

NOVEL

3

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The Condemned Villainess'

Goes Back in Time and Aims to Become the
Ultimate Villain

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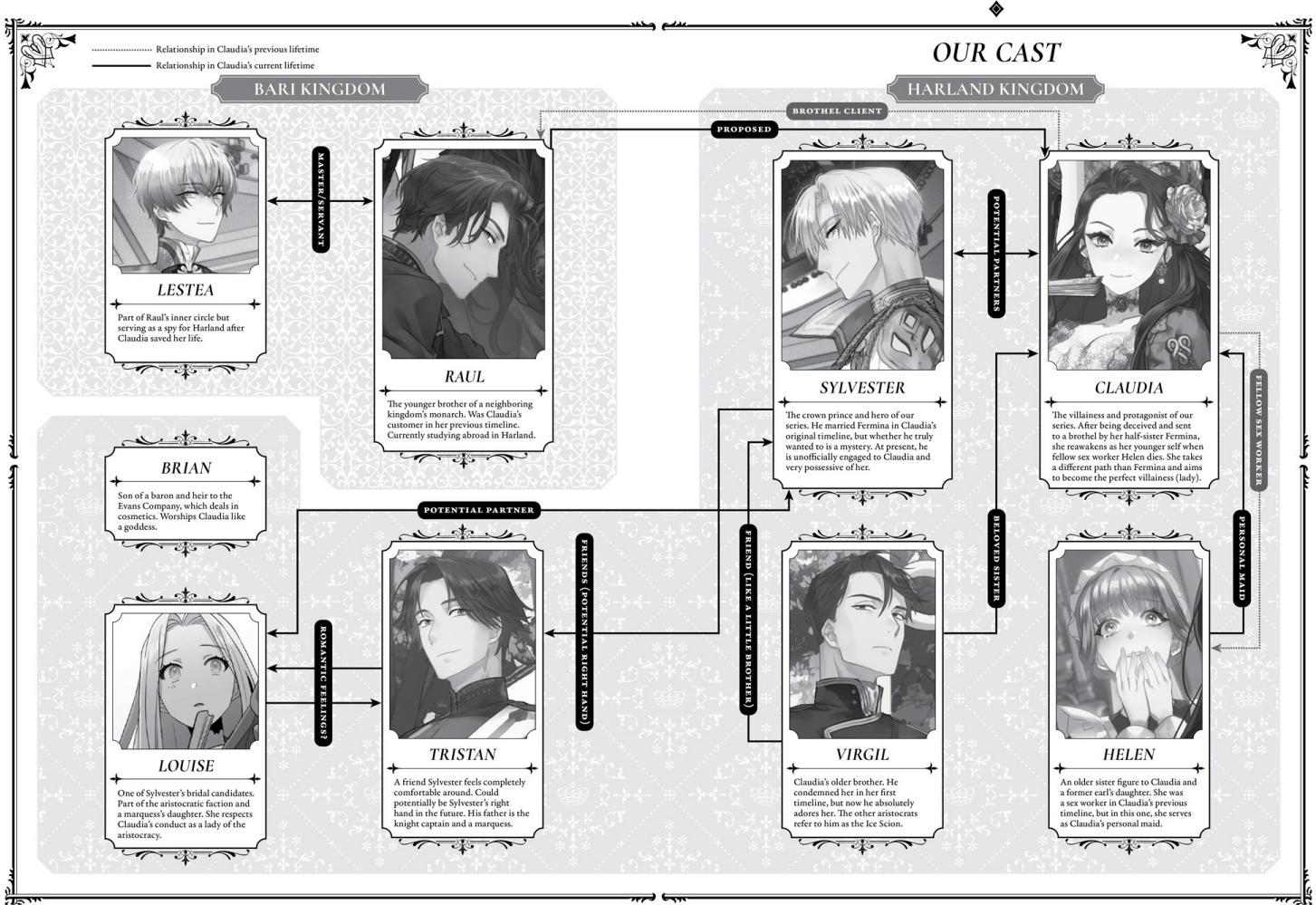
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Prologue

THE ROOM WAS deep underground, far from any source of natural light. It would have been pitch-black if not for the meager illumination provided by a single lamp, leaving the outside corridor and the corners of the room shrouded in shadows. The heavy, unpleasant stench of mold permeated the air of the bunker, with its mud floors and jagged brick walls. This was the last place in which anyone would want to linger.

But the bunker held a very different atmosphere tonight. Its largest assembly room was teeming with members of the local crime syndicate. They all stood with their heads bowed toward their new leader. This was the person who inspired their mounting fervor, and when it hit its zenith, they were all too enraptured to bemoan their uncomfortable surroundings.

Their show of admiration was directed at a noble lady in menswear at the back, seated primly on something resembling a throne. She wore a rimless black felt hat with a lace veil, which obscured her face completely. No one could tell her precise age or the dips and planes of her face. The rest of her suit was black too, which made her look like a widow in mourning. But the purpose of her entire look was to make her impossible to identify.

The woman was accompanied by several personal maids, who wore similar getups and color schemes. Theirs lacked the intentional touches their mistress had employed to appear more androgynous.

Despite the syndicate members kneeling reverently, there was a restlessness in the air.

One of the maids broke away from her position to bend closer to her mistress's ear. "Lady Rose," she whispered, "they are waiting for you to speak."

When Rose silently nodded, the maid returned to her station.

How did things end up like this? Rose—or rather, Claudia—wondered. Her

mind traveled back to the twisted road of events that led up to this moment. Emotion stirred within her as her gaze swept over the crowd. *When this all began, I never imagined I would wind up here.*

It all started when the crown prince of the United Kingdom of Arakaner requested Harland's aid.

Chapter 1:

The Villainess Meets the Foreign Prince

ONE SUNNY AFTERNOON, a party was held to welcome the United Kingdom of Arakaner's crown prince in the royal palace's banquet hall. All the most prominent aristocrats were invited to attend, as were the visiting Barian prince Raul and his entourage. Previously, a similar party had been held in Raul's honor with him as the focal guest, but he was here as an ordinary attendee this time around.

Prince Raul's foreign exchange was always part of the political agenda, though, even before everything that happened, Claudia thought to herself.

The past few months since his departure and subsequent return had gone by all too quickly, if only because Claudia's schedule had been consistently packed. It was the busiest winter she'd ever experienced.

Reuniting with Raul had been something of a shock, considering he was the same man who'd offered to pay her way out of the bondage of sex work in her last life.

Raul had temporarily returned to his homeland to resolve the outstanding conflict between him and his elder brother. With his people's blessing and support, he later returned to resume his stay.

Lestea was the other notable figure during his stay. She seemed perfectly content to stand by Raul despite having undermined and backstabbed him. Claudia wasn't entirely sure what to make of her, even though she was now an undercover spy for Harland.

At the very least, I'd like to believe I'm responsible for how twisted her personality has become.

Lestea claimed Claudia as her savior and her sole reason for being; to call that odd would be an understatement. Claudia wished Lestea would break her habit

of staring at her with unrestrained fervor.

I suppose she and Prince Raul are rather alike in that respect.

She had to admit that Raul's affection for her was pure and genuine. But his feelings were still a burden, given that she and Sylvester shared a mutual love for one another and were (unofficially) engaged.

Not to mention, that's one of the reasons he returned to Harland.

Raul's feelings were no secret. His forbidden love for one of the crown prince of Harland's bridal candidates was a sizzling hot topic in Bari. His people were enthusiastically supportive of his efforts to court her. No matter how much she rebuffed him, he swore he would continue trying until she and Sylvester officially tied the knot.

As spring gave way to summer, Claudia was finally growing accustomed to the newfound liveliness of her days. Even at parties like this one, her usual crew of friends naturally gravitated toward her—save for Sylvester, who was busy accompanying the Arakanerian crown prince.

Raul eagerly filled that void as if being by her side was as natural as breathing, those bitter-chocolate eyes melting into something sugary and sweet as he gazed at her. He was dressed in formal attire, but the top button was left undone, exposing a sensual glimpse of skin.

“It would probably be most comfortable to spend this season in the United Kingdom rather than anywhere else,” he told Claudia.

“Yes,” she replied. “It’s a popular summer retreat.”

Arakaner was northeast of Harland. It still enjoyed all four seasons, but its summers were relatively mild in comparison. The nation was a conglomeration of small islands with its own unique culture that differed from that of the mainland, where Harland was located. All of this contributed to its popularity as a vacation spot.

Leading their kingdom was the Arakaner royal family. They occupied the

island closest to Harland, aptly named Arakaner Island. Harland enjoyed a close diplomatic relationship with them, as did Bari.

“Strange, then, that Prince Seraphim would come all the way from cooler climes to visit Harland in the summer. But it shouldn’t surprise me too much since he’s been putting so much effort into diplomacy recently,” Raul said.

The way he complimented the other prince’s political prowess suggested he was already well acquainted with Seraphim. The praise was justified, if the rumors of Seraphim were anything to go by. Word had it that his business sense was unrivaled.

“Visits from foreign royalty seem to keep Sylvester awfully busy, though,” Raul remarked. “Must be rough.”

“Funny you should say that, considering you’re the one stressing him the most, Raul,” Lestea shot back, giving voice to what Claudia was too polite to say.

As usual, Lestea was clad in a dapper suit. Her cropped, aqua-blue hair bounced with each movement. When she cracked a smile, the young ladies nearby shrieked in delight over its beauty.

Raul grimaced. “That’s enough out of you,” he said. “Are the concepts of guilt and self-reflection so foreign to that head of yours?”

“I have already proven my use to you.”

In a spectacular twist, Lestea had managed to win all the lords and ladies from Raul’s faction over to her side, thereby solidifying her position. It was an impressive feat, but it also allowed Raul to keep tabs on her. Better to have her where he could see her than for her to be free to manipulate things behind the scenes. Raul had already made that mistake once, and he was resolved not to do so again. This was all backed up by Lestea’s reports that her movements were more restricted than before.

Raul tore his gaze from Lestea and refocused on Claudia. The sugary

sweetness of that smile made her want to down a mug of black coffee to balance it out.

“So, Claudia, how do you plan to spend summer vacation?” he asked.

The academy had two extended breaks throughout the year: one in the summer and another in the winter. It was customary for aristocrats to spend their vacations back in their own territories. But since there was a foreign royal visiting this summer, as with Raul in the winter, leaving the capital was out of the question.

“As I recall, you will be returning to your kingdom, yes?” Claudia said.

“Yep. You wanna come with me?”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid I must decline.”

“Aww, so cold.”

While it was bound to be a wonderful place to sightsee, Raul might very well use that opportunity to marry her. He prioritized her feelings over his own desires, to be sure, but the same could not necessarily be said for those around him. Sylvester would probably never approve of her going in the first place.

“Assuming nothing unforeseen happens, I suppose I will spend the break in my family’s territory,” said Claudia.

“Your family’s territory is inland, right?”

“Yes, in the northern part of the kingdom, which makes for more comfortable temperatures in the summer.”

Raul’s face lit up. “Hearing you say that makes me want to go.”

“You can’t. Not this year,” Lestea said, instantly taking the wind out of his sails.

Raul’s faction had taken over political affairs in Bari, but they still needed their unifying figure. Although he was studying abroad with his people’s support, he still periodically needed to return home and make appearances.

Raul glowered at Lestea. Sparks flew between them, something Claudia was already accustomed to seeing. Not even Charlotte or Louise, who were seated with them, paid it any heed—though Charlotte *did* seem to be fidgeting in her seat.

Louise's hair, locks as gold and bright as sunlight, caught Claudia's eye. "L-Lou," she said, stammering a bit on the nickname since she still found it a bit embarrassing, "will you be spending your break in your family's region?"

Louise shared the sentiment; her cheeks turned rosy, her eyes darting back and forth. Her bashful reaction sent a tidal wave of emotion through Claudia.

How should I label these feelings? It's like she's so precious, my heart constricts. If Tristan were here, she was sure he'd feel the same way.

"Our region is in the south, so it's not a proper escape from the heat, I'm afraid. But that is where we plan to stay," Louise said.

"And will you be doing the same, Charlotte?"

"Yes, with my two dear big sisters gone from the capital, there is no point in me remaining here."

Since Charlotte began attending the academy, she had taken to referring to Louise as "Big Sister" as well. She considered Louise as much of a sister figure and role model as Claudia. After all this time, Louise had opened her heart up enough to Charlotte to permit the endearing nickname.

"Oh, I can already feel the loneliness setting in when I think about how I won't be able to see you both for a while!" Charlotte cried.

Claudia's gaze swept over the faces of her companions—faces she saw every day while at the academy. Her heart ached too when she thought about how she wouldn't be able to hear Charlotte's lively voice for the foreseeable future. She never tired of hearing Charlotte refer to her as "Big Sister." Thanks to her, Claudia was close to forgetting how a similar endearment rang hollow from Fermina's mouth.

Charlotte threw herself at Claudia and clung to her arm. Claudia stroked Charlotte's head, fingers caressing her pink locks. When her eyes met Louise's, Louise quickly turned away. This manner of soothing Charlotte had become a habit by this point.

As such, Louise should have been accustomed to it, but she cocked her head to the side, her voice more delicate than usual as she muttered, "My heart aches to think of our parting as well..."

Claudia was hit with the urge to pull Louise into a tight embrace. Anyone else would surely feel the same if they were lucky enough to witness such vulnerability from someone who was normally so dignified and strong-willed.

She seems even more adorable than she was before. Perhaps that was because she and Louise had become comfortable enough with one another to share their true feelings.

Since too many eyes were on them, she refrained from an outright show of affection—instead offering a smile of commiseration. As long as her feelings reached Louise, that was all that mattered. She casually slipped her fingers over Louise's dainty ones and gave them a reassuring squeeze.

"Claudia, I'll be lonely too!" Raul protested.

"And me as well!" Lestea joined in.

"There is no need for you both to treat this like a competition," she scolded, ignoring their pleas for similar overtures.

Claudia knew their words were genuine, but for some reason, she couldn't take them at face value. *When they say it, it's not adorable at all.*

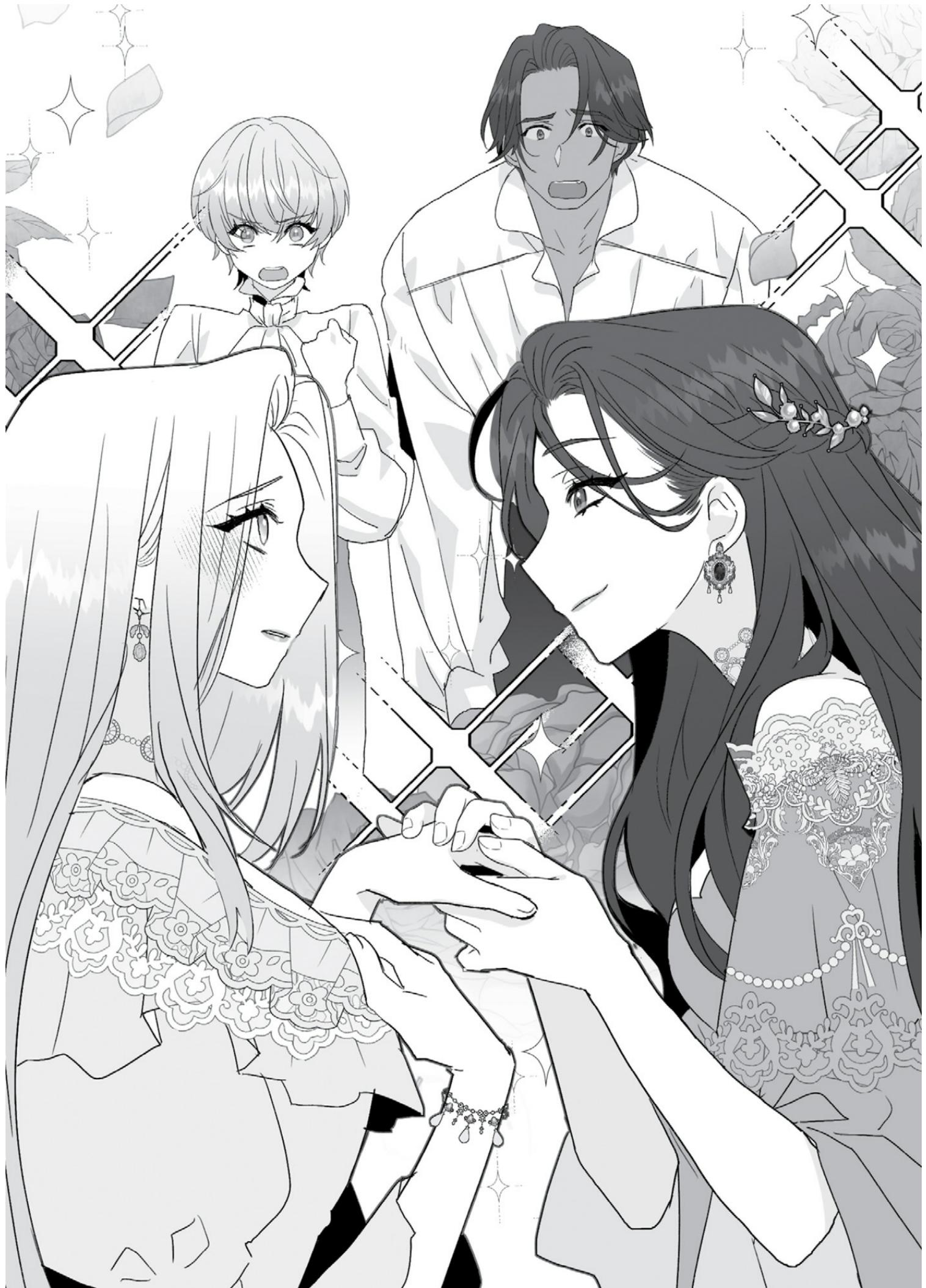
Maybe she wouldn't have felt that way if it were only Raul expressing the sentiment; but when Lestea did the same, she couldn't help feeling like a mother bird with two hungry chicks chirping complaints.

