, but that was it.

Finally, the face of the blunt but kind prince turned around to look at the ladies.

“… … .”

The woman who came closest stared at his face, speechless and completely lost. Her eyes were instantly enchanted by just a brief glance at him. Just like any other woman in the Ortega court, or a well-fed man of letters.

If it was the former, it would be a little boring, and if it was the latter, it would be utterly nauseating, but the cause was the same anyway: he was too handsome.

And as a child of the most prestigious Ortega family, he has always lived as the most handsome man in Mendoza… .

"ma'am?"

Sometimes it was so great that someone couldn't even speak. If only I could gouge out the old voyeur's eyes someday, it would be the best of a hundred, a hundred out of a hundred.

He smiled neatly over the somewhat blunt-looking impression typical of a naval officer. The firm lines of his lips, which gave off an ascetic feeling in contrast to his dazzling blond hair, softened for a moment. The woman’s face fell as it was, and then she shook her head as if she had belatedly remembered her duty.

“… Ah, so! I waited for a gentleman to pass by here who could help me, but no one showed up even after waiting for a long time. How fortunate that Sir Escalante showed up in such a critical time…!”

Cassel's eyes turned from the ordinary lady standing right in front of him to another lady leaning against the wall, panting heavily. It wasn't exactly familiar, but it was a face he recognized to some extent.

The two women standing next to her suddenly started making all sorts of noises. They were waving their hands, fanning themselves… Can you breathe? Can you walk straight? These were clearly questions that she was asked. It felt a bit strange to be asking them now.

If it was truly an emergency, anyone would have rushed to the banquet hall just two minutes away to help the noble countess, but it seems that no one did… … .

“… You really look like you’re in a desperate situation.”

It really wasn't an emergency at all. From the beginning, they weren't waiting for some kind gentleman to carry the poor woman to her carriage or cabin.

Whenever a banquet is held at the palace, Cassel's departure from the banquet hall and where he usually goes and what route he takes are all calculated.

Because all they were waiting for was Cassel.

Cassel nodded politely and walked towards the countess, who was finally starting to slump down against the wall, and remembered that her husband was the Count of Portillo, who had died a year ago, perhaps around that time.

She was a free-spirited young widow, and she was the perfect match for a lighthearted get-together.

“Can you stand up by yourself?”

But whoever it was, it was better not to do something rash like reaching out first. Cassel stopped in front of her and simply asked politely and respectfully. The countess blushed slightly at the thought of her face being made up palely.

“I’m sorry, no… .”

“Then would it be okay if I held your arm for a moment?”

Although he had asked about the arm, the countess's entire delicate body was obediently held in his arms. It was a rather tedious technique, but since the banquet was more boring at the moment, it was acceptable.

There is no reason to refuse a gift that has come to you on its own.

“Can I move you by carriage?”

When I asked the question while slightly lowering her body and supporting her, the countess rolled her eyes as if she was in trouble. Whether it was out of friendship or loyalty, the woman who had been acting as if she was the most diligent caregiver by the countess' side answered instead.

“It’s just a simple case of dizziness. You should rest for a while in a quiet place and you’ll be fine… Count Portillo’s residence is outside of Mendoza. Even if we leave the palace right now, it will take a long time. Let alone from here to the carriage…”

“I think it would be better to move it to the third floor.”

Cassel cut the woman off, sparing her the trouble of explaining everything in detail. To the south of the palace, there were several spaces where the nobles enjoying the banquet could rest or lie down for a while.

More precisely, the places where men like him and women like the countess hide. He picked up the countess. None of the women who were so worried about the countess followed him as if it was natural. If someone had been smarter, they would have at least pretended to follow him up the stairs.

Perhaps it was because her husband had died and she had recently enjoyed her freedom. He thought she was still immature, but he didn't bother to give her advice. There was no need for her to tell her how much he had been doing.

It is ridiculous to preach caution when you have been rolling around here and there. The place where Cassel was headed was a place where no one would pass by anyway. As the sound of people disappeared, the countess in his arms cautiously spoke.

“… I’m sorry for the trouble, and I don’t know how to repay you for this.”

“Helping the weak is the natural thing to do as a soldier of Ortega. Don’t expect anything in return.”

She was a woman who treated fellow nobles like her servants, scattering crumbs of money and power, let alone being weak, but looking at her struggling to breathe, she was extremely pitiful.

The Countess of Portillo looked up at Cassel, moved as if she had truly become a weakling in distress.

“I am truly touched to think that such a wonderful person is protecting Ortega’s territorial waters.”

The power of uniforms is so amazing. When you see how sincerity naturally attaches to even a single word spoken in a casual manner, even if the purpose was to spend the night together.

