

울어봐, 빌어도 좋고

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The child arrived in a mail wagon.

It was a late afternoon in the early spring. Bill Remmer was busy planting rose seedlings all day long.

"Are you Mr. Bill Remmer?"

Standing with a dazed look on her face, the child asked a cautious question. Her smooth pronunciation gave off a strange feeling.

"Yes. I am indeed Bill Remmer."

Bill took off his straw hat with the same hands that had dusted off the dirt from his clothes.

When the tanned face, which had been hidden by the shadow of his straw hat, was revealed, the startled child swallowed her saliva. The child's reaction was nothing out of the ordinary for Bill. Anyone who first saw Bill Remmer generally reacted like the child because of his rough-looking appearance.

"Who are you?"

Bill's face grew more terrifying as he frowned upon the child.

"Hello. Uncle Bill. I am Leyla Lewellin. I came from Lovita."

The child enunciated clearly and slowly. Lovita huh.. Bill realized why her pronunciation sounded rather strange.

"You're saying, you crossed the border into the Berg Empire all by yourself?"

"Yes. I rode the train."

The child smiled awkwardly and unnaturally straightened her posture. The mailman who had brought the child approached the two from behind.

"Ah. This child finally met you Mr. Remmer."

"Good timing. What made you bring this child?"

"This child was walking alone in front of the station so I asked her where she was going and she said she was on her way to find Bill Remmer, the gardener of the Herhardt family. I brought her here because I was on my way to deliver some letters."

The mailman replied with a smile and handed an envelope to Bill Remmer. It was a letter from a distant relative living in the neighboring country of Lovita.

Bill urgently tore open the envelope on the spot. The letter contained the story of a child who was an orphan and was taken in by relatives who were now no longer able to foster her due to their supposed 'poor' circumstances. The child's name was Leyla Lewellin. The little girl standing in front of Bill was the orphan.

"Damned people. They sure are telling me this news fast."

Bill lost his breath in amazement.

No one in Lovita could take care of this mere orphan. Bill Remmer was the last among those who had a faint connection with the child. The letter stated that if Bill's situation was not favorable, he should leave the child in the orphanage.

Bill muttered a curse and threw the crumpled paper to the floor.

"These people should go to hell. How can they send this little thing here alone."

Now that Bill understood the whole situation, his face gradually turned red with anger. The child was treated like a bomb that was passed back and forth from one relative to another and meant to be thrown away when no one else wanted her. She was ultimately sent away to a different country with an address of a distant relative she did not even know of.

"Excuse me, Uncle Bill. I am not that young."

The child who had been silently watching Bill suddenly opened her mouth.

"I'll be twelve in a couple of weeks."

She whispered in a rather grown-up tone. Bill chuckled in amazement. He was relieved that she was older than he thought. The child looked smaller than her age.

When the mailman who delivered the troublesome girl left, the two were left in the garden. Bill wrapped his head around with his hands and pleaded God for help.

Even though they were distant relatives, the two seemed more like father and daughter from afar. Bill had never met his distant relatives for more than 20 years and yet, there he was, stuck with a child who he never knew existed until today.

Even though the weather was chilly, the child wore a thin layer of clothes. She was emaciated- like an iron skewer. All Bill could see of her was her vivid green eyes and gold-threaded hair.

It was impossible for him to take care of her. Bill concluded.

But the only solution left was to put her in an orphanage, which drove him crazy. Bill once again murmured a curse towards the relatives that put him into this mess. The child flinched and started biting her red lips.

"Follow me."

Bill shook his head in frustration and led the way.

"Let's fill our stomachs before I make my decision."

His blunt words were carried away by the evening breeze. As the two walked further towards Bill's cabin, the child's timid steps gradually became light and cheerful.

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"Is that all you're eating?"

Bill frowned upon the small plate the child was holding.

"Yes. I eat a little." The child smiled.



"Child, I hate children who don't eat a lot."

The child's eyes widened at Bill's words. The light of the table lamp lit over the child's skinny wrist that was revealed under the carelessly raised sleeve.

"You should eat everything like a cow."

Bill's expression became more stern. The troubled Leyla, slowly blinking her eyes, moved more loaf of meat and bread onto her plate. She then hurriedly began to gobble up her food.

"I can't eat like a cow but I do eat quite well uncle."

The girl brightly smiled with bread crumbs near her dainty lips.

"Yes. I can definitely see that."

Bill laughed and started filling his tall glass with alcohol.

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

Bill scrunched his face to deliberately scare the child. The child simply stared at the man, not daring to avoid his eyes.

"No. You don't yell at me. You give me lots of good food. So I think you're a good person."

What kind of life has this child been living? Bill thought as he filled his glass of beer again.

The letter said the child's mother abandoned her husband and child to elope with another man. The father of the child, who was heartbroken

by the betrayal, became an alcohol addict and had died of alcohol poisoning. After that, the child grew up in the homes of her relatives, only left to be deserted by them.

Even though the child had a pitiful past, Bill believed it was still absurd to raise her.

Bill Remmer chugged down the glass of beer and decided that he will make his decision by next week.

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"Did everyone hear? The gardener Bill Remmer has started to raise a young girl."

A young maid hurriedly rushed into the lounge servants used during their free time. The servants who were taking their rest all turned their eyes toward the young maid.

"A girl? Mr. Remmer? It would be more plausible to say that he decided to raise a lion or an elephant instead."

One of the servants snorted.

The Herhardt household's gardener, Bill Remmer, was a man who had a natural talent for growing flowers. Thanks to his talent, he has been able to maintain this position as a gardener for 20 years even with his brusque temper. He was deeply trusted by the Herhardt family. Especially Norma. Due to Norma's unique love of flowers, she gave infinite understanding and tolerance to Bill's gardening and temper. It was also her decision to give the gardener a cabin in the woods located behind the Herhardt's mansion.

Bill Remmer's life was simple.

He worked in the garden and took a rest in the cabin. Despite his time drinking with his fellow workers, he spent most of his time surrounded by flowers and trees. Even after decades have passed ever since his wife died of an illness, he did not get close to any woman.

The Bill Remmer raising a little girl? The servants who were resting in the lounge reached a consensus deeming that the rumor was nonsense until one of the maids sitting by the window burst into an exclamation.