It didn't take long before Sylvester stopped by, Seraphim in tow.

"Allow me to formally introduce you," said Sylvester. "This is the first prince

of the United Kingdom of Arakaner, Prince Seraphim."

Sylvester always managed to draw the most attention, no matter the company. All right, so maybe Claudia was biased. But the sunlight pouring in through the windows haloed his silver hair in an almost rainbow effect. It also cast shadows on his alabaster skin, the aesthetic so perfect that she could scarcely tear her gaze away. The way his golden eyes adorably honed in on her made her cheeks feel like they'd burst into flame.



Claudia desperately tucked away her personal feelings to focus on Seraphim. As much as Sylvester commanded people's attention, Seraphim was no less eye-catching. Although he was shorter than Sylvester, he was still tall enough she had to crane her neck to look up at him. A neat ribbon at the base of his neck held back long locks of flowing blond hair, giving him a more elegant air. His stormy gray eyes should have felt cold and distant, but there was such warmth in them. Meanwhile, his gentle smile brought to mind sunlight on a warm spring day. His lean but toned build made him seem less daunting; Claudia got the sense he had an overall relaxed, welcoming demeanor.

Seraphim was twenty-four, making him six years older than her. The prince struck her more as an older-brother type than anything else. Granted, this was merely an initial impression. She had never met him in her previous life, so this truly was their first meeting.

"Seraphim Arakaner," he said by way of introduction. "It's been a while, Prince Raul. Word of your many accomplishments has reached us even with the sea between our lands."

"Oh, no. I'm afraid people exaggerate," Raul said with a shrug. He sounded unusually polite. Perhaps he was putting in effort since Seraphim was older.

Seraphim's warm smile did not falter. "Not at all. You managed to resolve the discord between yourself and the king without the need for the church's intervention. You should take more pride in your achievement."



Seraphim was referring to the religious organization that worshipped the Capricious God. The church had their own lands, a small country to the southeast of Harland, and their influence extended across the entire continent. The church touted monotheism as the only correct form of religion. As far as they were concerned, all other religions (so long as they were also monotheistic) worshipped the same god, even if they called it by some other name.

They rationalize it as the Capricious God taking different names throughout history, Claudia thought.

To set an example for the faithful through religion, the church tried to impart a shared sense of ethics. Aside from proselytizing, they engaged in various other activities, with their focus on maintaining harmony across the lands. They had substantial influence throughout various countries and were often called to mediate when international conflicts arose. With their background of successful diplomatic negotiations, demand for their intervention only increased.

Much of the continent owed an incalculable debt to the church for their many services. Even Harland had invited a cardinal to occupy an official post within the government. The United Kingdom of Arakaner was a rare exception. Their religion wasn't monotheistic.

Since he went out of his way to bring them up, I assume Prince Seraphim has more than a few grievances with the church.

It was common knowledge that Arakaner held bitter sentiments toward the church. Even if Seraphim was hinting at his displeasure, there was no deeper meaning to the conversation.

"You embarrass me, praising me so," said Raul, bashfully scratching his cheek. He gave no indication that he'd noticed Seraphim's hostility toward the church.

Like Harland, Bari had invited cardinals to serve in their administration. Since they embraced monotheism, Raul couldn't risk any thoughtless commentary on the church.

I need to follow his example, Claudia thought. Different people had different ways of keeping their words diplomatic and inoffensive. Raul's method felt natural.

Now that I think about it, I am in impressive company. There were three royal princes in her presence, after all.

Meanwhile, Charlotte was so overwhelmed with anxiety she had gone rigid. Perhaps Claudia had spent so much time with Sylvester and Raul that she'd grown numb.

Chapter 2: The Foreign Prince Has a Guest

“ELDER BROTHER! Don’t forget to bring us back souvenirs!”

“Get me one too!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be sure to bring you back some sweets.”

Before departing from the royal palace, Seraphim stroked his siblings’ heads. Some of them hadn’t expressed what they wanted from his journey, but he already knew what was in their hearts. His father had six concubines, so most of the royal children had different mothers—but they still enjoyed close bonds.

As much as it heartened him not to have bitter infighting between his brothers and sisters, it annoyed him equally that it was because their situation was too precarious to risk internal political struggles.

Though it seems the church is eager to pit us against one another.

He tilted his head back, drinking in the sky to clear his mind. There was nothing bracing about an overcast sky, but thanks to the clouds blocking out the direct sunlight, the winds had cooled to a pleasant temperature.

I suppose that to someone from Harland, this would still be a bit cold. That was precisely what made Arakaner such an ideal summer retreat. Sadly, throughout the rest of the year, it was indeed a bit too chilly for outsiders. He filed away this information in his mind as he boarded a ship for the mainland.

For Arakanerians, the sea was like their backyard. It would be hard to sell protection from pirates to other nations if they weren’t so familiar with it. Their maritime expertise led to their robust, unrivaled financial success.

The one thing we won’t do is follow the church’s agenda.

The church’s power dwarfed Arakaner’s, but because they weren’t monotheistic, his nation was a thorn in the church’s side. It didn’t help that

prior to Arakaner's founding, its rulers and people had been Vikings, which left lingering resentment. Only a century ago, coastal monasteries had been their main target.

The church touted financial asceticism as the ideal, so why did it hoard such luxuries within its facilities? That was what Seraphim wanted to know. Not that there was any legitimate excuse for raiding them and stealing their assets, of course.

We need to stand firm right now.

One of their central weaknesses was having a different religion from their neighbors, but Arakaner had also successfully managed to gain power through their unique financial policies. Even if import and export fees reduced some of their earnings, it was only a slight annoyance.

But even with all their achievements, they couldn't rest on their laurels. The tides changed with the times. That was as true now as it was when their ancestors unified the collection of islands that now constituted their kingdom. Their solidarity was more essential than ever before. Internal strife would only doom them. That was why his father had taken so many concubines—to strengthen the kingdom's solidarity.

Maybe not the whole reason; I can't deny he has a voracious carnal appetite.

Regardless, Seraphim and his siblings had no choice but to come together to face their colossal enemy.

Seraphim was all smiles as Sylvester introduced him to various people at the afternoon party held in his honor at Harland's royal palace.

If I called them cute, would they be cross with me?

Granted, one could not bat an eye at the titles these young lords and ladies touted. They were all adults under the law, yes, but they were still teenagers. Sylvester and his classmates were only six years younger, yet Seraphim couldn't

help but view them in the same light as his younger siblings.

Claudia Lindsay had stood out even before Sylvester introduced them. Doubly so when she was accompanied by the Barian king's younger brother and two of Sylvester's other bridal candidates. She shone like a star whenever she enthusiastically engaged in conversation with the rest of her friend group. If being an ideal lady were a mountain, she would be at its pinnacle.

Sylvester always struck me as cold and inscrutable. I'm surprised he's mellowed out so much.

Harland's crown prince normally masked his emotions; but that mask clearly slipped as he gazed at Claudia, for his eyes softened.

I get the feeling he's subtly trying to dissuade me from showing too much interest.

Seraphim had come of marriageable age years ago, but he remained single. He was too preoccupied with foreign policies to bother finding himself a partner. Fortunately, he had enough brothers and sisters to make producing an heir a nonissue. One of them could surely manage the deed. That was probably part of why he was so unhurried.

In any kingdom, the crown prince's lack of a crown princess would have been an easily exploitable weakness by political adversaries—but Arakaner's entire royal family was united toward one objective: ousting the church. As long as they were making political advancements, it didn't matter who became the next king.

More than anything, Seraphim was eager to establish deeper ties with Harland. Sylvester likely sensed that eagerness; he was shooting Seraphim a warning look that said, *Don't upset me if you want us to be on good terms.*

Lady Claudia Lindsay, hmm?

She was a breathtaking beauty, to be sure. Being a prince, Seraphim had gazed upon many attractive women before, enough to desensitize him, but

even he was caught off guard by Claudia. Her every mannerism was dignified and composed, lending her a level of maturity that far surpassed her age and all the other ladies in that age group. And yet, as she bantered with her friends, there was something adorable and youthful about her.

She is indeed the perfect lady. I can see why the rumors suggest she's the one who won Prince Sylvester's heart.

Much as Seraphim lamented their inability to have a substantial conversation, he excused himself. There were still many people to whom he needed to pay his respects.

Once the party ended and he'd finished an entire day's worth of work, Seraphim retired to the embassy. Harland's royal family had prepared guest quarters for him at the palace, but the embassy was a more appropriate venue for welcoming guests.

"I thought you'd be able to infiltrate the royal palace without issue," Seraphim said.

His visitor had appeared at the window and slipped in without so much as a how-do-you-do. He plopped himself on the adjacent sofa, slamming his feet down on the coffee table between them.

"It ain't that I can't do it," the man replied. "It's that I ain't gonna do it. We underworld types know better than to piss off Harland's royal family."

"Yes, I can understand that."

His guest was a bit crude and blunt, but that suited Seraphim perfectly. It allowed the prince to be equally frank.

"It would be terrifying to make an enemy of the Harland royal family," Seraphim said.

"Yeah, they ain't got a merciful bone in their bodies."

It wasn't as if they were ruthless; they didn't cut their losses pitilessly

whenever it suited them. That said, Seraphim would be the first to admit that those trademark golden eyes—which Sylvester had inherited from his father—inspired the same fear and awe.

Perhaps that was a product of the relationship between their countries, which hailed back to Arakaner's founding. No, even before that. Back when they were still Vikings. Seraphim's ancestors had raided and occupied Harland's capital. Their royal family quickly paid off the Vikings to leave, and the incident never again repeated itself.

Despite the bloody history between their nations, Harland wasn't like the church. They extended the hand of friendship, partly because they knew that Arakaner would have no choice but to repay them whenever they demanded compensation. They were pleasant neighbors who were also careful to ensure their best interests in the process.

Harland had done the same during the tense standoff between Bari's reigning king and Raul. Seraphim wasn't privy to the agreement the two nations had come to, but whatever it was, he was certain Harland had come out the better for it.

But even with their success at diplomacy, Harland kept their claws sharpened. Charitable though they appeared, they weren't soft enough to leave any exploitable openings. That was what made them so fearsome.

“How're things on your end?”

“Nothing decisive yet, but I intend to continue warning them about the church,” said Seraphim.

The other man snorted at him. “And you think that'll get us somewhere?”

He and the other man had reached a mutually beneficial accord since joining forces, but they had yet to reach their true shared goal. It wasn't surprising to Seraphim that the other man was growing impatient by this point; *he* was the one facing the most imminent danger, not Seraphim.

“I will support you as much as I can,” Seraphim promised.

The other man gave him a one-shoulder shrug. “That ain’t gonna do squat for me.”

Seraphim’s eyes softened. “Ruki...”

“Don’t act like you’re some kinda saint. Be honest, you’d cut me off in a heartbeat if I got in your way.”

“You’re not planning on cutting a deal with the church, are you?”

“Hah, I dunno,” Ruki said noncommittally. “I ain’t like you. I ain’t doin’ this out of ambition—I’m doin’ it to protect family.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “If nothin’s changed, I’m leavin’.” He started toward the window.

“I...” Seraphim’s voice trailed off. He understood where Ruki was coming from, which was why he was at a loss for words.

“I know. You’ve got your family back home. But remember, mine’s here.”

Seraphim pursed his lips, letting the silence settle between them. His eyes followed Ruki, who was completely shrouded in black attire and seemed to melt back into the night. It chafed that there was nothing he could say to get Ruki to stay.

Chapter 3:

The Villainess Is Filled with Righteous Indignation

THE DAY AFTER the welcome party, Claudia and Helen were strolling through the high-end district. Her usual retinue of bodyguards trailed after them, but she was so accustomed to their presence by now that they were little more than air to her.

"It's nice to go window shopping occasionally," she commented. It was a good change of pace, browsing the local boutiques without having to make a purchase.

Her heels made a pleasant *clack-clack* as she walked the cobblestone streets. Since summer was upon them, the heat of the sun could often be overwhelming. Thankfully, they had a parasol to block the worst of it.

Claudia was in high spirits. Having one arm looped around Helen's was icing on top of an already perfect cake.

It seems like Charlotte's little quirks are rubbing off on me.

Whenever they were together, Charlotte would have their arms linked before Claudia knew it. Charlotte was a master at milking affection from people. Claudia hadn't expected Charlotte to have such a strong influence on her, but lately, she always found herself arm in arm with Helen. Perhaps she could have stopped herself, if not for Helen happily obliging her all the time.

But I love this. It's comforting. Maybe it was the sensation of skin-on-skin contact that she found so reassuring.

Linking arms wasn't the same as having a man escort her. There was no solid slab of muscle to lean on. It was more like being enveloped in a velvety-soft blanket. The warmth and tenderness of the act brought her such peace of mind.

Even a small taste of it is addicting. It makes it impossible to pull away.

The logical side of her brain told her she should stop before Helen inevitably expressed her displeasure, but all her willpower dissolved when Helen gazed at her, eyes brimming with affection. All Claudia could do was hope Helen enjoyed linking arms as much as she did.

“What sort of gift will you be purchasing for His Highness?” Helen asked.

“That’s a good question.” Claudia hummed thoughtfully to herself. “I suppose a box of assorted sweets would be the safest option.”

In the wake of the party, Sylvester had arranged for them to meet sometime soon at the castle. He would typically be the one to drop in at her family home—but with Seraphim visiting, he was unable to extract himself. Judging by the way he presented the invitation, he didn’t seem to intend their rendezvous to be a purely romantic one. Even so, the promise of some time together was enough to put a little skip in her step.

“I know of a confectionery that’s popular with male customers,” Claudia said.

“Knowing how accurate your information always is, I’m sure it will be perfect for the prince.”

At Helen’s praise, discomfort crept into the edges of Claudia’s smile. The accuracy of her “information” was due to obtaining it during her brothel days in her past life. She’d often visited that particular shop whenever she knew a wealthy client was paying her a visit. Not only did they have a wide selection, but their confections were barely sweet with a dash of salt, and that made them widely enjoyable.

Syl isn’t too fond of sweets, so it should be perfect for him.

The confectionery was a bit of a walk from the heart of the high-end district, but it wouldn’t be too terrible since they could window-shop as they went. As she and Helen spent a significant amount of time peeking at the various storefronts, it took a while for them to reach their destination.

“Let’s summon a carriage to take us home,” Helen suggested.

Claudia agreed readily. She realized, in retrospect, that she'd underestimated the distance. By the time she spotted the familiar signage for the confectionery, her feet ached. Helen requested the carriage the moment they stepped inside; that way, it would arrive by the time they finished their business. All the shops in the high-end district had errand boys on hand to deliver messages and summon rides for their aristocratic clientele—especially if said clientele included the daughter of a duke.

A sweet aroma filled the air of the shop. Tantalizing as it was, it wasn't quite as strong of a scent typical of other confectioneries.

The owner rushed out to attend to Claudia as soon as he heard she was visiting. As he guided her, she surveyed the interior of the shop. Her gaze landed on a familiar face. It was a young woman named Sunny; in Claudia's previous lifetime, Sunny had been a fellow sex worker from the same brothel. She had taken her own life by way of poison. It was impossible not to recognize the adorable dusting of freckles across her nose and cheeks.