Cassel Escalante de Esposa. This long and honorable name, and this perfect shell. And with the white uniform of the Navy, it was a work of art that God had decided to drool over. Sometimes, it was not surprising that sane noblewomen—or, unhappily, even fellow men—went wild and rushed at him.

As someone once said, if it weren't for the great Escalante family, I would have been killed by the sword long ago.

“I heard that you enlisted to follow in the footsteps of your grandfather, who devoted his life to protecting Ortega. You will follow the honorable path that your family has walked for generations… Even so, I was really surprised at first. You are the sole heir to Escalante, and the world, the Nuñera Sea is still a dangerous place where naval battles, big and small, often take place. There was a brief period of peace when your grandfather, the great Admiral Calderon, won a great victory against the Talains in the Battle of Nuñera, but the pirates of Tala still rise up with each new year… … .”

Traces of her diligent study were evident. She was so engrossed in her uniform that she forgot her made-up face like a sick person and was so moved that she spouted out what she had memorized.

“As a Grande Ortega, I learned that I had duties as well as the honorable rights bestowed by the Imperial House.”

“Oh my.”

“My grandfather always said, ‘The highest position requires the greatest responsibility.’”

Cassel spoke as mechanically and neatly as a machine running in a textile mill. The countess gasped for breath as if excited by his neat appearance.

And the moment he thought, 'This is a bit dangerous,' she jumped down to the floor and ran towards him.

“Countess, here—”

“Please, anywhere is fine.”

“But at least go into your room.”

At every comma, the countess's lips were covering his. He tried to avoid her face here and there and push her towards the nearest door, but she had already forgotten that she was a patient, even if it was a lie.

“I don’t like it. The room is too dark….”

“Why is it dark?”

“I want to see more uniforms, more uniforms of honor… … .”

She was licking the shoulder straps and collar as if she was a uniform fetishist. Cassel looked down at the woman's half-pulled top and swallowed a sigh.

Why do they all go crazy when they see themselves? Self-reproach bordering on narcissism made him hesitate for a moment, but it was only for a moment.

That was because her barely covered chest was shaking lustfully in the dim light.

Grandes de Ortega. The only heir to the Duke of Escalante, one of the 17 great noble families who had been awarded the honorary title by the Ortega royal family, despite his great background, was so handsome that anyone would lose their sense of humor at first sight, which was no different from God granting him the right to live a lifetime.

And his theory was always that there was no need to bother to throw away the gifts that had already rolled in. Whether it was the shell of a peerless handsome man gifted by God, the love of women, the admiration of people of all ages, or a beautiful woman who took off her clothes in the middle of the hallway and said, “Let’s try it out.”

Despite being naturally reserved and blunt, he was a very reserved person from the time he was fifteen and began to show his manly side, and from the time he was seventeen and a cadet wearing the uniform of the military academy, wherever he went he was surrounded by crowds of followers. By the time he was twenty and enlisted in the navy, he had come to know more mature women who were more mature and had no trouble following them.

And now, twenty-three, it was the best of times.

Cassel hugged her waist and spun her around, pushing her against the wall. The woman's skills were crude, as she haphazardly kissed him, but her passion, regardless of the location, was worth praising.

So, it is necessary to give a proper reward. Another of his principles was that he would never do anything dangerous in such a dangerous place… .

'Well, maybe once.'

As he cupped her breasts and ran his lips gently along her neckline, the countess’s expression twisted into delight. She was carelessly raising the hem of her dress to her waist, but her hands were also obsessive, as she unbuttoned her collar again in case he took off even a little bit of her uniform.

If you rush to take off your clothes, it'll only be a hassle to get them back on, so it's better. I didn't enlist for this, but the fun that comes with it is always nice.

Cassel listened with one ear and the other ear as the Countess babbled about useless things while writhing around, concentrating on her body. The answers came in occasional bursts, a few words at a time. He couldn't quite remember them.

Then, several times, he realized belatedly that the same subject was being repeated in the woman's speech.

The words flowing from the countess's voice, and the thoughts that briefly crossed his mind... This wasn't why he enlisted...

… So, why did I enlist? I asked myself this without thinking, and a scary face came to mind.

“… So to Kyung’s fiancée, huh, Kyung, it’s such a shame… … . She’s too ordinary. Of course, her family is incredibly well-off. She’s the daughter of the Ballestena family.”

“… … .”

Ines Ballestena. Just thinking about that calm face was suffocating. Cassel frowned at the statuesque face. It was too vivid for what he had pictured in his head. The desire subsided in an instant.

