

The Duchess - A Day Arranged

I wake before the house does, the silence pressing in like an uninvited guest, heavy and expectant. The darkness clings to the edges of the room, and for a moment, I lie there, suspended in that fragile limbo between sleep and awareness. There is no reason for it, only habit—a relentless pull that drags me from the warmth of dreams into the cold clarity of day. I remain still long enough to recognize the ceiling above me, its familiar cracks like veins in marble, the weight of the blankets anchoring me to the bed, smothering yet secure, and the hour I've chosen not to look at yet, though I can feel its ticking in my veins. When I rise, I do so carefully, as though the morning might notice my movement and shatter the quiet illusion of peace.

(good job)

My breath catches—barely, a sharp hitch that sends a ripple of unease through my chest, like a memory surfacing too quickly, too raw. I steady myself against the bedpost, fingers gripping the wood until the tremor fades, and then I dress, pulling on layers that feel both protective and confining, each button a deliberate act to hold myself together.

Before the preparations begin, I decide to walk, craving the solitude that only the outdoors can offer. The path behind the grounds leads into the woods, winding through ancient trees that whisper secrets to the wind, and I prefer to start my day where nothing is waiting for me—no demands, no eyes watching, just the earth underfoot and the sky overhead. The air is cool, crisp enough to bite at my skin, invigorating in its sharpness. The light behaves itself, filtering softly

through the canopy in gentle shafts that dance without overwhelming. My feet know where to go without instruction, muscle memory guiding me along the familiar trail, each step a quiet affirmation of control.

Partway along the path, steam curls between the trees, rising like ethereal fingers from a hidden source, carrying the faint scent of herbs and something earthier, more primal.

The Flatter and the Hare are already there, seated on weathered stumps, cups set out in a haphazard arrangement that somehow feels deliberate, something simmering quietly between them in a battered pot that bubbles with subdued menace. They don't look surprised to see me, their expressions unchanging, as if my arrival was as inevitable as the dawn.

"Morning," the Flatter says, still watching the pot with an intensity that borders on obsession, his voice gravelly from disuse.

"Morning," I reply, my tone measured, careful not to disrupt the fragile equilibrium.

The Hare lifts his cup slightly in greeting, his eyes flicking to mine for a fraction of a second before returning to the steam.

I stop only long enough to acknowledge them, a nod that conveys more than words ever could. I don't ask what they're making—the aroma hints at tea laced with forgotten rituals. They don't explain. We all understand the value of that silence, the unspoken agreement to let mysteries linger untouched.

(remember the corners)

I pause, the words echoing in my mind like a distant scream, jagged and insistent, pulling at threads of memory I'd rather leave buried. "Yes," I murmur, more to myself than to them, my voice barely above a whisper, laced with a tremor I can't quite suppress. "The corners."

I continue down the path, letting the woods close behind me again like a curtain drawn on a stage, the branches intertwining to seal off the encounter, before turning back toward the house, my steps quicker now, as if fleeing an unseen shadow.

By the time I return, the staff has begun to move, their figures emerging from side doors like ghosts materializing at dawn. Tables are uncovered, cloths peeled back with reverent care to reveal polished surfaces beneath. Linens carried in stacks that will need to be corrected, their folds imperfect in ways

that grate against my sense of order. I take my place among them without ceremony, slipping into the rhythm of the work as seamlessly as a cog in a well-oiled machine.

I smooth fabric, my hands gliding over silk and cotton, erasing wrinkles that speak of neglect. I measure spacing between settings with a practiced eye, ensuring symmetry that borders on obsession. I adjust what does not need adjusting— a fork tilted just so, a napkin refolded for no reason other than the compulsion to perfect.

(it looks beautiful)

The sensation arrives suddenly—a pressure behind my ribs, sharp and insistent, like a blade twisting in an old wound, flooding me with a wave of dizziness that threatens to pull me under. I stop only long enough to breathe through it, inhaling deeply until the edges blur and fade, then continue, my movements mechanical, a shield against the encroaching void.

Red silk is unrolled across the tables, its crimson hue vivid against the neutral backdrop, like blood spilled on snow. White roses are placed where I indicate, their petals pristine and fragile, arranged in clusters that evoke both beauty and transience. The room responds to direction, transforming under my guidance into something almost alive, pulsing with anticipation.