Incidentally, Claudia had already met her once in this life when she'd paid a visit to her former brothel to get a better handle on its situation. Sunny's hadn't been the only familiar face. She'd encountered Mirage, Marianne, and Kayla as well. From what she'd heard, Sunny had started working as Kayla's personal attendant since the incident that occurred during Claudia's visit.

Sunny didn't recognize her. Not surprising, given that when they'd first met, Claudia had been disguised in men's clothing and had veiled her face. Claudia had good reason to withhold her true identity; that was why she couldn't risk saying anything to Sunny here.

Unfortunately, the owner noticed her staring and interpreted her gaze very differently. Panicked, he ushered Sunny to finish her business and leave. "My apologies for allowing unscrupulous customers to sour your visit to our establishment, my lady."

"Hold on a moment. Who are you calling unscrupulous?" Claudia's eyes

narrowed, lips pulling into a frown. It was obvious who he meant.

Is it because Sunny is a commoner? Or because she's a sex worker? Either way, this is entirely uncalled for.

Whatever her profession or status, she was still a customer. It upset Claudia that the owner would assume she found being in such company unpleasant. She knew people often misunderstood her from her appearance—they assumed she was vain and headstrong—but she had never openly expressed any displeasure at sharing the same space as Sunny.

"I would never deny someone else their opportunity to shop," she snapped at the owner before turning to Sunny. "I apologize for disrupting your visit. Please, finish your business here at your leisure."

It's probably safe to assume she is here on Miss Kayla's behalf.

It was customary for the younger sex workers to run errands for the more accomplished veterans on staff. Particularly if the girl was an attendant such as Sunny; it was but one of the many chores they were assigned. And if Sunny couldn't fulfill whatever task she was here for, it would put both her and Kayla in an awkward position.

Sunny's cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

Claudia offered her a gentle smile. "You reminded me of an acquaintance, so I found myself staring. I feel terrible if I have offended you for it."

"N-no, not at all. I..." The words seemed to catch in Sunny's throat. She was at a loss for what to do.

"I hope you will continue your shopping," Claudia said, filling the silence for her. "I know it's selfish of me to say this, but it would leave a bad taste in my mouth if you felt pressured to leave and didn't get to finish your business here."

Eager to soften the awkward atmosphere, she asked Sunny what products she thought were the most popular. This smooth change of subject led to amiable conversation between them. Slowly, the tension melted away from Sunny's

face. By the time the two of them finished shopping, they both sported great big smiles. That was a huge relief; Claudia didn't want Sunny to take away anything negative from their encounter.

As Claudia waited for her carriage to arrive, Sunny left the shop ahead of her to return home. She dipped her head low in gratitude before taking her leave. If that didn't speak to the quality of her character, nothing would. In fact, Sunny struck Claudia as noticeably fragile, but that belied how earnest and polite she was underneath. Sadly, even if she faced physical abuse, Sunny had no choice but to stay at the brothel.

It makes my heart ache.

Claudia had to wonder: what could she do to save people like Sunny? She understood it was an impossible problem to solve alone. Making life better for Sunny and the other sex workers would require systemic societal change, and that was no easy feat. If it were, she would have done it already.

While she was lost in thought, the owner stood beside her, pale and stiff as a statue. It was the sort of response anyone would have after earning the ire of a duke's daughter. He was probably entertaining the worst sorts of possibilities. It wouldn't be surprising if he couldn't even continue his business come tomorrow.

As impolite as it was in my book, his response was perfectly normal.

There were many aristocrats who wrinkled their nose at commoners. Although it offended her that he would assume she was the same as them, she couldn't really blame him. The chasm that separated the upper class from ordinary civilians was just too great.

As the minutes trickled by, her guilty conscience grew—until at last she said, "Having browsed so many stores today, I think I must have been exhausted. You will forget my earlier outburst, won't you?" Claudia beamed at the owner.

Color quickly returned to his face. "Yes, of course! I am the one who should apologize for not being more attentive, my lady!"

Now the air between them was clear, and just in time for her carriage to roll up. Claudia stepped outside the store, ready to board the carriage, but a familiar voice caught her attention. Her gaze was drawn to Sunny, who was being accosted by a strange man.

“You’re one of the courtesans at Flower Bed, right?” he said. “You out here hunting for a mark?”

“Apologies, but I’m in a hurry.”

“What the hell? You can give me a few minutes of your time.” The man snatched her hand, refusing to let her leave.

Claudia gave her bodyguards a discreet look, indicating they should intervene. But before they had the opportunity, a man in a cloak with a hood shrouding his features interceded.

“Sorry, but it ain’t workin’ hours right now,” he said.

“Huh? I was talking to her first!” complained the heckler.

“And I already told you, we ain’t open for business at the moment!” The cloaked man swung his fist into the other man’s sternum.

“Guh!” The man sank to the ground with a noisy thud.

“Come on, let’s get outta here!” The hooded man grabbed Sunny by the arm and dragged her away.

“R-right!”

Claudia assumed at first he was a bodyguard from Flower Bed, but she didn’t recognize him at all. It was only when he spun to leave that she caught the briefest glimpse of something gold glimmering beneath his hood.

*She cocked her head. I don’t recognize him at all. I’m sure I don’t. But then why do I get this sense of *déjà vu*?*

As far as she could recall, she hadn’t encountered anyone like that in her last life. Was it because the long, blond hair hidden beneath his cloak reminded her

of Seraphim's? His silhouette was similar too.

"That girl is awfully unlucky," Helen said, breaking Claudia out of her reverie.

She nodded. "I'm quite shocked myself. Who knew shopping could be so difficult?" It wasn't normally this much of a challenge, at least in her experience.

I suppose even brothel courtesans are treated no different from streetwalkers. Streetwalkers were those who, as the name implied, took to the streets to ply their trade and seek clients. Much like the courtesans in the brothels, they had the backing of the local crime syndicate, but since they operated on their own, they tended to draw in unsavory types. Physical abuse and even murder were part and parcel of streetwalkers' daily lives.

In that respect, Claudia's old haunt—the brothel Flower Bed—had a much higher-quality customer base than most. That was largely thanks to their entry requirements. But as she had seen the last time she visited in disguise, it still had its issues.

There were fewer risks to working in a brothel than operating alone on the streets. If a brothel was popular enough, it would even assign bodyguards to keep the courtesans safe. That being the case, most customers probably didn't distinguish between the two.

Maybe I was just lucky.

Claudia had rapidly gained popularity as a courtesan, so she always had protection when she went outside. No ruffians had ever accosted her.

Becoming an investor and contributing to make things better has been little more than a drop of water in a vast ocean, Claudia realized, much to her chagrin. Sex workers were at the bottom of the societal hierarchy, well below average citizens. What could she do to protect all of them equally?

There was no easy answer to that.

Chapter 4:

The Villainess Meets with the Crown Prince

Days later, Claudia answered Sylvester's invitation to visit the royal palace. She was quickly led to one of the drawing rooms, the same one where she and Sylvester had first met one-on-one for tea. An enormous window opened the room to a vast swathe of greenery beyond. The light that spilled in created shadows on the floor and table.

Claudia had been there numerous times. She should have been used to the room's majesty by this point, but no; each visit was a breath of fresh air. Perhaps because her companion was so special.

Sylvester's golden eyes were unwavering twin suns—not at all blinding but reflective of the steadfast will harbored within. Despite their unchanging nature, the vast range of emotion reflected in them was inexhaustible. Each time she peered into them, she discovered something new. Those eyes could jumpstart her heart and dry up her throat, as if she had forgotten how to breathe. They had an even stronger effect on her whenever she saw herself in them.

"Good afternoon. Allow me to express my deep appreciation for your kind invitation," said Claudia.

"Of course. It's a pleasure to have you here."

Sylvester had already informed her of the reason for the visit: Seraphim and happenings within the United Kingdom of Arakaner.

"I don't doubt that Virgil already shared some information with you, but I thought going over the particulars would be a great excuse for extending our time together," he said.

The prince was right; Virgil had already given her the gist of why Seraphim was visiting. Arakaner wanted Harland's input on how to curb the church's

growing power. That rendered most of Sylvester's explanation redundant, but she had no complaints if it meant spending more time with the ever-busy Sylvester.

Once he was done, she handed him a present with a smile. He tenderly stroked her cheek. There was nothing to separate them from physical contact because they were seated side by side on a sofa.

"As Virgil informed me, their main issue is the church's monopoly over the sale of sugar," said Claudia.

The monopoly was not meant for personal profit but to help with distribution and the regulation of market price, which they oversaw to keep financial balance between countries. The church also had strong influence over products considered daily necessities, which was what made them so irreplaceable to smaller nations. Unfortunately, the church had snubbed Arakaner entirely for all-too-obvious reasons.

"Religious beliefs can't change overnight, though," Sylvester reasoned.

Claudia nodded knowingly. "And Arakaner and its people are animists."

As a conglomeration of many islands, Arakaner didn't uphold a monotheistic religion. Being animists, they believed spirits resided in all things in the world. This rather predictably kept the church from accepting them. The subsequent lack of access to sugar was a substantial problem for Arakaner, since the church also retained rights to the seeds for the very plants used to manufacture sugar. And even if Arakaner had access to sugarcane, they had no way of cultivating or processing it. That said, Arakaner wasn't completely cut off from purchasing sugar, but monotheistic countries (including Harland) would only sell at exorbitant prices.

"Our two nations are on good terms, so I wish I could help them," said Sylvester, "But we cannot oppose the church."

They weren't quite as reliant on the church's goodwill as smaller nations, but they were still in the church's debt. Harland had to be careful; the church

wasn't the only threat. If they took a combative stance, every neighboring nation aligned with the church would come down hard on them. Excommunication and international ostracization were not desirable statuses for Harland.

Arakaner knew all this already, so for them to insist on coming to Harland signified they were at the end of their rope with the church.

"I understand where Arakaner is coming from," Sylvester went on. "The church has massive influence, and they're only gaining more and more power as the years go by."

"Other countries have even created high chancellor positions to give a prominent role within their government to a church official," Claudia said.

This practice was most common among smaller nations. A high chancellor essentially had as much power as a prime minister. Larger countries like Harland had enough capital and resources to train capable individuals for such positions, but smaller nations always lacked effective leadership. Since the church's influence extended beyond borders and spread across the entire continent, they could easily offer their assistance.

Monks were erudite, with proficiency in foreign languages—a necessity for their religious missions. Their strong sense of ethics made them good role models as well. They were perfect candidates for immediate dispatching to whatever country required them. It was little wonder why the small nations depended on them so much. In fact, the church had a wide range of highly educated and capable individuals, which was why one of their cardinals had been appointed as a judicial officer to act in an advisory role.

"It's largely thanks to the church that no nations have collapsed in recent history. A sudden influx of refugees would be impossible for us to regulate, so I prefer our current state of harmony," Sylvester said.

Even bigger countries like Harland would struggle under such circumstances. As eager as Sylvester was to help, doing so recklessly would only breed strife

between Harland's current occupants and any refugees welcomed. Although they were all from the same continent, different nations' peoples had different customs, cultures, and languages. The church's influence had instilled some shared sense of ethics, but it wasn't universal.

"However," Sylvester said with emphasis, "I will admit that not all members of the church have integrity."

Claudia instinctively scanned the room. Logically, she knew there was no way his voice would leak outside the drawing room, but such statements could be easily misconstrued. Not that she would risk saying so. What would the church and its leadership do if they overheard him? Being crown prince wouldn't protect him from their censure.

Sylvester seemed to read her mind. "Don't worry, the only people nearby are our Shadows."

Claudia's eyes landed on a maid near the door, whom she only now realized must also be one of the Shadows. Claudia sucked in a breath, shocked.

"Surely you must share my thoughts deep down, Claudia."

Her gaze slid back to him. "Yes, but I'm still surprised you would speak them aloud."

Prior to awakening as her younger self, Claudia had dismissed the idea that the Capricious God existed at all, but that was her opinion as a courtesan. She was living as a duke's daughter this time, and she knew better than to say anything that went against the church's doctrine. When her back was turned, tongues would wag about her being an immoral heretic.

Ironic that no one batted an eyelash when she was a courtesan. They didn't expect sex workers to have morals. Religious belief was proof one was cultured. If you were pious, people assumed you had integrity. The same assumption could be made of those with tattoos. After all, a tattoo could only be accomplished with a degree of medical knowledge. Some cultures used them as status symbols.

Sylvester stroked his chin. “On the surface, the church seems like a presence of universal good—but blind belief is dangerous. The church is like any other organization: it’s operated by human beings, which means wrongdoing at some level is inevitable.”

“That’s true.”

Even if the Capricious God really existed, the church monks had no divinity themselves. Miracles themselves were fickle. Monks were mortal, and like all mortals, there were good ones and bad ones. Not that the church would ever admit it.

“I believe Arakaner’s request for help is a warning sign,” said Sylvester. “If we allow the church to continue growing ever more powerful, the countries under its influence will lose their own independence and be reduced to the church’s mere extensions.”

There was no telling whether that would be better for the average citizen, but if the church held all concentrated power in its hands, the common folk would have no other options. It was possible the church might even develop into a dictatorship. The safer route was for each nation to maintain its sovereignty.

“How we respond to their request is still up for debate,” Sylvester continued. “To that end, I wouldn’t be surprised if Seraphim approached you to improve his chances.”

“Me?” *Not Father or Virgil?*

“Well, it may not just be you. I’m sure he will use every option available to him.”

“Very well,” said Claudia. “I will keep my guard up if and when he meets with me.”

That was the true reason for this invitation: to prepare her for handling Seraphim if he came to her. It would be impossible for her to decide how to respond to him without first knowing Sylvester’s thoughts.

"I realize it may be a tall order given the time of year, but there is something I would like your assistance with."

Claudia blinked at him. "Oh? What might that be?"

"Have you heard anything about an illegal casino?"

She shook her head. "No, not at all." His mention of it suggested there was gambling going on behind the scenes. A legal casino with proper permits wasn't an issue, but if it was an illegal outfit, it was a breeding ground for crime.

"Admittedly, I have only heard rumors, and there's no concrete proof that one exists. Do you think you could inquire with the lower-ranking aristocracy and see if they've heard anything?"

All students were supposed to be equals within the academy's halls, but even so, the only aristocrats who interacted with Sylvester were all high-ranking. It was difficult for him to otherwise involve himself with the aristocratic faction. Claudia, however, had formed various connections with students of myriad backgrounds during the festival last year.

"Very well, but with summer vacation on the horizon..." She let her voice trail off.

Sylvester nodded. "Yes, I know I'm asking the impossible, which is why any information will be a great help."

Not only was the academy on the cusp of summer vacation, but they were also entering high society's off season. It was the worst possible time of year to gather information.

At the mention of an illegal casino, Claudia's mind immediately honed in on the criminal syndicate. The government kept a watchful eye on them, though. If Sylvester couldn't find any further details on this illegal casino despite their surveillance, then the syndicate was doing an impressive job keeping it hidden.

"I plan to conduct a more thorough investigation myself based on whatever you can uncover. Even if it's mere gossip, that will give me a starting point."

“Very well,” said Claudia.

When it comes to vast sums moving around, merchants are probably the most cognizant. Their intelligence network was nothing to sniff at either. Claudia resolved to ask Brian about the matter.

The maid who had been standing at the door silently drifted toward the prince and bent down to whisper in his ear. This was probably an indication that they’d run out of time.

“Already?” Sylvester sighed. “All we had time to discuss was politics.”

“It brought me plenty of joy just seeing you,” Claudia assured him with a smile.

“I was hoping for time for us to get closer.”

How were they supposed to get closer than they already were? They were side by side with no space between them, their knees touching.

“As much as I long to stay in your company, I’ll simply have to look forward to our next meeting instead.” Claudia lifted herself off the sofa. She leaned over and planted a chaste kiss on his cheek. He returned the gesture, and with that, they had to part.

As the carriage trundled away from the castle, Claudia peered out the side window. The sun was still high in the sky. She leaned back and closed her eyes. Outside, the rhythmic *clip-clop* of the horses’ hooves echoed on the cobblestone.

The church was a force of good as far as society was concerned. They regulated distribution and market prices, of course, but that wasn’t their only contribution. There were monasteries where the monks typically lived, and they welcomed orphans into their church halls and cared for them there. Church halls held religious services and distributed food to the poor and unfortunate too—and that was just some of the volunteer-type work they did. If

monasteries were residences for the monks, then church halls were their workplaces.