“If your face isn’t that pretty, at least your actions should be pretty. Hehe, it would be nice if you had a soft and gentle taste…”

Even gossip was not pleasant. Cassel stared at the wall for a while, then nervously twisted his head and delicately avoided the countess’s lips. For a moment, his vision turned to the side.

“… with such a perfect fiancée by your side, and yet such a stiff and boring face? You’re not even a nun… … .”

Ines Ballestena was watching them.

With a peculiar stiff, dull, almost chapel-like expression.

It was the first discovery in the 17th year of engagement.

Episode 2

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It was right after the short rainy season.

The Via Santalaria, the main road that runs through the capital city of Mendoza, would normally be teeming with carriages and people of all kinds, but perhaps because of the unpleasant weather, it was not as usual.

There were only a few drab official carriages used by the government, a few carts carrying luggage, and a few private carriages in a hurry, running cautiously along the great road.

It was a weather where even a short walk would make your clothes wet with moisture. And what about the puddles of water here and there on the wide road? If the coachman looked away for even a moment, the carriage would stagger as if drunk.

The carriage of the Duke of Escalante was no exception.

“… … .”

The wagon wheels sank into the puddle again, and I could feel them bounce back up against the rocks. Cassel cursed quietly, his face still elegant, as if he was paying for the cost of taking off his uniform.

But the young duke, who had been cursing the incompetent coachman for a moment, soon returned to that day.

That day, the sudden sense of incongruity may have been the rag's instinct.

There was one reason why the imagination that brought to mind Ines Ballestena was so vivid: because it was reality.

Cassel thought as he tapped the cushion rolling beside his leg. Unlike his blond hair and his relaxed posture as he leaned back, his head was a mess as he recalled the unpleasant sights of that day.

That day, that day… … .

Cassel recalled a few more words the Countess had said that he had overheard.

'But look at that nun-like dress of your fiancée. Even at an imperial banquet… . No one who sees her for the first time would be able to imagine the grandeur of the Duke of Ballestena.'

If you had any discerning eyes, you would have noticed that her nun-like attire cost more than her necklace. The Duke of Ballestena was not one to skimp on his only daughter.

'Besides, how arrogant he is towards the other young ladies, if even His Majesty sees that… … .'

He wasn't a friendly person. He wasn't the type to make friends.

‘…I heard all about it.’

She had only heard. What she saw was more. So Cassel was filled with guilt, despite not answering.

Guilt. Guilt towards Ines Ballestena, the woman who was the culprit.

I stare at the empty space across from me with narrowed eyes, but for some reason, Ines' expression does not come to mind.

The memories were as hazy as the awkward feelings of that time. The face of that day, the expression of that day.

I'm the type of person who quickly forgets unpleasant memories, but this is more of a dislike than a...

“Captain, we have arrived.”

Cassel shook his head and got out of the carriage. It was the Ballestena. It was a magnificent mansion, a miniature replica of the great manor of the Perez region ruled by the Duke.

The Duke of Ballestena's residence was situated on an elevated platform, facing the southern side of the Via Sant'Angalia, like a castle dominating a manor.

Thanks to this, any guest who comes here can see the whole view of Mendoza as if they were an emperor as soon as they get off the carriage. It is an incredible luxury. However, Cassel turned away without any emotion.

Father—the Duke of Escalante—had left a private bad reputation for the mansion being so grand that it almost seemed shabby, but Cassel felt a lump in his throat whenever he stood there. Most of the time, he came here to escort Ines Ballestena or occasionally to pretend to be her fiancé, and nothing reminded him of their future more than that.

Moments when you can't help but think about the suffocating future ahead of you in the next few hours, or the distant lifetime you'll spend with her. Things that make your throat choke just thinking about them.

“Captain Escalante, Lady Ines is waiting for you in the reception room.”

Look at this. It was already hard to breathe.

Cassel was already a very promiscuous man, and he always lived with the very conservative idea that after marriage, one should not know any women other than his wife.

It was a kind of irreversible morality that went directly against the trashy 'let's do it first' trend of Mendoza society—ironically, it became a trashy motivation for him now, while at the same time turning marriage into a grave.

After getting married, you can't die, so you have to work even harder now.

That way, even if I live the rest of my life like a monk, I won't have any regrets.

Cassel Escalante needed a rag-like memory to live by someday.

It may be one thing if she was a fiancée who was unilaterally notified at the age of six, but it was different if she was a wife who had pledged herself to a cardinal. Such nonsense would soon become a thing of the past. And it had to be so.