By midmorning, I cross the main hall to inspect the long table again, my footsteps echoing in the vast space. I run my hand along its edge, fingers tracing the smooth wood, checking for flaws I know are not there—splinters that might snag, imperfections that could mar the illusion.

(remember the corners)

My hand stills, frozen mid-motion as the voice slices through me, evoking flashes of shadowed edges and hidden dangers, a trauma that lingers like smoke. "Yes," I say quietly, the word escaping through clenched teeth, heavy with resignation. "The corners."

I correct them anyway, folding and tucking with deliberate precision, as if the act could banish the ghosts.

In the afternoon, I take a longer route through the inner corridors—the ones that stay cool and dim even as the day brightens outside, their stone walls absorbing light and sound, creating pockets of eternal twilight. The Twins are there, as expected, leaning where the light fades first, their identical forms blending into the gloom like mirrors of mischief.

"You're early," one of them says, his voice a playful lilt that masks deeper intent.

"Am I?" I reply, keeping my tone neutral, unwilling to engage in their games.

They smile as though the answer is irrelevant, their grins synchronized and unsettling. Something small changes hands—folded carefully, wrapped too neatly to be accidental, a parcel that hums with unspoken significance.

"Paper holds better this way," the other says, his eyes gleaming with sly knowledge.

"I'm sure it does," I answer, accepting the item without question, tucking it away as if it were nothing.

I continue on without looking back, the corridor stretching ahead like a vein into the heart of the house.

(you always liked it this way)

The reaction hits harder this time, a vise around my chest that squeezes until stars dance in my vision, the words dredging up buried pain that floods my senses, hot and unrelenting. My chest tightens, and I brace my hand against the wall until the feeling passes, the cool stone grounding me as I gasp for air, willing the episode to subside.

Evening approaches quickly, the sun dipping low and casting long shadows that creep across the floors like fingers.

I return to the hall and begin giving instructions in earnest, my voice carrying authority that silences chatter. Chairs are aligned in perfect rows, their legs scraping faintly against the wood. Candles placed in holders that catch the flickering light. Voices lower when I speak, deference woven into the air.

"Here?" someone asks, holding a candle just slightly off center, their hand hovering uncertainly.

(don't forget the candles)

"Yes," I say, smiling before I realize I am, the expression pulling at my lips unexpectedly, a rare warmth piercing the veil. "Exactly there."

For a while, the motion keeps me upright, the bustle of activity a distraction that propels me forward, task after task blurring into a comforting haze.

Then it doesn't, the energy draining away like sand through fingers, leaving me adrift.

The warmth recedes without warning, pulling back like a tide exposing jagged rocks. The interruption returns—unchanged, familiar, a persistent echo that knows me too well—but my body reacts as though struck by cold water, a shock that numbs and awakens in equal measure.

(I'm right here)

I do not answer, ignoring the plea that tugs at my core, turning away from the voice as if it were a stranger.

When the lights dim and the room fills with guests, their murmurs rising like a symphony, I step back and let it become what it will be—a tableau of revelry and ritual. The music begins, notes weaving through the air like threads. The night moves forward without waiting for me, relentless in its progression.

Later—much later, when the echoes of laughter have faded—I allow myself to linger with the feeling, exploring its contours in the quiet aftermath. Slower now, deliberate. Softer, like a caress turned cruel. I do not resist it, surrendering to the pull.

(stay with me)

The sensation arrives again, heavier this time, a weight that settles over me like a shroud, stirring depths I'd forgotten, traumatic in its intimacy, and I let it pass through me, emerging on the other side hollowed but whole.

Morning comes quietly, the first light seeping in through curtains like a hesitant visitor.

The hall is empty, the remnants of the night cleared away with efficient precision. Chairs returned to storage, stacked neatly. Roses fading as they should, petals curling at the edges in

quiet defeat. I walk its length once more, gathering nothing but myself, piecing together the fragments scattered by the hours.

The interruptions do not return, their absence a void that echoes louder than presence.

I do not invite them, content in the silence they've left behind.

I stand anyway, rooted in the emptiness, enduring.