"Oh my. It must be true! Look over there."

The maid pointed over the glass window with her eyes wide open. The servants all at once rushed over to the window and soon became shocked with wonder. On the other side of the garden, Bill Remmer was gardening with his body crouched down and the rumored petite girl was following his footsteps.

The girl's golden hair, braided in one strand, shook back and forth like a pendulum as she trotted along.

"I still haven't made my decision."

When there were questions asked about the child, Bill repeatedly answered the same response.

"I can't leave her here so I need to think well."

While Bill's thoughts continued through spring, then to summer, Leyla Lewellin was slowly settling down on the Herhardt estate. The child's diligent stroll through the gardens and forests had already become a familiar scene for the Herhardt servants.

"I think she's grown a bit."

Mrs. Mona, the Herhardt's chef, smiled while looking out the window. Leyla was examining the grass and flowers that were beginning to bud behind the forest cabin.

"She's got a long way to go. She's still smaller than average girls."

"Look, Bill Remmer. Kids are different than your plants. They can't grow overnight."

Mrs. Mona shook her head as she lowered her basket down on the table.

"What's this?"

"Cookies and cake. There was a tea party yesterday at the mansion."

"I hate sweets."

"Really? This is Leyla's"

Bill Remmer's dark eyebrows wrinkled at Mrs. Mona's nonchalant response.

This child was not meant to be here and yet, the Duke's servants began to look after Leyla every day. They greeted her, brought her food, and sometimes visited her. It was becoming troublesome for Bill Remmer.

"You should buy her some clothes. The young lady's skirt seems like it will go up to her knees."

Mrs. Mona tsked as she stared at Leyla running after a bird. Bill failed to

refute. Even in his eyes, it seemed obvious that Leyla was wearing clothes that didn't fit her.

"Oh my! Oh my! Look at her!"

Just when Mrs. Mona was about to leave, she suddenly pointed towards Leyla and shouted in dismay. Bill glanced at where Mrs. Mona was looking towards with a queer look. When the bird Leyla was chasing after landed on a tree branch, she started to swiftly climb up the tree. Her movements were athletic and light like a squirrel.

"She sure has a talent for climbing trees."

Mrs. Mona scowled at Bill's unconcerned reply.

"Bill Remmer! You knew about her climbing trees and you let that go? How the hell are you raising your child?"

"She's growing strong and well as you can see."

"You're raising that girl like a wild beast! My God."

Mrs. Mona raised her voice and made a fuss as Bill snooped around the window deafeningly. Leyla perched on the thin branch and watched the mini birds playing on the thicket.

After watching over the girl for a couple of months, Leyla Lewellin was proven to be a curious child who wanted to know more about the world. Flowers and grass, birds and insects. Anything that caught her eyes amazed and piqued her interest. One day at night, when Leyla wasn't returning for dinner, Bill had gone deep into the forest to find Leyla sitting by the river looking at a flock of water birds. She was so focused that she couldn't even hear Bill calling her name again and again.

After spitting out a couple of more harsh lectures, Mrs. Mona had returned home. Bill had slowly walked out to the back of his cabin.

"Uncle!"

Leyla delightedly waved towards him.

The child, who came down from the tree as quickly as she went up, hurriedly dashed towards Bill. The dull gray one-piece dress Leyla was wearing had short sleeves and was ragged. Her hand-me-down like clothes seemed inappropriate when meeting the duke so Bill had made his decision to buy her new clothes.

"Get ready and come out."

Bill said impulsively when the two arrived in front of the back door cabin.

"Ah. Uncle?"

"We're going downtown to buy some clothes so you don't have to look so puzzled."

Bill awkwardly gave off a dry cough and scratched his back neck.

"Duke Herhardt will be here soon, so it'll be a bit weird to greet him with your state right now."

"By the duke, you mean the owner of this land right?"

"Yes. Since it's break, he'll be back."

"Break? Does the duke attend school?"

Leyla frowned as she tilted her head. Bill grinned and stroked the child's disheveled hair.

"The duke is only 18 years old so he has no choice but to attend school."

"Whaat? Eighteen years old? The duke?"

Bill's laughter grew louder at the child's stunned expression. The child's fluffy hair that Bill had touched with his rough fingertips was as soft as cotton.

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A train from the capital had entered the platform at the Carlsbar station.

The waiting servants approached the private section of the station. By the time they lined up in a straight posture, a tall, slim boy descended onto the platform.

"Hello, master."

Starting with the polite greeting of the butler Hessen, all the other servants soon bowed their heads towards the boy. With a straight and graceful manner, Matthias responded to their greetings with a light but silent salute. His rosy lips were curled up in a smile that was neither excessive nor insufficient.

It wasn't until Matthias took a few steps when the Herhardt's servants began to move. The onlookers quickly backed away and opened the path for the young master to pass. Matthias walked past the platform without showing any chance of slowing down.

"A carriage."

Matthias smirked as he found a carriage waiting for him in front of the station.

"Ah..... Yes, master. Madam Norma doesn't believe cars are trustworthy."

"I know. For grandmother, cars are simply a lump of iron that is unbearably vulgar and dangerous."

"My apologies. Next time..."

"No. 'Classic' is not bad. Once in awhile."

Matthias calmly got on the carriage. His long arms and legs gave off movements were slow but steady. The carriage gradually picked up speed as it passed through the square and the bustling shopping streets. The separate wagon that was loaded with Matthias's baggage followed the carriage that was engraved with a golden crest off into the distance.

Visits by relatives who are planning to spend the summer in Arvis. Social gatherings. Insurance issues for the trade ship to sail next month.

Matthias, sitting at the backside of the carriage, stared outside the window as his butler Hessen reported the family's pending issues. Matthias replied to Hessen's words with a brief answer or a nod. The directors were in charge of the company, and Matthias's mother and grandmother were in charge of the family affairs, but the power to make the ultimate decision was up to Duke Herhardt. And Matthias has

been in that position ever since he was twelve years old.

By the time Matthias entered the Platanus road to the Herhardt territory, Hessen's report was over.