Aristocrats had orphanages in their respective territories, but quality and policy were hardly uniform between them. All administrative matters in a particular region were under the reigning regional lord's purview—and without government funding, it was difficult for some regions to maintain such facilities. For those in particular, the church was an indispensable asset.

All this aside, Sylvester wasn't the only one with a bone to pick. Claudia had her own strong opinions. *Cardinals were regular customers at the brothel, after all.*

The cardinals oversaw monks within the church and had a lofty position in the hierarchy—just below the pope, who was on par with a king. Each nation that embraced monotheism was assigned a cardinal; there were, at present, twenty of them associated with the church.

Monks practiced asceticism, which one would think applied to those of a higher rank, including cardinals. But even men of the cloth couldn't entirely ignore their own carnal desires.

If I remember correctly, Harland's cardinal was one of Miss Kayla's clients.

The brothel itself was overseen by the crime syndicate. If the church was a force of good, then the crime syndicate was one of evil. The two should have been at complete odds. It made her wonder how the cardinal rationalized visiting the brothel.

The crime syndicate shouldn't be condemned as pure evil, of course. Perhaps the cardinals shared the same opinion as Harland's government: that the syndicate was a necessary evil.

The syndicate had deep roots in the kingdom's more rural regions. Its members had been born in the slums, outside the reach of what meager government aid could provide. With the hardships they faced, there was no room for learning ethics. Committing crimes was vital to survival and to earn

any sort of profit.

Different syndicates ranged in size depending on their location, but there were no ties between such organizations. The one exercising authority within the capital called itself “Dragoon.”

Lawbreaking of any kind deserved a fitting punishment, but Dragoon fed its profits back into the slums that birthed it. Their contributions were a bit more isolated and less widespread than the church’s; still, they *were* contributing. They did what they could to protect people like themselves.

Some aristocrats advocated for the complete removal of Dragoon and the slums along with it—a radical approach if ever there was one. But the denizens of the slums were the most disadvantaged and vulnerable of all their citizens, having slipped through the cracks of what welfare Harland had to offer.

Turning our backs on the weak is to deny the very purpose of the aristocracy, Claudia thought. Noblesse oblige was the foundation of the upper class: privilege entailed responsibility. What meaning would there be in expunging society of the very people whom they existed to protect and serve?

Harland wasn’t just turning a blind eye where the slums were concerned, but the measures in place to provide for their most impoverished citizens weren’t perfect. *That’s why Harland tacitly allows them to operate here. Like the church, they consider the syndicate a necessary evil.*

If Dragoon engaged in any blatant crime in the public eye, the government would launch an investigation—but they made no attempt to completely weed the syndicate out. There would be little point. Uprooting Dragoon would be a temporary fix to a systemic problem; a new syndicate would rise up to take their place. It was better to keep the current organization under close watch and uphold some level of order to avoid chaos.

I suppose Dragoon’s leader must be the one I knew in my last life. Claudia had met him a couple of times back then. He was a bald man with a rugged appearance, as befitting the head of a crime syndicate. Most people shrank in

his presence. On the surface, he was the embodiment of the crime lord stereotype. But he was always a gentleman to the courtesans.

A number of people in the syndicate viewed courtesans as fellow members, but since courtesans were essentially being exploited for money, it wasn't a relationship built on trust.

Unfortunately, it would be difficult to implement an immediate expansion of the welfare system. Claudia lamented that.

The government allowed Dragoon to operate out of necessity, but it wasn't as though they were ignoring the issues that led to the syndicate's creation. They were going through a series of trial-and-error policies, trying to discover a better way to ensure a proper safety net for their most vulnerable people.

The biggest obstacle to change was a lack of manpower and funds. To secure funding from the aristocracy (or regional lords in particular), they had to offer something in return—or, at the very least, demonstrate that their efforts were making a lasting impact.

I desperately want to establish a government-run brothel, but my prospects are looking grim. Putting the sex industry under the government's purview would mean implementing a system of laws to manage sex workers.

At present, all brothels operated under Dragoon's administration. They instituted some rules, but brothels weren't well regulated. Many of the courtesans worked in terrible environments.

Claudia thought it was best to implement change in the brothel she knew the best. She hoped to eventually expand government aid so that women facing financial troubles had options aside from entering the brothel. That was her end goal. If she could be greedy, she really wanted to cultivate a society where all people from poor backgrounds—not just sex workers—could live comfortable, secure lives.

But there was a limit to what Claudia could accomplish. For the whole kingdom to instate such laws, parliament would first have to approve them, and

then the king would have to give it his seal of approval. Even assuming she had Sylvester's full support for her proposals, she would still need to lay the necessary groundwork with the members of parliament to ensure they were on board. The issue was that she had no political authority to make proposals for parliament to vote on.

Claudia's first hurdle would be convincing her father to present her ideas on her behalf. Next would be securing enough allies to ensure that her proposal passed. Then, assuming everything went smoothly, she would need to figure out some way to fund this new government-run brothel.

There was a mountain of issues she would have to address before her dream became a reality. *But I absolutely want to put the sex industry under government regulation.*

If everything went the way she wanted, and they had a systemic welfare system going, would that mean the end of sex workers?

One theory holds that sex work is the oldest profession in the world.

Some even called it the original profession. As long as there was demand for sexual services, Claudia had a hard time imagining sex work would disappear entirely. Better to be safe than sorry, to secure the safety of any woman who entered the industry of her own free will.

The biggest benefit of a government-regulated sex industry was the ability to implement minimum standards. Brothels would be forced to meet certain criteria for an official license to operate, meaning no disparity between establishments like there was now. They could protect the health of the courtesans with hygiene protocols. Good hygiene would benefit clients as well. No one willingly chose to be inflicted by sickness or disease.

"Is there anything you want?" blurted the duke as they settled down at the dining table for their evening meal together.

Anyone else might have found the question abrupt, but it hardly surprised Claudia; her birthday was during summer vacation. A lavish affair was planned in the estate's event hall. The head maid, Martha, was already busy with preparations.

At her father's question, there was only one thing that came to mind.

"Sex business," she muttered. Perhaps the reason it popped out of her mouth was because she'd spent the whole ride home thinking about the sex industry issues at length.

Claudia had become an investor in Flower Bed during her previous visit, but she was painfully aware of how inadequate that was. She knew it would be no easy feat, but what she wanted more than anything was to establish government regulations for the entire industry. That was probably why those words slipped out of her mouth unbidden.

"Hmm. You have an interest in business, do you?"

"Hrk!" Her breath caught in her throat. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that!"

What in the world am I doing, letting such words leave my mouth?! The color drained from Claudia's face.

In a rare departure from the norm, she'd been too distracted to think properly. But while she was flustered by her slipup, her father didn't seem particularly perturbed.

"There's no need for you to feel embarrassed. I'm not being critical of you. I understand some aristocrats disapprove of such business pursuits among the elite, but I do not count myself among them."

Lilith's head bobbed. "It seems logical to me that you'd have an interest in it, what with your connections to the Evans Company."

Even Miss Lilith approves?! Claudia was amazed—or perhaps horrified—that everyone seemed on board with her running a sex business. Something about it made her uneasy rather than grateful. *I thought I had done well to establish*

myself as a dignified young lady.

She was supposed to be the *perfect* young lady, in fact, and the perfect young lady would never say the words “sex business.” It would be one thing if they had furrowed their brows in disapproval, but for her family to rally and support her could only mean they suspected her of having a deep interest in brothels to begin with.

“I set up my own such business in the United Kingdom of Arakaner just last year,” her father said.

“You did?!” she cried in surprise.

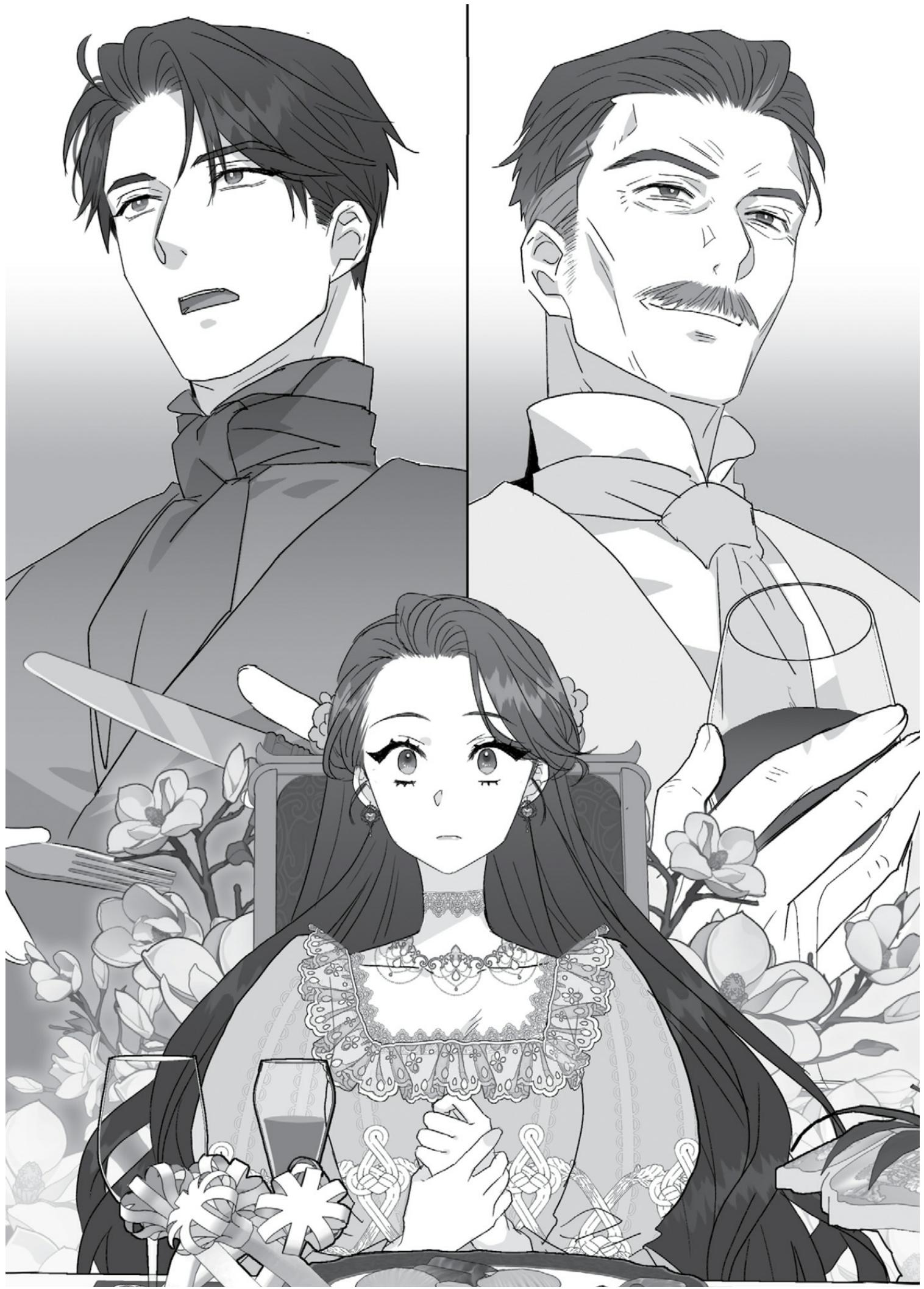
He cocked his head at her. “Is it really that shocking? I was quite uneasy about the venture. While they’re close neighbors, all transportation of goods must be done by ship. I am fortunate that we have enough of a surplus to take such risks. Failure itself is a learning experience, though, which is why I resolved to go through with it.”

Since the Lindsays’ territory was in Harland’s northern inland region, they had no cause to use boats or ships for their trading. It was hard to believe her father was so set on trying to establish a brothel in Arakaner that he was willing to brave heretofore unexplored territory for their family.

I never realized he had such a strong emotional attachment to brothels. Claudia stiffened as the realization hit her. *Hold on a moment.* There was something strange about the way this whole conversation had played out.

Neither her father, Lilith, nor Virgil seemed flustered about the topic of their conversation. Virgil’s eyes, which were the same deep azure as her own, shone with tempered rationality.

She needed to cool her head. There was no way Virgil, the man often referred to by the epithet “Ice Scion,” would be unaffected by the words “sex business.” Somewhere along the way, they had misunderstood what she said. Her intuition was screaming as much at her.



Miss Lilith mentioned Brian and his family's company as an example. The Evans Company didn't run a brothel. And her father's whole focus through the conversation hadn't been on the sex part but rather the business aspect. No matter how deep his interest in commercial endeavors, no aristocrat would want to dip their feet in the sex industry—or, at the very least, not as their first venture. No, there was an endless number of safer options to choose from, such as selling local specialties from their region.

Having pieced together all the hints she had picked up during their conversation, Claudia at last realized where the misunderstanding had occurred. *I must have mumbled. Father must have assumed I meant business as a general concept. It didn't even occur to him that I would really mean sex business.*

By business, her father must have assumed she meant a trading company: a facility either a merchant or aristocrat set up in other countries to sell goods and earn a profit. It would be one of many branch stores for the Lindsays, offering a selection of regional specialties that local peddlers could buy up and resell.

It was customary for merchants to court aristocrats into being their sponsors and build the stores themselves, but the Lindsays had a solid enough foundation to create their own businesses. Her father had proper business acumen and had already surrounded himself with capable merchants. His trading firm wouldn't fail as long as he left it in their hands.

The more she thought about it, the more she realized her request—misheard and misunderstood though it was—was an outrageous one. If her father had lost his temper and scolded her for being ridiculous, she couldn't have disagreed with him.

“Please forget I asked,” she hastily added, shrinking back in her seat, but it was already too late.

“Father,” Virgil said, “I see no reason why we couldn't afford to let her

supervise one of our stores. As long as you have an accomplished manager to oversee it, Dee shouldn't have any trouble."

"Hmm, you make a fair point."

Father's really going to agree that easily?!

"I suppose I could leave the branch in Arakaner in your care then, Claudia," her father decided. "Better for you to take over one that I haven't yet had so much involvement in."

Claudia struggled to keep her smile from faltering. This "present" was far too much for her. It wasn't something any other aristocratic father would ever consider giving his daughter.

"You have done an admirable job building a solid rapport with the Evans Company. Handle this store however you see fit," said the duke.

It was even more inconceivable that he'd give her carte blanche.

Claudia's father had built this branch with the idea that even failure would be a learning experience. He seemed to think it would serve the same purpose under her care. She had proven herself capable many times over, such as with the school festival. That was probably part of why he had so much faith in her.

Though she was a bit rattled by the financial scale of her father's gift, but she forced herself to smile nonetheless. "Th-thank you!" she squeaked, struggling to hide the stammer. "I will do my utmost to make it succeed."

After blurting out the words "sex business," she could hardly refuse. It would be far riskier if she refused and her father grew suspicious enough to realize what she'd really said.

But what am I supposed to do with a trading company?! Claudia had many opinions concerning cosmetics, since she used them all the time, but this was different. Yes, she had some knowledge about the specialties of her family's region, but she had no experience negotiating with merchants in such a capacity.

She tried her best to act pleased about her father's gift, but deep down, she was a panicked, flustered mess.

Chapter 5:

The Villainess Meets with the Merchant Baron's Son

“IT TAKES A THIEF to catch a thief,” or so the saying went. It thus stood to reason that if one wanted to know about business, it was best to ask a merchant. To that end, Claudia decided to turn to Brian for help with her newfound responsibilities. Fortunately, Brian would be coming to make his regular report, so she would let him speak before getting his advice.

It was a beautiful early afternoon when she, Helen, and Brian found themselves together in her family's drawing room. Helen stood by the wall, as was typical for a maid, while Brian and Claudia were seated.

Brian was in good spirits because their cosmetics were selling so well. Claudia felt he looked like a big dog eagerly whipping his tail back and forth. According to Helen, it was natural for a canine to exhibit such behavior in front of its master. But Claudia had a feeling that wasn't the only reason for his joy.

I bet he's over the moon because this is an excuse to see Helen. Claudia had already noticed his affections. But Helen's feelings mattered most to her, and unfortunately for Brian, she showed no indication that the feeling was mutual. Her family still had issues of its own, so she seemed to be prioritizing work over romantic pursuits. *All I can do is wait for her to collect her thoughts and make up her mind.*

Helen had been well provided for since she began working at the Lindsay estate, but it didn't change the fact that she was now a commoner and not an aristocrat. She was extremely sensitive to status and etiquette. While Claudia couldn't say to what degree exactly, she knew Helen would feel uncomfortable being courted by someone of higher status—at least right now. Only she could change her own point of view, though. Even that could be too difficult for some.