Whenever Cassel thought of the six-year-old daughter of the Duke of Ballestena, who had chosen her own path and derailed her life's path, he felt indescribable anger, irritation, and other feelings of annoyance, but for the twenty-three-year-old Ines Ballestena, he felt a future obligation as solid as a prison.

The reality that I had been putting off for over six years, going to the military academy and enlisting in the Navy, was getting closer and closer.

She was now closer to kneeling with the Cardinal at his feet and receiving his blessing than she had been seventeen years earlier.

“Sir Escalante.”

“… Ines.”

So, I was faced with this strange sense of guilt. At least, a half-guilty and embarrassed feeling that I shouldn't have caught her.

“Come in.”

A voice greeted him with a flat, even tone. Cassel approached her and kissed the back of her hand, which she held out gracefully.

What I see when I hear it again is, as always, a neatly covered outfit with no gaps all the way to the neck.

Her face was plain, without any sharp features, but not particularly beautiful, her eyes were always straight and calm, and her black hair was half-tied back. In the hazy recollection where her expression was completely absent, her face became clear.

Yeah. Even then, he just had that kind of expression. An expression that just stared at people, like someone who didn't know how to get angry or laugh.

“I understand that you have something to look for.”

“The matter was the same yesterday, four days ago, and two weeks ago….”

“It’s been a rainy season lately. I hope you won’t have to worry about me.”

It's a remark that seems to be very considerate, but in reality, it's a remark that lightly overlooks the fact that she has ignored his calls in the past.

It was the first time Ines had ignored him like this. And it was only natural. What fiancée wouldn't be angry at the sight of her fiancé entangled with a naked lady for the first time?

Cassel's mouth twisted.

“—I know what you were thinking that day.”

He seemed frustrated and threw away the honorifics in one word. Nineteen years ago, when they started out as playmates, there was no honorifics anyway. Of course, in the end, there were no games and no friends… … . Ines hated playing and friends, and he hated them too.

On that subject, with one point of the finger, he singled out Cassel, not his cousin the Crown Prince, and doomed him to his own dull life. Cassel tried to remind himself of that fact.

Yes, I had to think about who I was for and why I had to live the rest of my life like a monk. I never wanted to get married. I had to drive away this guilt with that annoying and annoying feeling, and get out of this situation… .

“I don’t understand what you are saying, Sir Escalante.”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“Not at all.”

His words were again interrupted by Ines's obedient voice. If he was truly obedient, there would be no reason to interrupt others. Ines was obedient to him in the first place. It was ridiculous nonsense, considering that he had swayed others' lives with a single point of his finger.

“Ines.”

“—It’s not a pleasant conversation for either of us anyway. Do we really need to do it?”

But Ines Ballestena liked him.

I chose him because I liked him, and because I liked him, I abandoned the will of the royal family, I abandoned the position of the royal family that was promised to me before I was born, and I also threw away several opportunities that could have brought everything back to square one.

I waited for him because I liked him. 17 years ago, and now. Always. In the same place.

And that's always been a problem for Cassel.

Ines Ballestena likes him, and he doesn't like Ines Ballestena at all.

Perhaps it wasn't her stuffy dress or her dull expression that was suffocating him. It couldn't have been the victim mentality that his life was being swayed by her.

He had nothing to give her in return. At best, he had nothing but the deception of trying to please her, the lingering embarrassment… and the long-standing guilt.

“I can explain.”

Of course, it was an excuse that didn't even come close to explaining it. Ines had built a stubborn wall against the world, and despite her rigid attitude, she had many innocent sides. She didn't need to know everything. They were going to get married soon, and there are some things in the world that are better left unknowing.

That doesn't mean she really didn't know anything, but even if she did… .

“I saw it with my own eyes, so the explanation is sufficient. So there is no problem.”

Before Cassel could come up with a decent excuse, she shrugged. He laughed and asked back.

“…You can only say that?”

“Sir Escalante.”

“It was worth it, it was worth it. So get real mad at me, Ines.”

“I’m not angry at all.”

She was even smiling. It was a smile you only see once a year. Cassel looked at her in astonishment and barely managed to spit it out.

“I’m mad.”

“I told you it didn’t come out.”

“That’s why you didn’t see me for two weeks.”

“Because it was the rainy season. I didn’t want you to come home soaking wet.”

Even in the midst of all that, I felt sincerity.

“And this conversation is tiring, Sir Escalante. This is not the kind of conversation we usually have.”

“… … .”

“Anyway, there are more than a few women who stick around the palace.”

“… … .”

“… Did you really think I didn’t know?”

The voice that asked Cassel in a surprised tone was similar to that of a child. A childhood friend who was not on good terms, with just that level of intimacy.

She wasn't a stupid woman anyway. Cassel narrowed his eyes.