Matthias gazed at the familiar scenery with his head tilted at an angle. The tall trees that lined both sides of the driveway were arched as if they were holding hands. The fragmented sunlight gliding through the swaying leaves embroidered the path like a beautiful pattern.

Passing the road and into the territory, a white mansion with a deep blue roof had revealed itself. At the front door, the mother and grandmother were out to greet the family's head. While Matthias was straightening the position of his already linear tie, the door to the wagon opened.

"Welcome, Matthias."

The Dowager Duchess of Arvis, Norma Catarina von Herhardt, greeted her grandson with a bright smile. Matthias bowed his head and accepted his grandmother's kiss. Elysee von Herhardt, who was standing behind them, approached Matthias with a slightly more straightforward attitude.

"You've grown taller."

She gave him a warm hug and smiled. Her dark black hair, just like her son's, shined in the early summer sun.

Matthias replied with a corresponding smile. The greetings that were shared with the other servants who were waiting in line were not much different. Matthias's refined manner and proper courtesy were distinctly

shown towards the servants. He was the perfect owner of this family, Duke Herhardt.

Standing between his grandmother and mother, Matthias took the lead and crossed the lobby hall. Before he climbed up the stairs, he suddenly raised his head and looked up the huge chandelier that was lit up in the middle of the day. Beyond the chandelier was the crest of Herhardt family imprinted on the ceiling.

He was a Herhardt.

It was another name for intelligence, elegance, and unrelenting character.

In his own life, Matthias never had any complaints or doubts. He was well aware of the type of life he had to live in and was willing to accept it. He handled his life as if he were breathing and it was easy as that.

With his gaze focused down, Matthias climbed up the stairs with large strides.

When the owner of the household safely entered the mansion, the servants were now able to properly breathe.

The people of Arvis prepared for days in advance to thoroughly greet Duke Herhardt. Everything and everyone had to be perfect on his arrival, including those who were residing on his land. The servants had to be on their best appearances. The Arvis' uninvited guest, Leyla Lewellin, was no exception.

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"Did the duke go in? Already?"

Leyla, standing at the edge of the group of servants, whispered in a rather disappointed voice. The ivory dress that Bill had bought fluttered along with the girl's movement.

"You'll see Duke Herhardt in the woods. I'll have to ask for permission then."

Bill Remmer gave out a blunt answer and started walking towards the woods. Leyla ran after him.

"Does the duke like the forest as well?"

"Well, yeah sure. He likes hunting."

"Hunting? In the woods?"

Leyla's eyes grew wide open. Bill snorted as he glimpsed down the child.

"Isn't it natural the forest is the hunting ground for this family?"

"Then... does he hunt birds too?"

"The duke enjoys hunting birds the most."

Leyla stopped walking in contemplation at Bill's insignificant remark. After realizing what he had said, Bill awkwardly gave out a dry cough.

He thought of appeasing her with a proper lie but Duke Herhardt was scheduled to be on the hunting ground in a couple of days. He was worried that he might give the child a greater shock if he tried to relieve her with his white lies.

"You'll be surprised when you see the duke's shooting skills. He's young but he's a great marksman."

Bill babbled because he thought he had to say at least something to reassure the young girl. But Leyla was already on the verge of tears.

"Why does he like catching birds? There's lots of food in a mansion like that."

"To the noblemen, hunting is just a form of leisure. Birds are the most interesting targets to shoot at, and...."

Bill once again realized what he had said and turned towards Leyla. His eyes were met with Leyla's upset face.

Why did you have to like birds so much!

Bill almost yelled out. He didn't know why he was bothering to explain all these things to her while having to be careful of the child's feelings. Bill ended up keeping his silence because if he said one more word, she looked like she was about to cry.

A crying Leyla.

He hated the sight of crying children.

After hesitating, Bill started to walk again. The child followed his footsteps with her shoulders limp. The exact child who was excited to wear her new ivory-colored dress was now nowhere to be found. It had been quite a sight to see her getting so jumpy about a dress she just got.

"I hope the duke starts to hate hunting."+

The child, who had been silent for a long time, said cautiously.

"Maybe he'll grow bored of hunting?"

Leyla looked up at Bill with eyes full of hope. Bill could only reply by sheepishly scratching the back of his neck.

Leyla believed her prayers could have been fulfilled.

A week after his return, the duke was nowhere to be seen near the hunting ground. It was understandable because he was busy taking care of the guests who had flocked to the mansion to see him.

Every day, there were clamorous gatherings held at the mansion but the forest was silent. Summer was near its end. Baby birds hatched from the eggs and the wild roses, which used to be in their early buds, were now in full bloom. Leyla happily observed the minor changes that were happening in the forest.

"Don't go too far Leyla!"

Bill raised his voice when Leyla excitedly left the cabin.

"Okay! I'm just taking a walk by the river! See you later, uncle!"

Leyla turned around and frantically waved both her arms over her head. The old leather bag the girl was holding over her shoulder shook along with the jumpy child.

Leyla was the first to see the recently hatched birds over the tree branch. The hairless baby birdlings were waiting for their mother to bring their food. Leyla scurried down from the tree and recorded the baby birds she saw today on a small note taken out from her leather

bag. Although the sketches were a bit messy, she tried her best to capture the tiny birds through her drawings.

Leyla drew and wrote everything she saw in the woods in her little notebook. The land was more beautiful than any other place she had ever lived in. Leyla wanted to write down everything so when the time for her to leave the place came, she could recall the memories she had in the forest through her notebook. The thought of leaving the place one day saddened her.

As Leyla walked along the path leading to the riverside, she steadily recorded the forest. She stuck in pastel-colored flower petals between her notebook pages and picked some strawberries she found on the way. The sun was beginning to set when she reached the glistening riverside.

Leyla climbed on top of a massive tree that stood at the border of the forest and the river. The thick lengthy branch of the tree was her favorite spot because it was as comfortable as a chair. Just when Leyla was about to open her notebook, faint clatter of horseshoes was heard from afar.

Leyla hastily shoved her notebook into her bag. In the meanwhile, the galloping sound of the horse came closer. Frightened by the incoming intruder, Leyla held her breath while hugging the tree branch she was laying down on.