All Claudia could do was hope that time would heal Helen and relieve her of her sense of inferiority. To her relief, Brian was perceptive enough to pick up on Helen's inner struggle and had made no concrete attempts to court her.

"This is the report for this month's earnings," Brian said, placing the documents on the coffee table.

"Thank you for always delivering them. Your product has such a good reputation among the rest of high society. I'm proud to be associated with it."

It was so popular, in fact, that the Evans Company was struggling to keep up with demand. Claudia was often being flagged down by the young ladies in her set, asking when they would be able to get their hands on it.

"Of course!" Brian said, a little too loudly. "This is all because you endorsed us and vouched for the quality of our product!" He hesitated before adding, "Although there has been some trouble recently..."

"Oh? What sort of trouble?" Claudia couldn't help but ask, seeing the way his bright smile fell away so suddenly. It was rare for his expression to cloud over so. She steeled herself; whatever the trouble was, it had to be something big.

"It's a bit embarrassing for us as a company, but I decided I would report it to you since I figure you will hear of it one way or another. Resellers have started surfacing."

"They have?"

This was likely a result of their product's popularity and scarcity. There were those out there willing to shell out extra if it meant they could get their hands on it. The bigger question was how these resellers were managing to get a hold of the product in the first place. The Evans Company had gone to great lengths to prevent knock-offs by putting a special seal on each bottle to indicate its authenticity. Sales were closely regulated as well, so there was no easy way for a reseller to come in and buy the product en masse.

"Part of it is that some aristocrats are lured in by how much they can make by

selling theirs. Their number is negligible, though. The other day, a carriage carrying a vast number of our products for wholesale was attacked.”

“Goodness!” Claudia covered her mouth.

Brian explained that while they’d had guards accompanying their carriage, the assailants had still found an opening to exploit. “Based on their methods, there’s a strong possibility that these were bandits affiliated with the local crime syndicate. We’ve filed a complaint with the appropriate authorities.”

Bandits frequently targeted merchant transports when they carried expensive goods, but this struck Claudia as odd. Cosmetics weren’t normally the type of merchandise they targeted. There was no telling how much it was worth at a single glance. It would be dangerous to sell them as is on the market; the seal would give the game away and potentially set investigators on their trail. The authorities always kept areas ripe for crime on their patrols. The crime syndicate therefore had other avenues to sell stolen goods.

Courtesans would happily buy such stolen products. Though there were some who could buy legitimately using client connections.

The issue in this case was that the Evans Company’s cosmetics were being sold primarily to the highest echelons of aristocratic society. It wouldn’t be as easy to obtain it in this life as it had been in her brothel days.

“If this continues, it will have a negative impact on the company, so we will make sure this doesn’t happen again,” Brian said. “We plan to strengthen our security measures in the future. So please, if anyone inquires, tell them the problem is being handled.”

If this subject was circulating in the rumor mill, another young noble lady might approach Claudia to ask about the situation, especially since she had a hand in advertising for the Evans Company.

“Very well,” she said. “Thank you for informing me.”

Brian beamed at her. “Business always comes with its fair share of risks,

whether people resell your merchandise or produce cheap knock-offs. It comes hand in hand with the product's popularity. You shouldn't let it weigh on you at all, my lady."

Claudia appreciated his words, but the subject *did* weigh on her now that managing a trading firm was one of her responsibilities. It was the perfect segue. She wanted his advice, and his report was essentially over.

"Consumers have a habit of ignoring the risks facing sellers so long as it doesn't involve them," she said, thinking of herself. As gracious of an opportunity this was, Claudia still didn't have the insight necessary to manage a business.

Brian's face brightened, and he laughed. "There's nothing wrong with that! It's why we've padded our product pricing. That's how we merchants make the most profit in the end!" His attitude spoke to the shrewd business sense his family had instilled in him.

Claudia couldn't help but smile with him. "I only hope that I can learn from your example. Just the other day, my father put me in charge of one of his trading firms."

"A trading firm?!" Brian cried, floored. "I suppose that makes sense. The scale of gifts in a ducal household is on a different level indeed."

"It's a gift far beyond my capabilities, I'm afraid. I worry that my inexperience will result in poor management and cause headaches for the employees."

Claudia could leave administration to the person in charge at the firm, but if she wasn't cognizant of the goings-on and didn't perform her own inspections, corruption would take root. She couldn't be completely hands-off with the firm.

Brian stared blankly at her, blinking several times. Once he fully digested her concerns, his eyes grew moist with emotion. Claudia couldn't even begin to guess what he found so moving about the situation. She quirked a brow at him.

Seeming to read her confusion, he said, "I already knew you were an

incredible person, my lady, but you never cease to amaze me. You show such consideration for the people working under you.”

“Wouldn’t anyone do the same?”

“It’s not common among the aristocracy, and even some merchants fail to take their own workers into consideration. All they care about is minimizing their own losses. You don’t know how much it means to those of us doing the grunt work to have people like you overseeing us. People who care.”

He spoke from the point of view of an ordinary worker. Although his father was a baron now, they were originally commoners. Brian had watched his father toil at the bottom of the social hierarchy to climb to his current position.

“As long as you’re aware of potential issues, the environment at your firm will be fine,” he promised her. “Your influence is more impressive than you realize. There’s no need for you to worry about poor management.”

“You really think so? Even though I’m a complete novice when it comes to business?” Claudia couldn’t understand why he had such a positive outlook about this.

For some reason, his gaze wandered to Helen. There was a wry twist to his lips, as if Claudia’s obliviousness entertained him.

“I realize I’m overstepping by saying this, Lady Claudia, but I think you have a habit of underestimating your own reputation,” Helen chimed in.

“I see. That makes sense,” said Brian. “As I’ve said, you’ll be fine, my lady. I would bet our whole company on it.”

“Please, you two. Don’t dismiss my concerns outright.” Claudia frowned at them. Her doubts were perfectly normal, as far as she was concerned. And she didn’t appreciate them leaving her out of the conversation either.

“Consider how much of an impact you had on our cosmetics,” Brian reasoned. “The only reason it has enjoyed such explosive popularity is because you were involved.”

"I would argue that it's because of the quality of your product," she said.

Brian shrugged. "I won't contest that, but sadly, quality doesn't always sell. You're the one who ensured it did."

A quality product wouldn't sell unless it had the proper promotion to get its name out there. In that regard, Claudia was rather blessed; she was always at the center of people's attention. Others would scramble to get their hands on anything she took an interest in, especially if it was a quality product.

"Any involvement on your part will be the best marketing possible. With your careful eye and capable hands, I trust there won't be any management problems."

"I hope you're right."

He nodded. "Honestly, I'm a little envious of your firm. As long as you don't partake in the sort of risky gambles many aristocrats do..." He cleared his throat. "Ahem, knowing you, Lady Claudia, you have nothing to worry about."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Even though some aristocrats directly oversee their companies, the individual stores have their own managers. It's akin to how regional lords sometimes assign others to govern their lands. Unlike them, you won't ignore the advice of the person in charge at your firm, right?"

"Of course not," she said quickly. "It would be foolish to ignore the opinion of an expert."

"Not even a moment's hesitation. You're incredible..." Brian shook his head, trying to get a hold of himself. "Erm, sorry, just thinking aloud." He cleared his throat. "The main reason businesses fail under aristocratic leadership is due to a lack of research. I don't understand why, but many aristocrats are confident despite having inadequate knowledge. And that's why they tend to disregard expert advice."

"A sort of arrogance particular to the upper crust, I assume," said Claudia.

Many aristocrats were accustomed to special treatment and reverence. They took it for granted, assuming that commoners would flock to purchase whatever they put up for sale. What they failed to understand was that business operated by a different set of rules from high society.

“They tend to be gullible, which makes them prime targets for scam artists eager to sell a ‘sweet deal.’ What they don’t realize is that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.”

It physically pained Claudia to hear about her fellow aristocrats’ worst qualities. High society was rife with talk of people being defrauded.

I'll need to be careful. No matter how cautious she tried to be, she knew that scam artists had a knack for finding vulnerabilities in their targets and exploiting them. It also didn’t matter what one’s status was. Even the most elite aristocrats could fall victim to swindlers.

“As long as you don’t heedlessly agree to investment opportunities, you should be fine. If you still want to go through with something and have taken into consideration the pros and cons, that’s your choice. The only one who’ll suffer for it in the end is you.”

“Thank you,” Claudia said with a smile. “Your advice is greatly appreciated.”

“Seeing as your father is a duke, you probably have plenty of skilled experts around you already. As many as the church, I imagine. They’ll safeguard you from those sorts of missteps.” Brian shook his head. “It’s probably presumptuous of me to even give advice.”

Ironic that he would echo Sylvester’s sentiments about the church. They did indeed possess many capable members. That was largely thanks to the education offered at their monasteries, which fostered intellectual growth.

The academy recruited many of its teachers from the monasteries. Their curricula weren’t limited to the upper class, however. Monks taught all their students equally, including orphans and commoners. That was why they had access to so many capable people whom they could send abroad as needed.

With that in mind, I think it's necessary for us to have an academy that caters to commoners as well.

At present, there were no schools for the common folk. The integration of such schools was worth considering, since more widespread education would result in a more talented and proficient citizenry.

Claudia shook herself from her reverie. She was getting too sidetracked from their conversation. She remembered Brian's self-deprecating statement from before her mind wandered off. "My, I always appreciate any advice you have to give me."

She told him she wouldn't ignore an expert's advice, but the words of an acquaintance carried far more weight than those of a stranger.

Brian's arms shot up to cover his face. A blush flooded his cheeks until their hue brought to mind tomatoes. If he really were a dog, his tail would be swishing furiously right about now.

"Y-you're really good at telling someone exactly what they want to hear, Lady Claudia!"

She pressed a hand over her mouth and giggled. She couldn't help but smile at his adorable reaction. "Ha ha, you exaggerate!"

The discussion had lightened her worries significantly.

"There's actually one more thing I'd like to speak to you about, if you wouldn't mind keeping it completely confidential," she said.

"I am always happy to keep your secrets!" Brian understood how useful information was, thanks to his line of work. He leaned forward in his seat, eager to hear what she had to say—especially since she obviously didn't plan to share whatever it was with others. Unfortunately, it was a rather unsavory topic.

"Word has it that an illegal casino has cropped up. Do you know of anyone who's suddenly grown wealthy out of nowhere?"

"Or someone whose finances have abruptly dried up," he said knowingly.

“Hmm. I haven’t heard of anyone who fits either bill around the capital.”

“Could it be happening in one of the more remote regions?”

“I wouldn’t completely rule it out,” he said. “But if something like that is happening in the rural areas, that would be under the respective regional lord’s purview, right?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

Sylvester was only interested in the issue insofar as it was within the central government’s power to address it. If a crime syndicate was engaging in operations outside of the crown’s jurisdiction, the information wouldn’t do him any good. None of the syndicates had connections to one another, so it would mean little to go after one within their jurisdiction if another outside it was causing the issue. Even assuming a regional syndicate was using illegal gambling to fund their activities, it was within the regional lord’s right to handle them.

“I’ll bring it up indirectly with our procurement manager.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it,” said Claudia. “But please don’t have your people do anything dangerous on my behalf, all right?”

“Understood! Our people tend to get a little *too* motivated when they hear your name, so I’ll keep you out of it to be on the safe side.”

Her brow furrowed. “Just what do your people think of me?”

“They think you a goddess.”

Claudia was taken aback. “My only involvement has been in your cosmetics!”

“That’s been enough to open business negotiations for us in other fields! That said, I promise we won’t do anything that would damage your reputation. We’re doing our utmost to make sure that never happens.”

“I trust you, so I don’t doubt that...” Her voice trailed off, a sign of her discomfort over the idea that her name had such influence beyond her control.

Claudia was aware that she had enormous clout thanks to being a duke’s

daughter, but there were times when it worried her—particularly the way Brian seemed to worship her. Her mind immediately went to the worst possibilities when he likened her to a goddess. What would the church think? It could put her under scrutiny. *Surely that's just my anxiety speaking and not a real possibility...right?*

Her attempts to put her own worries to rest were premature, given what Brian said next.

"I promise I won't do anything to betray your trust! Our goddess has been far more benevolent to us than the Capricious God. That's why so many have talked about adopting her as their figure of worship instead!"

Claudia's blood ran cold.

"Hold it right there," she said, then hesitated. "No, I suppose I shouldn't comment if there really is a goddess of commerce whom merchants put their faith in." Claudia suspected Brian was referring to her, but there was a possibility he wasn't.

"As long as our religion is monotheistic, the church will be accepting of it. Makes it convenient for us. Though I guess it doesn't help Arakaner at all."

Locals would balk if the church denied the legitimacy of the god they worshipped, which made it difficult to spread the faith. The church instead adopted the view that these other gods were simply different forms of the Capricious God, so there were no problems as long as these other religions were monotheistic. Accepting local customs allowed the church to extend its influence.

Their conversation had gone quite far off course, but at least it had been informative. That was enough for Claudia. (In truth, she simply decided further conversation would be pointless.)

After Brian left, Claudia returned to her room, where she had Helen pour her

a piping hot cup of tea. The refreshing brew prompted her to breathe a sigh of relief.

Helen gave her a knowing look. She could tell this new responsibility was burdening Claudia. “Does your load feel a bit lighter now?”

“It does. I let my anxiety get the best of me, but I think everything will be fine as long as I don’t needlessly butt in. Brian’s assurances convinced me of that.”

After all, Brian was right; her family *did* have capable people in its employ. The trading firm had been running just fine before she took over. There was nothing wrong with her being its proprietor in name only.

“If anything about the way things are being run bothers you, I believe you should bring it up to the management,” said Helen.

“They won’t think I’m being nosy?”

“Perhaps if it were anyone else they might, but your opinions tend to be insightful and precise.” Helen brought up Brian’s moisturizer as an example. Claudia had pointed out that different age groups had different needs for their skin. “Lord Brian is an expert when it comes to business, but even he failed to take into account something you noticed.”

Helen’s point was that there was nothing wrong with bringing a discussion to the table if it was for the purpose of improving the business. Claudia was always considerate of other people, so the firm’s management wouldn’t take issue with her providing necessary input.

“Besides,” Helen continued, “it’s not as though your father insisted you increase the firm’s profit margins, right?”

“True, he didn’t. He framed it as a financial asset that he was transferring over to me.” As a result, any profits that came from the business would go straight into her pocket. It was a gift, not a test of her skills.

But regardless of her father’s intentions, there were people working at this trading firm. She had a responsibility to them, if no one else.

"Then even more reason you should feel free to do with it as you wish. Having said that, I know how you are, my lady. You always take others into account." Helen smiled affectionately at Claudia.

Bashful, Claudia glanced away. She knew better than to think she was a proper, upstanding individual when those qualities were only borne of reflecting on the many mistakes she'd made in her last life. Still, having such enthusiastic support from someone who truly believed in her helped ease the shadow of self-deprecation hanging over her.

She's right. Balking at this opportunity won't get me anywhere. Taking the first step forward was the most important part of any new experience. It was a lesson engraved deep in Claudia's heart.

Chapter 6:

The Villainess Arrives in the United Kingdom

A FEW DAYS AFTER summer vacation commenced, Claudia landed in the main port of the United Kingdom of Arakaner. The sun's rays were bright enough to singe the skin, but the early morning breeze was refreshingly cool.

Despite the comfortable temperatures, everything around her was illuminated in the vivid hues of summer. The sky was bright and cloudless. Red roofs dotted the landscape. Along the roadsides, yellow flowers bloomed stark against white walls. The colors were so intense, they burned themselves into her retinas. Crowds milled about the streets, which could only mean the early morning market was already in full swing.

People ogled Claudia as she stepped off the ship. *I can't really blame them.* Considering the commanding presences beside her, people would be hard-pressed *not* to stare.

Sylvester's silver hair shimmered like clear seawater, refracting the light that touched it. By himself he would have been dazzling enough to make onlookers stop in their tracks.

"A shame there was no opportunity to see an empty horizon with nothing but the sea," he said.

"Since it was our first sea voyage together, perhaps it's better this way," Claudia replied.

They had promised to see the empty horizon on the sea together at some point, hence his bringing it up. Harland and Arakaner were separated by an ocean, but the main port on Arakaner Island was within viewing distance of Harland's coast on a clear day.