“…And you weren’t angry?”

“There’s no reason for that. Whoever you meet, it’s your heart.”

“I am your fiancée, Ines. We are going to be married soon.”

Realizing that he had spoken like a madman, as if the tables had been turned, he ran a nervous hand through his hair. It was as if he was actually angry.

Instead of pointing out his contradiction, Ines spoke gently.

“That doesn’t mean you’re losing your freedom now. We’re not even married yet.”

“… … .”

“So from now on, do whatever you want. Don’t worry about me. There’s no need for any explanations.”

“…because you are that ‘tolerant’ of your man’s female problems?”

Cassel asked sarcastically.

“That’s not even funny. Ines, that kind of thing—”

“—Yeah, this isn’t something like tolerance. Just like you said.”

Instead of shaking her head, Ines raised her soft green eyes. Ines' black hair swayed gently in the damp wind blowing in from the distant window. She opened her mouth quietly.

“That means I don’t care about you at all, Escalante.”

Summer of my twenty-third year.

She said so. Up to this point, it was all a mistake.

Episode 3

Chapter 1. Cassel Escalante's Position

So, it could have been wrong from the beginning.

When six-year-old Cassel Escalante promised to spend his life with six-year-old Ines Ballestena, he did not know what a “lifetime” meant. It was only when the sumptuous banquet to celebrate their engagement at the Ballestena residence was almost over that Cassel asked the people, “How many years is a lifetime?”

“No, what I mean is, how many years is ‘lifetime’?”

He must have asked that question for the fourth time, wandering among the adults who were just smiling strangely instead of answering. The Duke of Ballestena, who was asked the question, pointed to his daughter with his chin, interrupting the Duchess who was trying to answer instead. Only then could Cassel see Ines’ expression.

“…Do you know what that is?”

The eyes that looked down as if they were looking at something inferior in the world were looking at him. Their eye level was the same, but the angle of their gaze was infinitely superior. Six-year-old Cassel had a very easygoing personality, but he knew like a ghost that someone was ignoring him. At the moment when he was frowning, Ines suddenly continued.

“You don’t know.”

“I know, who doesn’t know that?”

“Explain it.”

“… Time, time.”

“Time, what.”

“Because it’s time—”

“—Do I really have to talk to Prince Escalante directly?”

Ines turned her head and asked her parents. The Duke bent down to his young daughter's eye level and spoke affectionately.

“You’re much smarter than your peers. It’s natural to feel frustrated. So you need to practice. Practice talking to your friends without ignoring them, even if they’re not as smart as you. How to tell your friends when they don’t know something, and how to make them feel like they’re being ignored, even if they’re not as smart as you are…”

Did you just say that I was stuffy? Didn't you say that I was lacking? That I wasn't smart? Cassel doubted his ears and looked back and forth between the Duke and Ines.

But it seemed like they had already lost sight of Cassel.

'Me? Are you stupid?'

Cassel was smart for a six-year-old. Didn't his tutors and the elders of his family all unanimously praise him? 'Prince Escalante is really smart for a six-year-old.'

He looked back at the duke, his perfectly cute frowning. Unlike Ines's stiff attitude, the duke's haughty face was filled with pride and affection for his daughter. It was a stark contrast to how he looked at other people's children.

“I don’t need friends. Prince Escalante is my fiancé.”

So it was as if it wasn't important at all. It was a tone like, 'I don't need friends, so why would I care about a fiancé?'

Cassel was young and didn't know much yet, but he knew that a 'fiancé' was more important than a 'friend'. You can have an endless number of friends, but you can only have one fiancé, right?

'You're so smart, but you still don't know that?'

Of course, the catch is that they have already failed as friends several times.

“Yes. Cassel is your fiancé. So be more kind, gentle, and girlish….”

“Even if I have a bad personality, I am already a woman, Father.”

Cassel stared at her with narrowed eyes, then flinched in surprise when she finished reprimanding her father and turned her head away again.

The girl with black hair and a neat black dress looked more suited to a funeral of a stranger than to a banquet celebrating her own engagement. She had a strict air that was not childish at all, and she felt uncomfortable, as if she was encountering an adult who was unkind to a child… .

Ines Ballestena did not seem like a child. Perhaps that was why she had an instinctive aversion to her. Cassel had always felt uncomfortable with her. So he still found it hard to believe.

“Escalante. Listen carefully.”

That stiffness that doesn't call someone's name even when they die. That arrogance, even though they're not even prettier than you...

Marriage, marrying someone like this.

“Only dead people can answer how many years a life is.”

“…Can a dead person answer?”

“I can’t. That’s why no one alive knows.”