Soon after, a horse with a smooth dark hazel fur appeared. A man was on its back. Of all places, the man chose to rest his horse right underneath the tree where Leyla was on. The man's movements from when he descended from the horse were light and flexible.

Leyla believed she should come down but the strange man was already leaning his back under the tree. Not knowing what other excuses to say, Leyla simply stared at the man raising his hand to take off his hat. It was at that exact moment when Leyla's leather bag slid off her shoulders and hit the branch.

The memory of the next moment was vague.

The man reflectively turned his head towards the tree branch and met eyes with Leyla. Leyla gazed upon his eyes. His blue eyes, seen through the thick black hair flowing over his forehead, were like transparent glass beads. By the time Leyla pulled herself together, the man was pointing his gun towards her face. Leyla's face grew pale at the thought of getting shot by the long, threatening gun.

Leyla, frozen in place, simply hugged the tree for dear life. Her whole body was trembling in sweat. The man slowly gave off a silent sigh and lowered his gun.

"What are you."

A low voice streamed through his crooked lips.

".....Leyla."

Leyla managed to squeeze her voice out but was on the verge of tears. Her gold hair fluttered in the wind.

"What?"

His eyes narrowed further. Leyla hugged the tree so hard that her fingertips began to hurt.

"Leyla. Leyla Lewellin."

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"Uncle! Uncle Bill! Uncle!"

Leyla's voice rang out in the woods.

Bill was sitting in front of the cabin warehouse. He turned his head in bewilderment at Leyla's frantic call. Leyla rushed towards him with a crimson red face.

"What's the matter?"

"The- There's a man in the woods! He was tall!"

Despite her shortness of breath, Leyla was about to explain her encounter with the strange man.

"You must've met the duke who came out hunting."

Bill retorted as he picked up his tools from the warehouse.

"His hair was black and his eyes were really blue. His voice was light as a feather."

"It's Duke Herhardt without a mistake."

Bill snarled with laughter. Leyla stood in front of Bill for a long time, trying to catch her breath.

The beautiful but scary man stared at Leyla for some time and had turned away without saying a word. When he got back on his horse, two other men appeared from the deep forest. The man turned his

horse to join the other two men as they drifted further into the woods. When they were no longer visible, Leyla climbed down from the trees and fled to the cabin.

"Then the duke....."

When Leyla was able to say something, a cold shot rang out, shaking the calmness of the forest.

Leyla was startled and she turned her head towards the direction of the sound. Surprised birds arose from the far side of the forest. One of the surprised birds fell into the trees, with its wings drooped helplessly.

The shots went on a few more rounds. Bill gave Leyla a pat on her shoulder in an effort to calm the scared girl.

"Leyla."

Leyla slowly raised her head. When their eyes met, Bill unconsciously held his breath.

The child was crying.

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The beautiful bird slaughterer.

That was the title Leyla Lewellin decided to give him.

All the people of this estate, even Bill Remmer, praised him for being a perfect aristocrat. People seemed to care and love Matthias von Herhardt, who had outstanding qualities as the owner of this land.

But Leyla did not agree.

Ever since the day the duke went out hunting, the mother bird disappeared. The baby birds that had recently hatched no longer than their mother to feed them. In addition, countless birds were no longer to be seen.

Why did the duke hunt only small, beautiful birds instead of large birds that are meant to be eaten?¹

Leyla, who had been observing and agonizing for over the past month, now seemed to know why.

To him, the birds were moving a target.

The smaller they were, the more difficult and interesting they were to aim. The duke did not bother to look at the prey he hit. He simply turned away after hitting his target. On the days he went out hunting, Leyla buried the dead birds that were covered in blood.²

Bang-

The gunfire rang once again in the distance.

The sun was scorching hot but the tree shade was cool. Leyla sat on a blanket with her arms wrapped around her knees. Bill and the other garden workers were engrossed in digging up the rose tree that had started to wilt.

The garden behind the mansion seemed to have roses of all different sorts. The rose was said to be the national flower of the Berg Empire and the flower that the duke's mother and grandmother adored.

Due to another day of gunshots coming from the forest, Leyla wandered nervously around the cabin. Uncle Bill had seen her nervous state and decided to bring her out into the garden. Her mind was put to rest when the sound of gunshots faded away.

Is it really okay for me to rest when Uncle Bill is working under the burning sun?

Leyla uncomfortably looked at Bill. She slowly closed her eyes and let out a small sigh. Uncle Bill threatened to get angry if she helped him. He told her he hated children who don't listen. Even though Leyla's heart wasn't at ease, she decided to wait for him until he finished his job.

When Leyla opened her eyes again with resignation, she was startled by an unfamiliar boy standing in front of her. The neatly dressed boy looked like he was around Leyla's age.

"Hey."

When their eyes met, the boy greeted her with a lovely smile. He was a boy with charming platinum hair.

"You live here?"

The boy looked around and asked solemnly.

"Yeah. With Uncle Bill."

Leyla answered as she squinted her eyes.

"Mr. Bill? You mean that scary gardener guy?"

"He's not scary."

"Really? Seems scary to me."

The boy tilted his head and casually took a seat next to Leyla.

"Do you live here too?"

Leyla asked with caution. The boy smiled and shook his head.

"Nah. I followed my father. He's the family doctor at the Herhardt household. He's here to give Madam Norma a medical examination. I come here with my father sometimes. Madam Norma said it was okay."¹

"I see."

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"Same. But you're kinda small."

The boy staring at Leyla began to laugh. Leyla's cheeks started to flush bright red in fury.

"You're small too."

"I'm the tallest in my class though."

The boy stretched out his back to prove his tall height. He certainly looked a little taller than his age.

"Anyways... You're still shorter than Uncle Bill."

Leyla whispered softly. The boy giggled again at Leyla's words. He seemed like a happy-go-lucky child.

"Hey, it's impossible to find a kid or even an adult taller than Mr. Bill."

"I'm not so sure about that."

Leyla picked at the grass growing near the blanket for no reason. Her delicate fingers slowly tainted green. She wished the boy would quickly go away but he showed no signs of getting up.

"Do you want some?"

Leyla, who then focused her attention on the peach sitting at the edge of the blanket, asked impulsively. The boy gladly nodded.