"It is a great honor for ours to be the first foreign country you visit, Lady Claudia," Seraphim said. His gray eyes were as warm as she remembered from

their first meeting. He took the lead as they disembarked, guiding their small party.

Syl coming along was enough of a surprise, but I never imagined Prince Seraphim would accompany us. Claudia had made plans to visit the trading firm she was now in charge of during the break, and Sylvester had been quick to jump on board. Well, to be more precise, he'd strong-armed his way into coming with her.

The issue wasn't with her family; it was Sylvester's schedule that had posed a problem, and he'd gone through immense trouble to adjust it. Tristan had been forced into coming along as well. He already wore a look of utter resignation.

They were here for a private visit, not in an official capacity. That necessitated hiding their identities—both Sylvester and Tristan had donned more muted garments than they normally wore—and there certainly would be no over-the-top parades held in their honor.

Claudia's plans were supposed to be confidential and known only to a select few, but Seraphim had caught wind and volunteered himself to act as their guide because it was his homeland. It bore repeating, however, that they were *supposed* to be undercover.

Sadly, we can't really help but stand out.

The two heads of contrasting silver and golden hair gleamed in the sunlight. If they alone weren't enough to demand the spotlight, there was also Tristan's vivid mop of fiery red only a step behind them. As princes, Sylvester and Seraphim both possessed a gravitas that commanded attention, even with their nondescript attire. The change of clothes did nothing to hide Sylvester's natural grace, though. His lack of a jacket highlighted the chiseled muscles of his chest. Claudia had to force herself to look elsewhere.

Goodness, how is it possible they can make ordinary shirts look stunning? Perhaps it was their confident, steadfast demeanors.

Like her male companions, Claudia had chosen a modest dress rather than the

elegant, opulent ones she normally donned. She hoped it would draw less attention. The garment itself was a simple sundress with half sleeves. On her head was a wide-brimmed hat, a standard accessory in the summer months. No one would know at a glance that she was a duke's daughter. But she, much like the men, held herself with such dignity that she also stood out.

Claudia's lustrous black hair fanned out around her back, and her artfully sculpted curves begged for attention. Her skirt was long and simple, leaving very little of her exposed, but the fabric itself was thin, and her lack of a corset further emphasized her sensual figure.

She was a vision on her own, but she had two incredibly handsome men accompanying her. They had bodyguards with them as well. It was impossible to keep a low profile.

I wonder if we'll really be able to keep our identities under wraps.

Claudia was honestly delighted to be able to take this trip with Sylvester. They went on dates in the capital, but they had never spent multiple days at a time together. Though she still had her concerns, her heart thrummed with anticipation at what was to come.

Her already mounting excitement was heightened by the unfamiliar scents on the breeze. People hustled through the streets despite the early morning hour, with goods being carried to and fro. The activity was like a rhythmic drumbeat in the background. Some of it was reminiscent of Port Brenach back in Harland, but the culture here was decidedly different. A unique atmosphere blanketed the market.

With all her senses, she could feel that Arakaner was foreign. Novel.

The crash of the waves behind her caught her attention, and she peeked over her shoulder. Another group was disembarking, and their members were equally eye-catching.

First was a mountain of a man with a bald head. The woman beside him wasn't quite as conspicuous, but the beauty mark near her mouth gave her a

bewitching quality. Beside her was a slightly younger girl with freckles dappling her face. The final member of their party was a man whose face was hidden by a hood. Despite the warm weather, he wore a thick cloak.

Claudia stiffened. *What are Bezel and Miss Kayla doing here?!*

Bezel was the leader of crime syndicate Dragoon, which operated primarily within Harland's capital. His appearance was too unique for her to mistake him, what with his imposing figure and hairless head.

Kayla was the highest-ranking courtesan at Flower Bed. Claudia could easily pick her out from a crowd. She owed Kayla immensely for supporting her in her previous life, and they had already exchanged words in this life when she visited Flower Bed for the first time as a client. And if that weren't enough, Sunny being at her side was a dead giveaway.

Since the man in the hood was standing beside Bezel rather than Kayla, that meant he wasn't a bodyguard at all. He was a member of Dragoon.

What business do they have here in the United Kingdom?

Arakaner was a perfect summer retreat since it was located to the northeast of Harland. Yet they were a bit too conspicuous to be vacationers.

I wouldn't think twice about it if Miss Kayla was accompanying a nobleman, but this is different. The syndicate shied away from making their connection to brothels public knowledge—or at least, they never had with Flower Bed. Sure, they would swing by sometimes to check on earnings and receive their dues, but Claudia had never heard of them going on trips with courtesans. Even assuming Dragoon's borders had spread from Harland's capital to its northeastern coast, it was hard to believe its leader would leave their headquarters.

This port isn't part of their territory, is it? No, surely not. It wasn't completely inconceivable, though, given how close their nations were.

During their shared history, Arakaner's people had rowed their longships to

reach and invade Harland's capital. They had made their living as Viking raiders prior to their nation's founding. Their raids were lightning fast. From the sea, they traveled upriver into Harland's heartlands. Harland had no other choice but to pay them the demanded fee to get them to leave.

Whereas pirates commenced raids on other ships at sea, Vikings preferred to hit villages and towns and steal what they could. Their favored pattern was to occupy a city and demand a ransom if the locals wanted them out. In fact, the reason Harland kept a standing army stationed in the capital at all times was because they had fallen prey to the Vikings' tricks in the past.

Until then, the method for rallying an army had been to send out messengers and petition the regional lords for troops. That took too much time. With all the expenses that would entail, it was cheaper to give the Vikings what they wanted. And the Vikings knew they had the finances to afford the ransom.

Thanks to their history, each island in Arakaner had its own military force, as did the royal family that had united them. No matter how close the two nations were, the royal family wasn't so complacent as to let a foreign crime syndicate take hold.

Claudia had stared at Kayla too long, lost in thought, and the other woman noticed. Their eyes met. *Oh no!* She panicked when Kayla stilled and quickly turned her head.

"Dia, what's the matter?" Sylvester asked.

"Nothing at all," she told him with a smile. "Don't worry about it."

Surely Miss Kayla won't recognize me...will she? When they met, she had disguised herself by cross-dressing and calling herself Rose. She was careful to keep her most distinguishing features—her black hair and blue eyes—from view. Even the outline of her body was different due to her chest binding. Surely there was no way for Kayla to figure out her identity with a simple glance.

I'm worrying for nothing, Claudia told herself.

She noticed Sunny bowing out of the corner of her eye. Though she knew the gesture had to be meant for her, she ignored it. *It's sweet that she remembered our encounter at the confectionery.* Part of her felt guilty for not acknowledging Sunny, but doing so would mean having to interact with Kayla. She wasn't confident she could fool Kayla's eyes.

Then again, Flower Bed's owner may have already told her that Rose has some link to the Lindsays. When she first visited, the owner was the only person to whom she showed her family's crest. The crest was something anyone could use, provided they had the family's permission to do so. That alone wouldn't be enough to prove to anyone that it was Claudia.

Honestly, she didn't even really mind if Kayla knew who she was. The bigger issue was that she wanted to avoid Sylvester knowing of their connection. *I couldn't look him in the eyes if he found out I had visited a brothel in secret.*

Claudia decided to give the matter no more thought. She let the two men escort her to their carriage.

Seraphim had directed their carriage to a restaurant in the harbor where they could enjoy breakfast together. He had rented out the entire venue for the occasion, so there were no other guests inside.

While a server led them to their seats out on the terrace, Seraphim paused and said, "Allow me to excuse myself for a few moments to pray."

It was customary in Arakaner to pray to the spirits before a meal. Most did this at the dining table, but as part of the royal family, Seraphim had to uphold tradition and excuse himself to a special room set aside for prayer. Sylvester didn't particularly mind, nor did Claudia or the rest of the staff. They understood Seraphim's reasons.

Everyone else took their seats at the dining table, and a refreshing breeze caressed Claudia's cheeks. The restaurant was on a coastal bluff overlooking the ocean. A cloth awning protected them from the sun's rays, creating a cool

shadow that stretched over the terrace. The sea glimmered in the distance. Ships cruised the clear waters, their sails billowing in the wind.

Time melted away as Claudia gazed out at the scenery, captivated.

"What an incredible view," she said.

"It is," Sylvester agreed. "Feels a bit strange to think that not long ago, we were part of this view, riding in one of those ships."

She wondered how it had looked to everyone who'd sighted their ship. Probably not much different from how it looked to them now. However, Claudia was confident that she could spot Sylvester on a ship deck even from this distance.

From this bird's-eye view, she could watch society take shape and play out. The liveliness in the market spoke volumes about the royal family's successful rule. Even with a different religion, their country was thriving.

I doubt the church cares to see that, though.

The church and Arakaner were thorns in each other's sides. Harland was sandwiched between these two opposing forces. Perhaps Sylvester had insisted on coming in part to better discern the worth of an alliance with Arakaner. That thought was a bucket of cold water tossed over her girlish excitement.

How silly. I just assumed he was here to spend time with me.

She glanced at Sylvester, and his glossy golden eyes locked on hers. Her heart skipped a beat and accelerated. Meeting each other's gazes was nothing special. At least, it shouldn't have been—but her cheeks flamed.

Is it because he's not in his usual attire? That had to be it. He didn't look as dapper as always. This was as close as she'd ever gotten to Sylvester the man rather than Sylvester the prince, and she assumed that was what affected her heart so much. He looked more masculine than he did in his formalwear, yet it did nothing to diminish his innate beauty.

"Dia."

She blinked. When she did, her emotions coalesced into a single tear that slid onto her lashes. It wobbled at the tips, barely holding on. The air between her and Sylvester grew thick with romantic tension.

That is, until Tristan abruptly cleared his throat. “Ahem! Please don’t forget there are other people present.”

Sylvester shot him a look. “Why are you sitting with us again?”

“Because Prince Seraphim invited me to dine with you!” Tristan cried.

Ordinarily, he would be standing behind Sylvester to act as his bodyguard, but Tristan was already part of Sylvester’s inner circle. His father was a marquess, and he’d been friends with Sylvester since childhood. They were still close even now. It only made sense that Seraphim would invite him to dine with them, since he’d come along for the trip.

Just as the atmosphere was easing thanks to Tristan’s interruption, a head of golden hair appeared on the terrace. Seraphim had finished his prayers.

Sylvester fixed Tristan with a disgruntled glare. Claudia, however, was glad for his interjection. Better for the two of them not to get lost in their own world. She wanted to avoid any open displays of affection in front of Seraphim, lest he figure out their unofficial engagement.

“Apologies for the wait,” Seraphim said.

“No need,” said Claudia. “I only hope you didn’t feel rushed to finish on our behalf.”

“Your consideration is most appreciated.” Seraphim smiled at her. It looked extra tender to her in that moment; more so after the murderous expression on Sylvester’s face a moment earlier.

He’s such a soothing person to be around.

The presence of a prince tended to put others on edge, but Seraphim always wore such a relaxed smile. It massaged away any tension. He was like Raul in that respect, although their way of accomplishing it differed; Raul’s smile was

more cheerful and vivacious.

“I thought we could enjoy the sea breeze while having our meal. This restaurant’s seafood is superb,” said Seraphim. His grin suggested he was looking forward to the food as much as they were. This was a private side of himself that he never showed in a public setting, and his excitement was infectious.

When the server came by and laid the dishes on the table, the appetizing scent of herbs filled the air. Fish was grilled whole with the skin still attached, drizzled with a dressing made with fruit-derived oil. It was supplemented by a helping of vegetables with contrasting acidic flavors.

Claudia flaked off a forkful of the white fish and took a bite—and the flavor exploded on her tongue. The fish was so tender, she didn’t even have to chew. Moreover, the dish’s tangy notes helped her forget the scorching heat of summer.

“This is delicious! I bet those baguettes pair perfectly with it,” said Claudia.

Seraphim motioned encouragingly at the basket of baguettes on the table. “They do. Try dipping one in the dressing. Even on days when I don’t have much of an appetite, I can’t stop myself from having seconds.”

Tristan was the first to test out Seraphim’s recommendation. His eyes fluttered shut and he hummed in appreciation.

The dish itself was deceptively simple; the fish only had a hint of spice, but that was enough to highlight the ingredients’ natural flavors. The depth was impressive. There were notes of citrus wafting from the dish, which earned it extra points in Claudia’s book. The spices were enough to make one’s tongue tingle, and that was where the cold came in—perfect for soothing the mouth and throat.

After eating their fill of the main course, everyone breathed a collective contented sigh. All that was left was dessert.

Why are they serving us this?

Claudia wouldn't have given the dessert a second thought if it had been local to Arakaner, but the one in front of her was all too familiar. The relaxing atmosphere immediately disappeared, and a newfound tension welled up inside her. This was the same type of sweet she had gifted Sylvester during her recent visit. She hadn't heard anything about the shop she visited having a branch here.

Sylvester shared her suspicions and turned to meet her gaze. The restaurant had gone out of its way to serve them something specifically from Harland. Seraphim was behind it, she was sure, but she couldn't figure out why.

Chapter 7:

The Villainess Discovers the Foreign Prince's Intentions

WHILE EVERYONE ELSE grappled with the meaning of the dessert before them, Tristan stared blankly at the party. It had gone right over his head. “What’s the matter, Syl?”

“I think we should ask Prince Seraphim to explain,” Sylvester said diplomatically. His calm smile betrayed no emotion, but the atmosphere around him tensed.

Seraphim’s brows creased in a look of anguish. “I apologize for disrupting the mood when you were all enjoying the food, but I wanted this opportunity to enlighten you about the situation my country’s facing.”

The biggest question on every mind was this: why were they being served a dessert from Harland rather than a local specialty? Claudia couldn’t help but be suspicious of the intended message of this stunt, but she quietly leaned back in her seat and waited for an explanation.

“I am sure you may find this difficult to believe,” said Seraphim, “but this dessert isn’t the least bit exotic to my people.”

Sylvester cocked his head. “Do you mean to say this restaurant regularly serves it?”

“Indeed. Granted, they tend to serve fruit to Harlanders—but I specifically asked the proprietor to give us their regular dessert.” He paused for a moment, then continued, “In Arakaner, even for the aristocracy, it’s rare to be able to enjoy any sort of baked good that requires sugar.”

“But it’s not as if your country is completely cut off from obtaining it, right?” said Sylvester.

Though the church had ostracized them, they still had *some* access to the

sugar trade, even if they had to pay a much more outrageous sum than other countries to obtain it.

Seraphim adjusted himself in his chair, his blond bangs sweeping across his forehead. His smile was a bit strained as he said, “Right. Thanks to our business ventures, we have enough financial leeway to purchase sugar. Though I doubt the church is pleased about that.”

Arakaner had found great success in financing. In fact, at the time of their founding, when Arakaner was still a disparate collection of islands, their monetary policy helped unite them under a shared understanding. They began with offering insurance to merchants and nations engaging in maritime trade. From there, they branched out to financial commodities and trade on land with foreign entities.

Even the tiny nations that employed high chancellors from the church in their government paid Arakaner to insure their trade. It was much too risky to do business without any insurance, so they were stuck between a rock and a hard place—or rather, the church and Arakaner—unable to cut ties with either.

The church prized asceticism, which made them unable to capitalize on profits like a regular business entity. Financing was one industry in which they couldn’t interfere. Seraphim was right to assume Arakaner’s success displeased them. The church didn’t hesitate to treat them as heretics, so nothing chafed more than Arakaner having greater influence in any sphere. Arakaner was an enormous obstacle to the church growing its own power.

“It’s cheaper to import Harland’s baked goods than it is for us to import sugar,” Seraphim told them.

“What?!” Tristan shouted in disbelief. Shocked at his own outburst, he clamped his mouth shut.

Claudia endeavored to keep a blank expression, but she shared the same sentiment. *It makes sense. The church levies a heavy tax on sugar, not on baked goods.*

For most countries, it was more expensive to import sweets than to produce them domestically. But sugar was only a basic ingredient in Arakaner, the first step of a much larger and more involved process. First, they had to pay an exorbitant price to import it. Then there were the labor costs for manufacturing, along with various other expenses. It was bad enough that sugar was a nigh-unaffordable commodity, but then there were all the other expenditures that came with it.

Seraphim must have requested this dessert so they could understand all the ramifications of the church's hostile policy toward the United Kingdom.

"My countrymen preserve subtle sweetness most. Indulging in luxury is a symbol of power, of course, but it's necessary for our aristocracy and royalty to show self-restraint when it comes to desserts," he said.