“How do you know the dead?”

“Because I died.”

“… … .”

The boy, who had been learning about 'death' for about four months, was embarrassed by the conversation that only kept coming up with the word 'death'. She was wearing a dress that looked like mourning clothes, and it was so scary, but she kept saying it without fear... He rolled his eyes to find an adult who could mediate the conversation, but the Duke and Duchess of Ballestena had already abandoned them.

Cassel decided to change the subject himself.

“So you don’t know either?”

“Yes. Only dead people.”

The horse returned to its original place without any purpose. Cassel quickly gave up.

“Why do you have to die to know?”

“Life is until death, and when you die, life ends.”

“… … .”

“Then… you can finally calculate the total. How many years is your life?”

"…through?"

“It’s over. So you thought you’d never die?”

The end of a lifetime was welcome. They said they had to be together 'for life'. If his marriage with Ines was to end, then a lifetime had to end too.

But dying was a bit difficult.

“…Why is life only until death? Why?”

“That’s life. From the day you’re born until the day you die. So you won’t know how many years your life will be until you die.”

“… … .”

“Please don’t ask me when I will die.”

“When will I die?”

Ha… … Ines put her hand on her forehead and shook her head. It was something that Cassel’s mother, the Duchess of Escalante, liked to do when she was worried about her son.

Feeling both bad and ominous at the same time, Cassel asked again urgently.

“When will I die? Why will I die?”

“Do you think I’m a fortune teller or something… No one knows that.”

“My grandfather’s leg rotted after being shot in Nunyera. Then my leg too….”

“If you really want to emulate that, you can get shot, but you don’t have to. Everyone dies for different reasons. Some die from illness, some die from starvation, some die from drinking too much, some die from being beaten, some die from being shot, some die from being stabbed… .”

Cassel's beautiful face turned pale. Ines sighed again, as if she was tired.

“There are so many things to die for?”

“Just be careful. Just try.”

“If you’re careful, you won’t die?”

“That’s not it.”

“Even if you’re careful, you’ll still die?”

“You could die tomorrow.”

The face that had been perfect like the incarnation of a baby angel depicted in the Holy Spirit slowly distorted. Tears seemed to well up in her trembling blue eyes, but soon began to drip down.

A look of pity appeared in Ines' eyes again.

“Will I get my legs cut off too?”

“…Your grandfather lived ten years after his leg was amputated.”

“I have to live with you until my legs are cut off?”

“You’re not like your grandfather. How many times have I told you that you don’t need to amputate your leg… Oh, of course, if you get sick and your foot rots away, or if you get a gunshot wound and leave it unattended, then you might have to do that—.”

“—I said I have to cut it! If I don’t cut it, I have to marry you!”

People's eyes belatedly gathered on the main characters of the dinner party. To be exact, on the boy with a pitiful and beautiful face like an angel, who was shedding tears. Then, they all looked at the girl who was looking at the boy with a face that was bloodless and tearless, as if searching for the cause.

Take Cassel, with his brilliant blond hair, perfect blue eyes, flawless porcelain skin, and sculpted features, dressed in a white dress shirt, red cravat, beige vest, and brown frock coat.

Ines's stern expression and black color in stark contrast to those warm colors…

It couldn't have been a more perfect contrast of colors, like the contrast between good and evil. Ines whispered through clenched teeth.

“Do you think marriage is all you need to do? You have to have children with me too.”

"no!"

“So, if you don’t want to do this, you’d better stop now. If you cry, you’ll end up having a baby with me.”

“… … .”

“You hate me, don’t you?”

Cassel looked at Ines with frozen eyes and nodded slowly. Ines reluctantly reached out and wiped Cassel’s wet cheek. The adults quickly looked away as if they were relieved by this action that seemed quite affectionate from a distance.

Ines pulled away from him, as if the suspicions that had been cast upon her were gone. It seemed cruel, but to Cassel, it seemed as if the smoke of death had also moved away just by her moving away.

“Escalante.”

"huh."

“… In fact, it may not be ‘lifelong’.”

"what?"

“I’m talking about our marriage.”

Ines smiled with a secretive expression as if sharing an important secret, then returned to her expressionless face.

When Cassel tilted his head in confusion, he muttered something like, “What would you know?” in a slightly annoyed tone, but that was it. It was thanks to the fact that Empress Cayetana, the Duke of Escalante’s older sister and Cassel’s aunt, happened to raise her glass to give a congratulatory speech.

“Cassel Escalante de Esposa will marry Inés Ballestena de Perez when she comes of age, and the alliance between their families will be strengthened by this beautiful couple who will spend their lives together.”