Leyla took out a pocket knife from her leather bag. The boy snickered at the sight of Leyla gently cutting the peach.

"You're funny. Why is a knife coming out of a girl's bag?"

"Don't make fun of me. Uncle Bill gave it to me."

Leyla slightly wrinkled her nose in annoyance as she gave the half-cut peach to the boy. The sweet scent of the peach pulp tingled two children's noses.

"Why do you look so down? Did something happen?"

The boy carefully asked after he gulped down his peach.

"The duke and his friends keep hunting down birds."

Leyla somberly answered. The boy tilted his head, wondering what the

issue was.

"What about it?"

"They're murdering birds for their own enjoyment."

"Isn't that how hunting works?"

"Do you think so too?"

Leyla stared at the boy with her stern green eyes. To Leyla, the boy seemed like he would have a hard time holding the big, long hunting gun.

"Uh..... No."

The boy shook his head violently.

"I don't. It's cruel."

The boy replied. A smile gradually began to spread on Leyla's face.

"Do you want another peach?"

Leyla asked in a brighter voice. The boy nodded. Leyla cut another peach in half and handed the larger piece to the boy. The boy's cheeks started to flush as he tried to fix his uncomfortable collar.

"Kyle! Kyle!"

A faint voice was heard. The boy, who was fiddling with the dead peach seed, sprang to his feet.

"I have to go now."

"Okay. Bye."

"Kyle Etman."

The boy held out his hand.

"My name. What about you?"

"I'm Leyla. Leyla Lewellin."

Leyla awkwardly shook his hand. With their small hands covered in sticky peach nectar, the two shook hands as if they were making a truce.

"Bye, Leyla. See ya. I'll bring you something more delicious next time."

The boy shouted as he dashed away in the distance.

Leyla simply gave out a small wave because she was unsure if she could see him again if she ever stayed in this estate.

When Kyle left, Leyla's world was at peace again.

While taking a whiff of the rose-scented breeze, Leyla patiently waited for Uncle Bill to finish his work. But at some point, she had fallen asleep and opened her eyes to Uncle Bill calling her name at sunset.

Leyla rose up from her seat, carried her bag, and picked up the blanket.

"Uncle Bill. I saw a kid...."

When Leyla was about to tell her encounter with the boy who she shared her peaches with, she was interrupted by silhouettes of people walking out from the other side of the forest. It was Duke Herhardt and

his friends.

Matthias paused in the center of the rose garden. The blunt gardener, Bill Remmer, was there bowing his head towards the duke. It was not long before Matthias realized that there was a tiny child hiding behind the gardener.

"Long time no see, Mr. Remmer."

Matthias lightly nodded. His acquaintances that were with him during his hunting session stopped behind the duke at a moderate distance.

"She's going to be staying here at Arvis for the time being."

Bill Remmer informed the duke with a slightly uncomfortable look.

When Bill tapped the girl's back to come forward, the girl hesitatingly took a step towards the duke. Thanks to her sparkling blond hair, Matthias was able to recall who the child was. The girl who he almost shot. The absurd little girl who almost got shot for being thought of as a bird.

"I've already received approval from Madam Norma and Madam Elysse but I believe I should ask for your approval as well."

Bill Remmer bowed his head once again. The child standing beside him bowed along.

Matthias slowly glanced at the child. When they exchanged looks, the child frowned at him. Thin scowled eyes and clamped lips. Her expression was the exact same when they first met in the woods.

"You're that girl. The girl who lives in the forest."

Matthias's cousin, Riette, snickered from behind. The red-faced child hid behind the gardener's back in embarrassment. The girl he occasionally met in the forest was like that as well. As soon as she stared into the duke's eyes in wonder, she hid behind the tree. And after Matthias had finished hunting, she always came out from behind and buried the dead birds.¹

"Sure. If that's what you want Mr. Remmer."

Matthias gave a brief answer with a grin. Whatever the gardener raised in the forest was none of his business.

"Thank you My Lord."

Bill gave him his thanks. After Matthias's chin ever so slightly nodded at Bill, he began to move.

After the duke passed the gardener and the girl by, Leyla flinched at the sight of Matthias's servants following him with their hands full of hunted animals. The deep, unpleasant scent of blood ran through the girl's nose. Leyla's shoulders hunched and she closed her eyes.

Uncle Bill's large, warm hands patted Leyla's frail shoulders.

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Claudine let out an exaggerated sigh with her chin rested on the palm of her hand. Her curled brown hair bounced along to the beat of her constant sighs. Countess Brandt glanced at her daughter with her thin eyebrows.

"Claudine, behave like a lady please."

The countess's inarticulate voice grew in impatience. Although Claudine was rather too young to be called a lady, she was soon to be the Duchess of Arvis. Claudine's mother let out a long sigh at her daughter's immature attitude.

"But I'm so lonely and bored."

Claudine grumbled. The other noblewomen who were drinking tea at the tea table turned their eyes at the upset brunette girl.

"Then go play with your cousins."

Countess Brandt huffed as her face turned crimson red. But Claudine did not bother to notice her frustrated mother.

"They treat me as if I'm not here. They say things I don't understand."

The ladies let out a soft smile at Claudine's annoyed expression.

"Well, it can be boring. Claudine doesn't have any friends her age."

Elysse von Herhardt nodded as she stroked the white dog sitting on her lap.

"See? Madam Herhardt understands."

A lively smile bloomed on Claudine's lip when she found someone who could understand her pain.

"Who's that child?"

Claudine suddenly directed her finger towards a garden after glancing at a young girl for some time. All the ladies turned their heads toward



the direction Claudine was pointing at. The young girl Claudine was talking about was talking a stroll with a gardener.

"Can I play with her? I think she's about the same age as me."

"Well... Isn't she an orphan from abroad? That kind of girl isn't suitable to be your friend."

"I'm fine. I think it'll be more amusing than playing with a dog."

Claudine's tone was calm and imposing. She didn't pay any attention to her mother's red ears that were about to burst in embarrassment. Elysse von Herhardt laughed and happily rang the bell.

"Bring me that child."

A maid arrived at the call of her master's bell.

"The child the gardener is currently raising."

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The maid brought Leyla to an unknown world. It was a place where fancy people, dressed in candy-sweet colored clothes, sat under the white mansion shade.