Even fruits were too expensive for the common people. As a collection of islands, Arakaner didn't have much land suitable for farming. And given their cold climate, their options for cultivation were limited. Prior to their success in financing, their people had lived in poverty and subsisted on seafood.

"We have no intention of denying our heritage, specifically that our ancestors were Vikings," Seraphim continued. "It's true that we caused many of our neighbors immeasurable grief. But that's also why we're so committed to being civilized now." There was warmth and determination in his gray eyes. Seraphim represented Arakaner with the utmost grace and dignity.

Claudia sat a little straighter, impressed by his earnestness.

"Part of the reason we desire better access to sugar is so that we can show proper hospitality to foreign guests whose palates are more accustomed to sweetness. The church calls us heretics, but we have no intention of condemning monotheism. So, let me ask this..." Seraphim inhaled sharply, then went on, "Why must they deny us recognition as reasonable, cultured people simply because we aren't monotheistic? That is the one and only reason we cannot abide them."

Was it a sin to love nature and its many facets? To worship them all equally? Seraphim's plea seemed perfectly reasonable, beyond reproach.

He bowed his head apologetically. "I will not burden you with further political discussion. In recent years, we've invested greatly in our tourism industry, so I hope you'll take the opportunity to enjoy everything our nation has to offer while you're here."

Once their meal was finished, Seraphim had other matters to attend to elsewhere, but their entire group was staying in the same hotel. It was a fair distance from the harbor to the royal palace, which was why Claudia and Sylvester had opted for a hotel. Seraphim had decided the same.

"If we're able to sit down for dinner, I hope you'll tell me about your adventures here," he said. "I'm interested in hearing what impressions foreign guests have of our country." His expression had gone grave for most of his explanation, but at this point it softened, his eyes half-lidded and once more filled with warmth.

There was such love and affection for his country infused in his every word that it heartened Claudia. To her, it would have felt suffocatingly patriotic coming from anyone else, but perhaps Prince Seraphim's general demeanor defused that.

The sun was beating down mercilessly on the harbor, yet Seraphim looked perfectly composed and at ease. This may very well have been a product of his lithe form and delicate, graceful mannerisms.

He's gentle but suave, and in a way that's distinct from Lestea.

Lestea likewise had a slender, petite frame, but she gave off an impression that she'd brook no dissent from anyone. Seraphim was different. He had a warm, tender aura, which Claudia could only liken to a soft, comfortable blanket. He opposed the church, but he wasn't about to deny anyone their belief in a monotheistic god.

And yet, for all his compassion and understanding, the church will never

recognize his country or his people's beliefs.

The church had only been able to grow and strengthen its influence by upholding monotheism and condemning everything else. To make any exception for Arakaner would be to deny all the efforts of its forebears.

I doubt the Capricious God would care either way. He was a fickle deity, as the name implied. She didn't see why someone so all-powerful would care whether people believed in animism or monotheism.

Chapter 8:

The Villainess Meets a Cardinal

AFTER CLAUDIA and company parted ways with Seraphim, they boarded a carriage to tour the harbor. It was about midday by this point. Sweat was beading on her skin, but the temperatures weren't so stifling as to be unbearable.

Sadly, although their driver chose main thoroughfares, there was so much traffic that they didn't pick up much speed. This wasn't like the high-end district in Harland's capital, where limitations were in place to keep everyone's travels smooth and swift. There was a veritable mountain of people and carts moving about.

Claudia might have been displeased by the situation if they were in a hurry, but the slow pace was perfect for sightseeing. *I wish we could get out and walk around, but that's a security risk waiting to happen.*

The harbor was teeming with activity, and the citizens' upbeat energy was infectious. The heat hadn't diminished their spirits in the least. They strode along the streets with their heads up and their eyes fixed ahead, living in the moment. Claudia found something deeply moving about this shared human quality between herself and people from a different country and culture.

I doubt I would have ever felt any appreciation for that during my first life, Claudia reflected.

She had been too busy with her own education, and once she was sold off to the brothel, she dedicated every waking moment to adapting to her life there. She wouldn't have had the wherewithal to look around her. The time she spent with Helen was her only real reprieve, and even that was short-lived. She never had a spare moment to consider what other people's lives were like.

"Somehow I'm not surprised the lottery store stands out the most," said

Sylvester.

“The lottery is practically synonymous with Arakaner,” Claudia agreed.

During their tour, they occasionally glimpsed the eye-catching red standards with Arakaner’s official crest sitting squarely in the middle, indicative of the lottery stores.

Tristan’s shoulders slumped. “It sucks we can’t participate.”

“How about immigrating?” Sylvester suggested with a smirk.

“Then I wouldn’t be able to buy Harland’s lottery tickets!”

“You’re being greedy to want both,” Sylvester said. “There’s no guarantee you’d win anyway.”

“But isn’t the possibility itself exciting?”

“I bet the people running lotteries *love* customers like you.”

There were two core aspects to every history lesson about Arakaner: their Vikings and their lottery system. At the founding of their kingdom, the royal family struggled to exert command. They resolved the issue by introducing the lottery system. Since it was endorsed by the royal family, the citizens could rest assured they wouldn’t be scammed if they participated. Even the highest-ranking aristocrats in each region invested their private funds in hopes of snagging a bigger fortune.

Though the price of participation was considerably low, the system allowed the royal family to collect money from its citizens without any discord or discontent. It was a resounding success. And with their earnings, they were able to expand into financing, which led them to where they were now.

Harland had learned from Arakaner’s example. Whenever calamity struck, they would temporarily hold a lottery. It was easier to gather funds that way than by asking people to donate. People’s chances of winning were publicized to keep the system transparent. It was still gambling, but the systems in place helped prevent anyone from investing more than they could reasonably afford.

Tristan's lips puckered in a pout. "You act like you wouldn't be over the moon if you won, and we both know you would be."

"Who wouldn't be happy to have more finances at their disposal?" Sylvester said.

"Yes, and Arakaner boasts the largest prize pool of any lottery system," Claudia chimed in. "Perhaps that's not too surprising. They were the first to conceive of the idea."

"Exactly!" Tristan said. "That's what makes it so exciting."

She could understand why Tristan wanted to buy his own ticket. If a commoner won, it would be more than enough to enjoy a lavish lifestyle until the day they died.

While the group enjoyed sightseeing from the carriage, it trundled toward another restaurant that Seraphim was particularly fond of, where they would have lunch. The one they visited this morning had been located on a bluff with a sweeping view of the ocean, but this one was tucked inside a grove on even terrain.

They broke through the copse of trees and into the clearing where the restaurant was located. Droplets of water danced through the air, twinkling as light refracted off them.

"Goodness, this is like something out of a fairy tale," Claudia said.

"Doesn't seem to be seawater," Sylvester noted.

Tristan nodded. "I don't smell any brine on the wind."

Claudia stretched her hand out to catch the mist coming from the impressive fountain centerpiece of the restaurant's exterior. She could see why Seraphim had suggested this place; she felt cooler just standing at its entrance.

The proprietor soon appeared. "We are fortunate to have a local source of pure water, and we use it in abundance. In fact, we only open for business on clear days so people can truly appreciate the majesty of our fountain," he told

them. "Please, come inside."

The man oozed confidence in his restaurant, and the moment they stepped inside, Claudia understood why. The interior was designed with two primary colors in mind: white and aqua blue. There was a waterfall featured on one of the walls with mini streams trickling across the floor. Above, the glass ceiling allowed the sun's rays to pour in and cast waves of light on the walls, reminding its inhabitants that they were nestled in the bosom of nature.

"It's almost like we're underwater," said Claudia.

The indoor water features were cleverly designed so that the splash and mist wouldn't drench customers, but she felt immersed in the dynamic sights and sounds. The enjoyable atmosphere made the wait for their food painless—at least until an extremely unexpected visitor appeared.

"Blessings of the Capricious God be upon you," said a middle-aged man. He had blue eyes and blond hair that only seemed to have taken on more depth with age. It was obvious he had been handsome in his youth. If what she'd heard was to be believed, he was in his forties.

Their visitor's most eye-catching feature was not his looks but rather his attire: he wore a pure-white robe with a long cape draped around his shoulders. It wasn't the sort of getup just anyone could wear. A silver sash hung around the cape, denoting his official position.

No one could refuse an offer from this man. Not the owner of this restaurant, and not even a king.

"I had no idea a cardinal was visiting Arakaner," said Sylvester, speaking on their group's behalf.

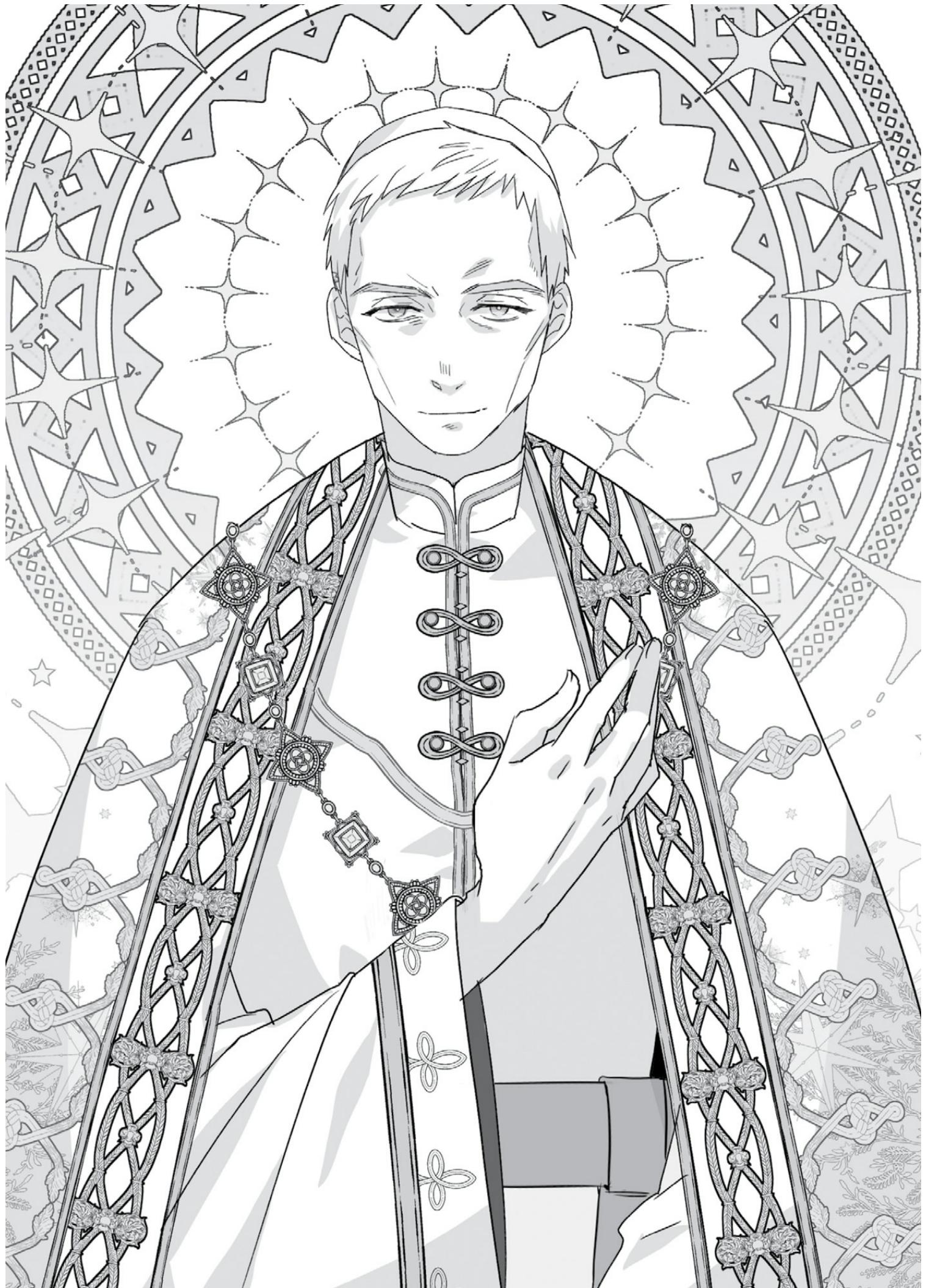
"Our meeting must have been ordained by the Capricious God. I only discovered you were visiting recently, Your Highness." The cardinal, Nigel, quickly explained that he had only arrived two days ago. He had decided to come pay his respects upon learning that they were here as well.

There's nothing odd about him being here, but something still seems off about it, Claudia thought. She understood that even with his role in Harland, he still had a duty to spread the church's gospel—but there was something suspicious about the timing, given the present state of affairs.

"Has the time come at last to build a church hall here in Arakaner?" asked Sylvester.

"If only that were the case. I'm afraid the reason for my visit is to provide what support I can for our demoralized believers."

Animism was the dominant spiritual belief in Arakaner, but there were some who turned to monotheism, largely thanks to the proselytization efforts of missionaries.



"I'm certain your presence will be a great comfort to them."

Nigel nodded. "Nothing would delight me more than to be of some assistance to them. But, Your Highness, there is a favor I would ask of you."

"Oh?" said Sylvester.

"I plan to distribute food at a nearby fishing village later today. If you have the time to spare, could you pay a visit as well? And let me assure you, I completely understand you wish to keep your visit confidential." The way he framed it made clear he wanted them to visit in the capacity of fellow believers. "There is no need to reveal who you are. Simply seeing you, Lady Lindsay, and Lord Newberry would be enough to rally their spirits." He smiled gently, his soft tone suggesting he really was the kind and inoffensive man he appeared to be.

Sylvester hummed thoughtfully. "I cannot say for sure whether our schedule will allow it, but I'll keep your request in mind."

"Thank you. I'll inform your bodyguards as to the location. I hope to see you there." As cardinal, Nigel had a high position within the church—a responsibility that had him teaching kings and future kings. Yet he wasn't the least bit conceited. His easygoing, amiable nature made it easy to relax around him when his rank would have made it impossible otherwise.

There was just one thing that niggled at the back of Claudia's mind: she remembered seeing Kayla at the harbor. In her previous life, Nigel had been one of Kayla's clients.

Is she here not to accompany an aristocrat but to be with the cardinal?

Both of them being there was too uncanny for her to chalk up to a coincidence. The cardinal might claim he was there at the Capricious God's demand, but she didn't buy it. There were too many players present. Maybe they all happened to be vacationing at the same time by pure chance, but her intuition screamed that it was something more.

Plus, Bezel was with Miss Kayla.

She already had bodyguards from the brothel with her. Why would the leader of the syndicate go out of his way to accompany her as well?

Nigel had a group of monks acting as his bodyguards for this trip. Assuming Kayla was here accompanying him, wouldn't it make more sense for the cardinal to assign a couple of *them* to guard her rather than Bezel?

Under the church's doctrine, sex outside marriage was a sin. They frowned upon sex workers. But, much like with the syndicate, the church considered them a necessary evil. Many of the faithful made use of the brothels' services, so the church tolerated them. No one found it the least bit scandalous to see a man of the cloth with a courtesan.

Is there some deeper reason for all of this? Maybe there wasn't. Kayla was the top-ranking courtesan at Flower Bed. Bezel might just be looking out for his most valuable asset.

"Well, what do you think?" Sylvester asked them.

Tristan shrugged. "I see no problem with going."

"I have no other concrete plans, so I'd be fine with stopping by," said Claudia.

The only thing on her schedule was a visit to the trading firm, but that was tomorrow. She wanted to spend her first day familiarizing herself with her surroundings before attending to business.

As for the cardinal, she had met him several times before, but she didn't know much about him as an individual. This would be a perfect opportunity to observe him more.

"Very well," said Sylvester. "Then after we finish our meal and rest a bit, let's pay the cardinal a visit."

The fishing village where the cardinal was distributing food was much closer to the harbor than Claudia had expected. It only took thirty minutes by carriage to reach. The roads there were relatively empty, which allowed for a speedy

drive. But as they approached, the road grew increasingly uneven, their carriage bouncing and rocking uncomfortably. The paths weren't well maintained to begin with, and the recent rains had softened them into a muddy mess.

"The worst part is that we'll have to repeat this experience going back. Now *that* is depressing," said Sylvester.

Claudia frowned. "Yes, this area seems poorly cared for."

"You said it. I mean, can you imagine trying to draw a cart full of—grk!" Tristan's words were cut off with a strangled cry as he bit his tongue with the newest jostle.

"Are you all right?!" Claudia cried.

"Yeh, em ohay," he said, unable to speak properly through the pain. Tears had welled in his eyes.