“That’s right!”

“They will love and cherish each other their whole lives, and they will become a pillar of support and a light to lead each other by holding each other’s hands during difficult times, and they will surely support their two families with a stronger love. Ines Ballestena will become the mistress who will personally rule the great manor of the Escalante family, and Cassel Escalante will become the son-in-law of the family that Ballestena has formed an alliance with, and they will devote their whole lives to each other’s families, and this will also be a joy to our royal family… … .”

To be together for life—until death, to love and cherish each other for life—until death, to devote ourselves to each other’s families for life—until death… … . Now, the word “lifelong” was automatically replaced with “until death.” It was a congratulatory message that was like a curse.

No matter what their unkind, sassy, ​​and unattractive six-year-old fiancée said, their lives were cast that day like dice.

And it was clear that Cassel Escalante's perfect life had become distorted from that day on.

Episode 4

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“…I still don’t understand.”

Crown Prince Oscar, ten years old, sat cross-legged on his still immature legs and stared at Cassel with disapproval. It was clear that he was showing off his legs that were longer than those of his cousin, who was four years younger. He was still a child himself… .

“Why you?”

“… … .”

Cassel was about to face his cousin with annoyance as usual, but he closed his mouth, wondering what he could say. He had already been warned by his parents and was entering the palace. 'Although Lord Oscar is not very mature in his actions, he is the one you should serve as your master for the rest of your life.'

Life is just until death. And Cassel was already tired of the word life.

It was hard enough to live with Ines Ballestena as husband and wife until death, but to have to look after that childish cousin until death… . To have to serve him as if he were the Emperor himself… .

“The Escalante de Esposa in Cassel.”

"huh."

“Do you think what this brother says is true?”

It was funny to list his long name and say it solemnly. They say that when you're young, you look like an adult even if you just grow a few years older, but Oscar was a type of person who, despite his height that was good for his age, ate away at his adult appearance with his babbling.

At least to his cousin Cassel.

“I don’t know either.”

“Don’t you know? Is that okay?

The Crown Prince seemed naturally intelligent and calm on the outside, but Cassel was now becoming convinced that because of his habit of nitpicking, he would eventually lose the loyalty of his subjects.

“If you don’t know, just say you don’t know, that’s it. Just because you have a pretty face, you can already live comfortably in this world, right? Don’t you know? That’s all?”

“I don’t know, I say I don’t know.”

“That's exactly your problem.”

As Oscar nervously ran his fingers through his red hair, Cassel, who had been forcibly holding the book opposite him, finally closed it with his small hands.

“If you don’t know, try to find out. When you grow up, if your master asks you something, will you just blankly stare at women’s butts and say, ‘I don’t know about that…’?”

"no."

I just didn't want to be around that bastard's cousin. I had to do this annoying thing even when I was grown up. At this point, Cassel thought back to the words of Empress Cayetana, Oscar's mother and his father's great-sister.

I was told that when I grow up, I will be able to do whatever I want. In order to do that, I have to study hard and do things I don't like—like my annoying cousin—and buy freedom in the future.

But look at reality.

When he grew up, he had to marry the cold Ines Ballestena, and help his cousin, who would rise to greater heights than he was now. Even the family duty that he had secretly tried to postpone to his younger brother Miguel became Cassel's only duty from the moment he had been engaged to Ines and was treated as a temporary adult. The only daughter of the Ballestena family could not marry a man who would not even receive the title of duke.

Thanks to this, Cassel was now the true heir to the Duke of Escalante. This was the first time in one hundred and fifty years that a crown prince had been born in the Escalante family.

All affairs of the Duke of Escalante revolved around the Crown Prince, and among all those ‘affairs’, their eldest son and successor, Cassel, was no exception.

He now has to spend more time with Oscar than ever before, not to mention his unwelcome fiancée.

“To Young-ae Ballestena… You definitely did something. Yes.”

While enduring such an absurd conspiracy right in front of me.

Cassel did not lose his composure despite the Crown Prince's out-of-context argument, and responded respectfully, just as he had learned dozens of times from his mother.

“I am six years old, Your Majesty.”

People say that he is so innocent and six years old, but he is so mature. It is hard to believe that he is six years old… He has always been smarter than his age. No matter what his unkind fiancée and her unkind father say about him.

Oscar's eyes narrowed as if he had read the proud expression that came to my mind without me knowing.

“So, you’re only six years old.”

“I’ll be seven soon.”

“How dare a seven-year-old like that….”

He's only ten years old... ... .

“Didn’t you know that kid was mine?”

“Your Majesty, Ines was once yours….”

“You dare to intercept what belongs to your lord?”