"She's very cute."

One of the ladies complimented.

"What do you say? Do you like it, Claudine?"¹

After examining Leyla, the black haired woman turned over to the chestnut-haired girl sitting besides her. The girl, named Claudine,

smiled happily and nodded.

"Thank you, Madam Herhardt."

Leyla blankly stared at the people in front of her. She wasn't sure what the ladies were conversing about. She just wanted to get back to Uncle Bill's cabin but no one seemed to notice her desperate desire.

When one of the ladies murmured an order, the maid held Leyla's hand and dragged her into a room.

Leyla had washed herself in a fancy bathroom for the first time and wore clothes that were surprisingly soft and white. The maid roughly combed her messy hair but Leyla endured the pain. She believed if she said something wrong, she would risk Uncle Bill's job.

"Lady Claudine is the daughter of Count Brandt. You shouldn't act recklessly in front of her. Do you understand?"

The maid who dragged Leyla into the second floor of the mansion sternly warned Leyla.

Leyla dazedly nodded. The maid cautiously opened the door of the drawing room. Claudine had greeted them with a posh attitude.

"Hello. What's your name? Age?"

Claudine lowered her head and attempted to make an eye contact with Leyla.

"Leyla Lewellin. I'm twelve years old."

"Really? I thought you were younger since you're so small."

Although Leyla hated being called 'small', she decided to hold in her frustration. For Uncle Bill. She calmed herself as she repeated those words like an incantation.

Piano. Music. Floral Arranging.

Claudine recommended this and that, but there was nothing Leyla could do.

Dice game. Word game. Chess.

The other alternatives proposed by Claudin were the same.

A vague smile came upon Claudine's mouth as she alternately looked at the table full of toys and at Leyla.

"Poor you."

With a disappointed sigh, Claudine slowly rose from her chair. Leyla stared helplessly at the toys assorted on the table.

"You don't know a thing."

Claudin walked towards Leyla's chair and sighed in resignation. Her soft voice, trying not to give any hints of disappointment or annoyance, gave Leyla a greater humiliation.

Leyla thought she should at least answer something but her mouth was closed shut. In a situation like this, It was hard to say anything polite. Fortunately, Claudine turned away without waiting for what Leyla had to utter.

Before closing the door, Claudine muttered a sigh to herself.

"What the heck. No better than a dog."

When Claudine left, Leyla was left all alone in the gleaming drawing room.

Leyla wanted to leave right away but she decided to wait. Maybe she'll come back. Leyla thought. But when the afternoon sun gradually ripened to a golden color, Claudine did not return.¹

The maid who brought Leyla in did not show up until evening.

"You may go back."

The maid's voice was softer than before.

"The lady said you can keep the clothes. And this as well."

The maid extended a glittering gold coin towards Leyla. When Leyla froze in place, the maid shoved the coin into her hands.

"Take it. It's polite to be thankful for what your superiors give you. Do you understand?"

Leyla left the mansion when the sky started to paint itself into a rosy color. As she left the entrance leading to the rose garden, a refreshing breeze greeted Leyla.

With a gold coin grasped in her right hand, Leyla walked proudly. But her gallant steps did not last long. Claudine was sitting under the pergola that was located near the vine roses-which were in full bloom. Claudine, who was having a pleasant chat with her cousins, vaguely smiled when her eyes met Leyla's.

"Goodbye, Leyla."

Claudine greeted first. The eyes of the young men sitting next to Claudine turned to Leyla. Fortunately, Duke Herhardt was nowhere to be seen.

Leyla replied with a bow. Claudine did not say much in response.

Leyla began to run after she was out of their sight. She was eager to escape the strange and unfamiliar world and return to Uncle Bill's cabin. But the greatest misfortune came at the last moment.

At the border between the garden and the forest path, Leyla fell down. The gold coin mockingly rolled down the paving stone and hit the edge of a man's shoe. Leyla frowned at the spinning gold coin. The man lightly stepped on the coin with the tip of his shoe to quell the clamorous sound.

Leyla slowly gazed at the well-polished shoes, long legs, and then the man's face looming down upon her. It was Duke Herhardt.

Surprised, Leyla reflexively rose herself up. Her white dress was stained with blood and dust from her scratched knee. The duke simply stared at Leyla with a calm look. His red lips seemed as if they were slightly tilted to one side.

Leyla clenched her lips and swept the dust off her clothes. In the meanwhile, Duke Herhardt leisurely took a step back. The coin that was underneath his foot shined, reflecting the sunlight.

Although Leyla wanted to leave it, she crouched her body in front of the duke. Just when she was about to extend her arms out, she was

reminded of the words Lady Brandt left her. No better than a dog. Those words had scarred a deep wound in Leyla's heart.

Leyla grabbed the coin and politely bowed towards Duke Herhardt. She did not dare to raise her head. All she could do was to bow her head down as low as possible and hold her breath. Surprisingly, although she felt pain when she fell, she could no longer feel any pain when she bowed.

Leaving the duke behind, Leyla started running again. She wasn't able to run as fast as before because of her injured knee but she continued to move her bloody legs. She felt something rising from the bottom of her heart up to the end of her throat.

After passing through the forest path and facing the light that came from the cabin, Leyla realized what it was.

It was sadness.

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"I'll give this to you, uncle."

Leyla held out the gold coin in a rather solemn manner. Bill's hairy eyebrows slowly wrinkled.

"What's this?"

"A gold coin."

"You think I don't know that?"

"Lady Claudine gave it to me."

"Claudine? Ah, that little noble lady."

Bill nodded as if he knew the lady.

Ever since Leyla was called upon the mansion, she had been looking down for the next two days. She didn't talk or take a walk around the woods as well as the garden. Bill realized that he missed the child's past, bright lifestyle.

The world was quiet because the child was quiet. And Bill did not like that quiet world very much.

"Why do you want to give me that money?"

Bill leaned a little towards the table. Leyla sat in a straight posture, facing the man.

"Because I think it's worth a lot."

"It is worth a lot."

"...Even though I initially felt miserable receiving this coin, I couldn't possibly throw it away because it's worth a lot. So I realized that if I gave this coin to you instead, I can at least start paying you back after being so indebted to you."

"Damn it."

Bill impulsively muttered. Leyla slightly flinched but didn't pay any mind to his curse.

Ever since the child arrived in Arvis, Bill worried about the aristocrats hurting her fragile heart. He expected them to harass the child because

of her low status. All the aristocrats were the same to Bill.

Arrogant. Rude. And Condescending.

Although Bill was afraid he might make the child cry if he asked what had happened at the mansion, he could guess how bad the child was treated there.

"Leyla."

Leyla, who had been pretending to act mature for her age, gave a childish grin when he called her name.

"Since you earned the money, take it."

"The money I earned?"

"Yep. It's the money you earned from your work. Dealing with a bored aristocrat is a pain in the ass but you did it. So you can confidently claim your reward."

Leyla scrunched her eyebrows in confusion. While looking at the pondering child, Bill gulped down the thick glass of beer in front of him.

"Really?"

Leyla tilted her head as she tapped on the gold coin.

"That's right."

Bill swiped the alcohol that had drizzled on his beard with his sleeve.

The money I earned.



Leyla's face suddenly started to brighten.

"Welcome to the adult world, Leyla."

Bill sliced a huge chunk of meat and placed it on the child's plate.

"Adult? Me?"

"If you can make money on your own, you're considered an adult. And that's exactly what you did."

"I just made one gold coin?"

"There are plenty of old people who still can't manage to earn a coin in this world. So you're off to a pretty successful start. Because you're off to a nice start, you're bound to be a pretty good adult."<sup>1</sup>

Bill soon started piling Leyla's plate up with bread and baked vegetables.

"Uncle, it's too much."

Leyla's eyes widened at the large amount of food.

"You've been nibbling at your food like a bird for days, so eat a lot."

"But...."

"You know right? I like kids who eat like a cow."

Leyla burst out laughing.

"Uncle, if I eat well, I'll grow a lot right?"

"I suppose so. Why? Did someone bully you for being too short?"

"Not really, but I do think I look too young. It's upsetting."

That's because you are still a child. Bill stopped himself from stating the obvious.

Leyla began to proficiently chop up her meat.

For Bill, it seemed like Leyla did indeed grow quite fast in the last few months. The child no longer had a body like an iron skewer. She was quite pretty. Her natural frame was small and slender like a bird so she didn't seem like she would grow to have a big physique. There was no doubt that she would become a beauty.

Bill was surprised when he found himself praising Leyla's beauty and shook his head to pull himself together.

For women living in poverty, beauty was poison. They were bound to be subjected to trouble. That was why Bill was determined to send the girl to a place where he can trust. The orphanage wasn't a place he could totally trust because he believed it was the perfect place to ruin a child's life.

Damned world. Damned humans.

Bill emptied the rest of his beer while cursing at the names of those who left the child in his care. It was hard to know why such worries were embedded in Bill Remmer's life. He wished for days, where his life had used to be just full of flowers and trees, to come back.

"Uncle. If I earn money, it's not a shame to spend it right?"

Leyla asked while thoroughly chewing on her food.

"Of course. Do you have something you want?"

"I used up my notebook. I want to buy a new one."

"By all means, go ahead."

"Do you think I can buy colored pencils as well?"

"Of course."

"Is there anything you need?"

"Why? Are you planning to buy something for me as well?"

"Yes."

"What if I asked you to buy me something ridiculously expensive?"

Leyla's expression became solemn. Whenever the girl got serious, her pupils grew darker and wider, which made her seem a bit more lovely.

Bill loudly laughed as he filled up a glass of apple juice for the child.

Leyla lifted the glass and motioned Bill to clink his glass towards hers. Bill gladly bumped his glass onto the glass the child reached out. Leyla then emptied her juice all at once.

Bill started to worry if the child began to pick up his drinking habits.

He shook his head at the thought of Leyla becoming a drunkard.

I'm only allowing this just for today.

Bill persuaded himself.

The long days had continued to pass, and during those long days, Bill thought about the reasons why he couldn't raise Leyla and wondered where to send the young girl.

Leyla. The lovely troublesome child who suddenly appeared in his life.

During those days of Bill's endless wondering, Leyla grew.

The new clothes Bill had bought for Leyla got so short that her milky white calves started to show. The warehouse-like room meant for Leyla to temporarily reside in at one point transformed into a lady's room. The troublesome child who used to hop around the forest trail, soon finely matured into a grown lady who now crossed the exact trail with soft steps as if gliding on water.

Bill, sitting on a chair underneath the porch, looked at Leyla with a puzzled look on his face. A young lady with a willow basket full of raspberries was waving at him.

"Uncle! You're back early today."

Leyla lightly ran as if she was dancing. Her attractive blonde hair, tied into a single braid, shook under the wide brim of the straw hat. The color of the lady's two red cheeks looked as fresh as the breed of roses Bill had recently cultivated.

"You must have gone to the woods again."

"Yes. It's a great harvest, isn't it?"

Leyla lifted the basket with pride.

"I'm going to pick some more tomorrow. I'm planning to make a lot of raspberry jam."

"Are you planning to open a business or something?"

"That's not a bad idea."

Leyla, smiling brightly, sat on a chair placed beside Bill. Bill suddenly noticed that there were two chairs on the porch. And it wasn't just the two chairs. Before he knew it, all the furniture in the cabin was arranged for the two of them—even though Bill still hadn't made his decision on what to do with Leyla yet.<sup>5</sup>

Leyla placed the basket on the floor and rummaged through it to find a wild peach. She held the peach out to Bill. Bill naturally took the peach, split it in half, and gave Leyla the nicely half-sliced peach.

The two sat side by side and observed the forest while eating their peaches. The sound of leaves blowing across the clear sky tickled their ears and the birds chirping from afar were as clear as Leyla's voice.

"It's summer again."

Bill muttered unconsciously. Leyla, with a silent smile on her face, took off her hat and languidly stretched her arms. When Bill found the old leather bag that ran below Leyla's knee, he burst into a loud laughter. It was the first thing he gave her on the year she arrived.

"Are you planning to carry that old thing around until it's worn out?"

"I like it because it's comfortable. It's still useful."