It had already been three months since Cassel and Ines had become engaged, but Oscar seemed to be reminiscing about that day as if it were yesterday.

“I won’t hold you accountable for your sins just by looking at your uncle’s face. So tell me. What on earth did you do to him?”

“… … .”

“It’s that damn face, isn’t it?”

Cassel's angelic face was clouded with fatigue. It was an expression that did not suit a child, but there was nothing that did not suit such a face.

“Nothing—.”

“You kept hanging around in front of that kid, with that damn face.”

“… … .”

“I said there is no such thing as a separate work.”

Oscar muttered to the side as if spitting. He too had the same refined features as the emperor, and his face was already quite handsome, giving off a sense of being tall and handsome, but he knew very well that it was no match for Cassel’s inhuman face.

“It’s because of, or rather, thanks to, Her Majesty the Empress.”

“That marriage was meant for the royal family. She wasn’t born to look after the Escalante estate.”

It was the Crown Prince's mother, Cajetana, who originally wanted to form a perfect alliance by marrying the Ballestena family and grafting Cassel as Ines' playmate to achieve this.

And when Ines refused the engagement in front of him, saying, "I hate the Crown Prince even if he dies," and pointed to Cassel, who was sitting there unawares, saying, "I'd rather marry someone like that," it was the Crown Prince's mother, Cayetana, who brought her niece in front of him as if she had been waiting for it. She kept saying the nonsense that, "Marriage is only possible if the woman is happy," to a mere six-year-old child.

If Cassel had grown a little more, he would have noticed that naked willingness. He would not have scolded the girl for her impiety in daring to boldly reject the emperor's son by saying, "I don't want to die," but would have hidden a hidden intention behind her kindness in saying, "Choose whatever you want."

His aunt did not want a dull girl as much as the Duke of Ballestena needed, and she needed Ines, but not enough to give up her own son.

Cassel was a suitable link. It would allow them to keep Ballestena's daughter close by but not so close that it would intrude on their lives, and it would also solidify the alliance with Ballestena.

However, since Cassel was a child who did not know English, he just felt wronged. If he had known English, he would have felt even more wronged.

“Your Majesty, the choice is Ines’s.”

“Because of your damn face, that child lost his chance to stand at the highest point of the empire. Because of one moment of misjudgment… Do you know how much you ruined that child’s life?”

It's an unbelievable statement. He ruined her life? I don't know if it was the other way around... ... Cassel shook his head firmly. Oscar sighed, resting his hand on his forehead.

“… The only one who rejected me and chose me was this idiot. That damn black hair like a crow…”

“… … Didn’t you like Ines?”

“Do you like it? Who?”

“Your Majesty.”

“Me? That crow?”

“…You wanted Ines.”

To the extent of tormenting a person like this. Oscar burst out laughing at Cassel's words as if he had suddenly heard something funny.

Then he looked at Cassel with a hint of bravado, as if he were looking at a very young and innocent child.

“Kassel, what you want is different from what you like.”

Very different. He nodded as if he was thinking that way, then rested his chin on his hand haughtily. It was the way he looked when he believed himself to be very mature.

“I wanted to marry Ines Ballestena. I didn’t love her.”

Instead of saying what was on his mind, "Either way, Ines doesn't like you, so your opinion doesn't matter anyway," Cassel tilted his head as if he had only a little bit of doubt left.

Oscar laughed.

“Of all the women we could marry, there is no one with better blood than her.”

Cassel also knew that among the prestigious noble families belonging to the Grandes de Ortega, there were only five families that were considered the highest class of dukes, and that among these five families, Ines was the only girl of their age.

Whether it was a boy or a girl, the decision-making power tended to lean toward the one with the rare value. The Grandes de Ortega was not a position that the imperial family could suppress by force, and as a result, the young crown prince experienced the first frustration in his life. Just as Cassel was immediately put on a leash.

“Of course you could have married my sister.”

"…no, I do not want."

“You hate my sister more than the crows of Valestena?”

It was no surprise. Marrying your cousin? How disgusting… When Cassel nodded, Oscar snickered and removed the hand that was resting his chin.

“It seems like you like crows more than I expected.”

“After all, if we have to live together for the rest of our lives.”

It was now three months since their engagement, and Cassel was trying to control his emotions every day. Oscar smiled.

“That makes me want it even more.”

Well, it must be hard to live off of someone’s face for the rest of your life… The crown prince stood up, muttering to himself something that an old woman might have muttered.

“Okay. Let’s go see your crows.”

“… … ?”

“You still have a long way to go before you reach adulthood.”

He said something so suggestive and meaningful as if he were an adult.