Leyla held up her bag and gave it a good shake. Bill could easily figure

out the identity of the rattling sound. Tin pencil case. Pocket knife. Old notes. Some beautiful feathers and flower petals. In certain aspects, she didn't change much.

It was a normal evening.

Bill chopped up some firewood while Leyla took out and organized the dry laundry. While she skillfully prepared their dinner, she didn't forget to feed the chicken and the goat. By the time the two faced each other from the opposite sides of the table, the sun was already down.

"Kyle's coming over tomorrow. We're going to study together and have dinner. That's okay right?"<sup>1</sup>

Leyla asked while setting down her delicious smelling plate.

"Why does that rascal keep coming to my house to eat when he already has a rich father already feeding him well?"

"Even though you talk of him that way, I know you like the guy."

"Unfortunately."

Bill snorted. Leyla causally laughed as she placed the half-filled beer glass in front of him.

"What's this? It's not filled to the brim?"

"You need to cut back on drinking for your health."

"Did that glutton Etmon tell you that?"

"Uncle!"

"That good-for-nothing fellow."

Bill grumbled. But he did not go against Leyla's words.

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The night deepened at the end of a cozy dinner. Leyla took a leisurely bath after cleaning up and returned to her room. She was sleepy, but she decided to turn on the lamp and sat on her desk. An exam was just around the corner. Her summer break happiness depended on that exam result.

The sound of birds crying at night was carried away by the night breeze. The noise of her pencil making marks on the paper was mixed along with the sounds.

Leyla, who had been concentrating on her studies for a long time, let go of her pencil- unable to overcome the eye strain and faint headache that came over. Her eyesight, which wasn't originally that good, now seemed to have gotten worse. Ever since she was young, she had to squint her eyes to clearly see.

Leyla turned off the lamp and lay down on her bed. She was almost on her goal to get a pair of glasses fitted for her.

Twenty bottles of raspberry jam. No, should it be thirty bottles?

Anyways, it wasn't that far away.

Even though her problem could have gotten resolved by telling Uncle Bill, she was afraid of burdening him. He was already providing her so many things and she wasn't able to repay him back.

When he announced that he would send Leyla to school, a fine majority of people laughed at him. They told him there was no point in educating an orphan girl. They told him she was bound to become the maid of the Herhardt family when she grew. But Bill was firm with his words. He spoke to her every day. Leyla, you're going to be a pretty good adult.

The headache somewhat calmed down when Leyla closed her eyes. Leyla attempted to sleep, but the harder she tried, the more her mind turned clear. At a night like this, as usual, odd thoughts began to fill her blank mind.

The birds' return. Plans for this summer. The culprit behind the series of an interesting mystery novel written in the daily newspaper. And Duke Herhardt.

When the name came to mind, Leyla gently opened her eyes. Beyond the familiar darkness, she could see the scenery out of the window.

Slightly wobbling branches, the night sky shining beyond those branches, and the moon and stars.

Staring at the blurry white light from afar, Leyla unconsciously held her breath.

The duke, who graduated from college, was commissioned as an army officer after passing the Royal Military School in accordance with the family tradition. He hadn't visited the estate for the past several years because he was assigned to the frontier overseas . It had been a peaceful time for both Leyla and the birds in the forest.

But this summer, he was to return.

Master of Arvis, Duke Herhardt.



And that marks the end of 12 year old Leyla!

Now that the duke is back and Leyla is now an adult, the real story will begin. 😊

Standing in front of the main gate of Gillis Women's Academy, Kyle Etman's existence was as natural as the school's streetlights. He's here again. The female students thought as they impressively glanced over the young man waiting.

Kyle looked over the gate and slyly grinned. He could see a young lady dragging her bicycle from afar. Kyle could recognize who the lady was through her graceful and gallant walk.

But it wasn't just her way of walking that he could recognize the girl.

Her face was always full of rich expressions and her body gestures were soft and subtle.

Her entire existence was everything to him. There was no other girl like Leyla and he had realized that ever since they met that summer-underneath the shade of the willow tree.⁴

"Leyla!

Leyla stopped when she heard someone vigorously call her name. She squinted her eyes towards the direction of the man who was approaching her.

Kyle liked those moments.

The moment the girl's steps grew faster after she recognized who he was. The moment the girl came up to him and smiled at him gently.

"Why are you here again? It would've been more convenient for you to meet at the cabin."

"Nah. I had plenty of time anyway."

That was a lie. In order to return home from school with Leyla, he had ditched his tennis club members. Even though his seniors might have been waiting for him with a racket on their hands the next day, Kyle was not worried at this moment.

Tomorrow's problems should be taken care of tomorrow. It'll all resolve.¹

~~~~~

The two students walked side by side on a busy street. They bought some ice cream as they passed by the shopping district. They then stopped by a bookstore that smelled like dust.

Leyla laughed often. Besides Uncle Bill, Kyle Etman believed he was the only one in this world who knew how often Leyla laughed in front of him and how beautiful her smile was.

As they entered the path leading to the Arvis territory, the wind got cooler. Leyla's eyes deepened when their conversation led to the school exam. There was a bit of despair in her eyes when geometry was mentioned. Kyle carefully observed the minor changes in her facial expressions.

Not yet.

Kyle suppressed the heart fluttering words that almost came out of his mouth. He didn't want their relationship to get uncomfortable through his hasty confession. He then wondered if it was necessary to ask her to go out with him when he was already thinking of marrying her instead.

Leyla Etman. That sounds nice. That's good.<sup>3</sup>

"Why are you laughing?"

Leyla asked him while she frowned. She was complaining about her grade struggle in geometry until she found herself looking at Kyle dazedly chuckling.

"Huh..... Well, ah! I heard Duke Herhardt is coming back?"

Kyle suddenly changed the subject.

"It's been a long time. When is he coming?"

"I don't know."

"Everyone's been babbling on and on about Duke Herhardt returning but you don't seem to really care."

Leyla's hands that were on the bicycle handle tensed up.

During the past years, there wasn't much contact between Leyla and Duke Herhardt. They only greeted each other when they met in the woods or whenever Claudine summoned her to the mansion. Even passing by the duke was uncomfortable that she tried to avoid him at