As much as Claudia wished she could help him, there was nothing she could do. Sylvester gave him an exasperated look, but the prince was lucky he'd avoided doing the same. It would be wise for all of them to keep their mouths shut until they reached their destination.

When the carriage finally rolled to a stop, Claudia was shocked by the state of the village. Since they couldn't cultivate the land, their village was crowded together, as if occupying the smallest plot possible. The path the carriage had taken extended through the middle of the village, with wooden boathouses lining the waterfront on one side and a row of houses on the other. With the village's size, it could only support a population of about a hundred or so.

The cardinal's food distribution was being conducted at the only open entrance to the village, which made it easy to locate him.

As soon as Claudia stepped out of the carriage, a pungent mix of brine and mud hit her nose. It took everything she had to keep from grimacing as they met with Nigel again.

"Thank you for making the time to come here," he said with a gracious smile,

seeming far more comfortable and at home in this environment than she was.

“These people have it rough,” said Sylvester.

“Oh, I’m used to it. Inland regions and coastal regions have their differences, but you see villages like this everywhere.”

Claudia had assumed the cardinal would leave the process of handing out the food to his subordinates, but he served the people himself. He had shrugged off his cape, unbuckled his belt, and rolled up his sleeves. The man even seemed more relaxed and cheerful than he had when they met with him earlier. His amiable smile made Claudia want to pitch in.

“The ground is uneven, so please be careful,” he warned her. “I have some boards laid out to help you keep your footing. Over here.”

It wasn’t just the road that had been uneven and bumpy; the ground all over the village was much the same. There were impressive depressions and swells adjacent to one another, some centimeters deep (or high, in the case of the swells). It was almost like the ground had been shaped to trip people up.

Claudia heeded the cardinal’s advice and stepped onto the boards. *Even if I wanted to help, I would only be a nuisance in this outfit.* Mud wasn’t exactly something she had taken into account when dressing this morning.

Witnessing that Nigel’s feet sank into the mud and squelched as he moved, she knew joining him would be a death trap. She would just get in his way. Besides, he hadn’t asked them to help with this part. Nigel merely wanted them to drop by as proof that there were other faithful outside of the village.

Claudia’s blue eyes scanned her surroundings. She was familiar with the odd looks the villagers—young and old, men and women—were giving her. *The children at the orphanage had the same looks.* It was the way someone eyed the unknown, with equal parts fear and curiosity.

Her dress was of a simpler design than usual, but it was still made of top-tier fabric. There wasn’t a speck of mud or dirt on her skin, which had to puzzle the

villagers. One couldn't live without getting dirty.

Their eyes were glazed like those of dead fish, their cheeks sunken and gaunt, and their skin almost black for the layers of caked dirt and mud. The children's clothes were threadbare and frayed at the edges. It was no wonder they ogled Claudia and her group as if they were a foreign species.

The sun shone bright and unimpeded by clouds overhead, but the atmosphere in the village was dark and oppressive.

"While you eat, please listen to what I have to say!" Nigel belted as he served the line of villagers who had yet to receive their portion. "Fellow believers have come from far, far away to visit you all today!" He went on to emphasize that while monotheists were few within Arakaner's borders, they were the majority on the continent. None of the villagers here were alone in their beliefs.

Most of the people were more preoccupied with the free meal than listening to the cardinal drone on. Yet their unenthusiastic reception didn't discourage Nigel at all.

"Those who needed to hear my words heard them. That's what matters," he said, smiling warmly.

Nigel interpreted their lack of a reaction as confusion. That they were unsure of how to respond to his words. Even if they were more focused on their meal, there was nothing wrong with that. It proved the food was going where it was needed most.

"Not all of the villagers here are monotheists, are they?" Tristan asked as he watched the people eat.

They had all offered their prayers before eating, a custom that was unique to Arakaner's native, animistic religion.

"Some of them are praying to the Sea God, while others are praying to the spirits they believe reside in all things," Nigel answered.

Faith existed within people's hearts. All Nigel could do was explain the

church's doctrine and views, but he wasn't about to expose those who didn't follow their teachings.

"If some of them lie to have access to food, I don't hold it against them," he said. "This can still serve as an opportunity to consider another path."

Even if it started with a lie, monotheism could still take root in their hearts. As the cardinal told it, he had seen this pattern before. The most important thing was to help those who wouldn't survive otherwise.

"Since we uphold asceticism as a virtue, all we can offer them is the bare minimum. There are many out there who don't even have that."

Arakaner wasn't the only country where financial assistance didn't reach all the people who needed it. Harland faced the same issues, relying on the church and crime syndicates to fill in the gaps. A flourishing economy didn't mean that all of a country's poverty had vanished, which was the point Nigel most wanted Claudia and the others to understand.

Claudia knew there was a wealth gap. Sylvester wasn't the only one who paid charity visits to orphanages; many noble ladies did as well. But, as the cardinal had made clear through this brief visit, those glimpses of the unfortunate were still tailored to conceal the true darkness of society.

The cardinal is absolutely right about one thing, though. The people's survival was paramount. Missionary work was pointless if there was no one to receive the church's wisdom. There could be no conversion of the dead. She understood why he was distributing food—keeping the people alive at least presented an opportunity for them to contemplate a change in beliefs.

On the ride back, Tristan braced himself and spoke very carefully to avoid repeating his earlier mistake. "I realize now how naive I've been."

Although the redhead had seen far more of the country than she had because he was always accompanying Sylvester, he had been rattled by the state of the village. Claudia had the benefit of an extra lifetime, but even her heart had ached for the people there.

Tristan hung his head. Sylvester reached over and gave it a light tap. “As long as you don’t forget, that’s what matters.”

Indeed, they couldn’t forget the people they were meant to protect: the ones living in abject poverty in the shadow of a thriving economy.

“I won’t forget,” Tristan swore. “I was also surprised the cardinal wasn’t more zealous.”

He was referring to how Nigel said he didn’t care if they were lying about their beliefs for the food. It was proof that his charity work wasn’t purely for the faithful but rather for those who truly needed help.

Claudia had monitored him closely. The cardinal didn’t seem like he was putting on a show for them. In public, Nigel overflowed with grace and dignity, the kind that made him unapproachable. But the man she’d seen at the fishing village was completely different. He was like a kind, doddering older man you might bump into on the street, as disrespectful as such a comparison might be. He didn’t mind getting filthy, and he genuinely appeared to enjoy interacting with the villagers.

No matter how suspiciously the people regarded him, Nigel let it roll right off him. He was tenacious. Claudia wanted to follow his example in that respect. *It must be because he’s so confident about what he’s doing.*

No one could deny that the church helped the underprivileged and the underserved, people whose own nations couldn’t protect them.

The cardinal was a saint among men, a phrase normally used to describe monks since they partook in such charity work more often, but Claudia thought it suited Nigel perfectly.

And yet, despite everything, there was an alarm bell clanging in her head—one she couldn’t ignore. Its rhythmic beat pumped through her bloodstream, spreading to every extremity.

Why do I have such a sinking feeling about this?

Though the cardinal had given her nothing to worry about, she couldn't shake the sense that something was very, very wrong.

Chapter 9: The Villainess Has an Argument

BY THE TIME they returned to their hotel, the sky was bathed in crimson as the sun began to dip. Claudia's quarters were on the top floor, and Sylvester's room was right beside hers. Hers came equipped with a drawing room, bedroom, and bathing area. The selling point of this hotel was the seaside view visible from windows in the drawing room and the bathing area.

Claudia's maids busied themselves unloading her luggage while she sat on the sofa. She suspected the situation in the men's quarters was the same as hers. Her maids seemed more restless here than when she and her family returned to their home in the countryside, but she told herself it had to be her imagination.

Still, I never dreamed I would stay somewhere overnight with Syl.

They weren't sharing the same chambers, but there was still something about it that made her cheeks heat. It was a new sensation, one she'd never felt during their normal dates in the city.

Once the bustling stilled and all the luggage was where it needed to be, a calm settled over the room. Sylvester chose that moment to visit, as if he'd been waiting for it.

"Has the hustle and bustle subsided over here?" he asked.

"It has," Claudia replied. "Everything went smoothly." She assumed he would take a seat beside her and they could enjoy some tea together, but he remained standing with his arm extended in offering.

"It would be a waste not to enjoy the view. Care to join me on the veranda?"

"I would be delighted." Claudia smiled, but her movements were a bit jerky and awkward when she reached out to take his arm. She wasn't accustomed to this environment, and it made her nervous. Was she the only one who felt that

way? Or did he feel the same?

Sylvester expertly escorted her to the veranda. The whole time, her pulse raced despite her best efforts to calm herself. As soon as he opened the glass door, a strong gust of wind raced at her. It was probably more powerful since they were on the top floor.

Although she'd expected the sun to be glaring as it made its evening descent, it proved so blinding that she lifted a hand to shield her eyes. It took her a moment to adjust to the brightness. Once she could stop squinting, she was blown away by the view.

The sun sat at the horizon's edge, like a ripe red fruit. The heat that permeated the air was the perfect representation of the sizzling passion ever constant between her and Sylvester.

When she lifted her head, their eyes met. Her thoughts flew back to the tense moment they had shared in a carriage as he took her home. The sun had been setting then too. Only at this unique hour could she glimpse his beauty highlighted by the divine light of a crimson sun, its rays reflecting off his silver hair and painting his golden eyes a similar shade of red.

Claudia had no words with which to describe her beloved in this moment. His hair was like liquid moonlight. It made her heart tremble, her voice leak out in an inexplicable gasp.

Sylvester pressed his hand to her cheek with all the gentleness and care as if he were handling porcelain. She couldn't look away from him. His beauty was transcendent, otherworldly. And all his attention was focused on her, eyes half-lidded and filled with affection.

Heat pooled behind her eyes. A wave of emotion crashed over her, causing her vision to blur with tears. All sound from the world faded, and a shadow fell over her as Sylvester leaned down. Their kiss was brief, chaste, but even after it ended, she couldn't peel herself away. And so their lips met again and again, until finally she let out a shaky breath.

Sylvester traced a finger down her cheek. A fire ignited inside her, racing to her core. Her hands flew to his chest.

“Syl,” Claudia whispered.

“I love you, Dia,” Sylvester told her, voice overflowing with passion.

He leaned closer and tried to plaster their bodies together, and she had to rein in all her willpower to push him back. “We can’t,” Claudia insisted in a voice so hoarse it sounded foreign to her ears.

His arms tightened around her. “At least let us stay like this for a little bit longer,” he said, his moist breath caressing the shell of her ear.

Claudia couldn’t possibly deny him. *I wish we could stay like this forever too.*

What would be better than being frozen in this moment in time, when it was just the two of them, when she could feel the heat of his body so close to hers? She coiled her arms around him, fingers splaying against his broad back. Sylvester’s presence brought her such comfort.

“I love you too, Syl.”

“Mm,” he grunted. “Don’t tempt me.” His voice was unusually strained, which prompted a small laugh from her. No one else knew this side of him.

“It wasn’t my intention,” she said, then paused. “Shouldn’t you be getting back to your room soon?”

“I want to stay a bit longer. The sun will disappear soon, and it will be night.”

Sylvester’s words served as narration; a curtain of darkness was already beginning to cover the land, the last fingers of crimson sunlight receding at last.

“It’s the Claudia hour,” he went on. “The moment when you become one with the darkness, and I want to hold you close.” His voice lowered as he continued, “To keep you mine. I won’t let even the Capricious God take you from me.”

Her heart stuttered.

Little did Sylvester know, the Capricious God had already done just that by

ripping her from death and hurling her back into the past. She was a little taken aback; the comment had hit a little too close for comfort. And frankly, she wasn't sure this miracle would repeat a second time.

"I'm right here," Claudia assured him.

"That you are—because I'm holding on to you."

"I belong to you, Syl."

"And I belong to you, Dia."

Their disjointed, irrational conversation continued even after that. While it was meandering and had little point, they were both smiling the whole time. Sylvester fulfilled her, left her teeming with happiness. Every moment with him was precious. She longed for this to go on forever, but everything in this world that had a beginning also had an end.

Once the light had all but faded and the evening breeze wrapped around them in celebration, they finally retreated inside. Claudia planted herself on the sofa while combing her fingers through her windswept hair to smooth it out. Her throat was surprisingly parched, and she quickly drained her cup of tea. Sylvester, who had taken the seat beside her, shared her thirst and did the same.

While Helen busied herself brewing them more, Claudia scooted away from Sylvester. Experience told her that staying too close to him was dangerous. But every inch she put between them, he made up for by sidling closer.

"You always try to run away from me," Sylvester observed.

"I'm simply practicing self-defense."

"You know, there is a great view of the ocean from the baths in our rooms," he said.

She fixed him with a look. "That was an all-too-obvious change of subject."

Sylvester must have known she was right, but that didn't stop him from continuing. "A morning bath would be perfect here."

"It would, yes. Much better than an evening one, I'd imagine, since the only sight you could enjoy are the lights in the..." Claudia stopped herself. "There wasn't any deeper meaning to that suggestion, was there?"

Depending on the interpretation, it could be assumed he was inviting her to bathe *with* him in the morning, which would almost necessitate sleeping together. It seemed increasingly likely that this was indeed how he intended her to take it, especially since he had plucked a loose strand of hair that had fallen over her shoulder and was twisting it between his fingers.

"I don't mind if you read more into it."

"Let's enjoy the view separately, in our own baths."

Claudia couldn't spend the night with Sylvester. All her efforts to maintain her chastity would go to waste.

"Your walls are impenetrable," Sylvester complained. "If you're so worried about status, why don't we put in a request with the cardinal to exchange our vows early?"

"Don't be so flippant about it. The cardinal would never agree to that."

Besides, making vows to the Capricious God wouldn't be enough to solidify her as crown princess. It wasn't until the king gave his official seal of approval that she would be legally listed under his family register.

"I suppose there's no way for us to rush our wedding here even if I wanted to, is there?" said Sylvester.

There were no ecclesiastical facilities in Arakaner: no church halls and certainly no monasteries. Whereas the monastery acted as the living quarters for monks, church halls were houses of worship and a base from which missionaries could work to proselytize to those who hadn't yet converted. Without either, there could be no official ceremony, and the cardinal wouldn't have that. On a related note, Harland's capital's church hall had been rebuilt into a grand cathedral. Its opulent design was a testament to the kingdom's

devotion.

“Syl, what sort of person do you think the cardinal is?”

“A saint among men,” he said, using the very words she’d thought to describe Nigel with earlier. “For better or worse, he prioritizes the church over all else.”

“For better or worse,” she murmured to herself.

That said more about Sylvester’s thoughts than he probably realized, but for him to still consider Nigel a “saint among men” indicated that whatever flaws he *did* have weren’t notable. She conjured the image of him serving the villagers. He’d looked like he was enjoying himself. The children there had also been smiling by the end.

“He is an exemplar to the rest of the faithful, which I assume is why he rose to the rank of cardinal,” Sylvester said. The cardinal’s records had been sent ahead to the king prior to his deployment to Harland, and as Sylvester told her, they had been spotless.

I didn’t have a bad impression of him in my previous life either.

There were some among the clergy who refused to acknowledge sex workers—people who abhorred the unchaste and would permit nothing to sully their noble order. By contrast, Nigel recognized the necessity of sex workers and their trade. He knew they didn’t all join the sex industry out of a genuine desire to be in it, and that some of them were there precisely because the religious organization had failed to save them.

Why do I feel so uneasy, then?

That image of Kayla at the harbor flashed through her mind. If possible, Claudia wanted to find out what she was doing here and why she was with Dragoon’s leader.

“Is there something you find displeasing about him?” Sylvester asked her suddenly.

“I couldn’t say. I haven’t had enough direct interaction with him. But I am a

bit concerned about the people I saw at the harbor..."

She hesitated, unsure of how best to explain it. How would a duke's daughter know the identity of a crime syndicate's boss and a courtesan? She wouldn't, at least not under ordinary circumstances.

Oh, that's right. I can simply say I heard it from Lestea.

Lestea had proven herself morally corrupt enough for Sylvester not to bat an eye if Claudia claimed her as an informant. And she was pleased to have found an easy way to frame her concerns. Thus, she informed him about Kayla and Bezel.

"So that's who you meant. You noticed two people who matched the descriptions Lestea had given in her report," he surmised.

"They were quite unique figures, so they left a lasting impression in my mind."

"But I have to say, this is the first I have ever heard that the cardinal is on intimate terms with a...Miss Kayla, was it?"

"Really? I was sure you would've already heard of this."

"I knew he wasn't as strict about the church's teachings as some others, but... a courtesan, hmm?" He fell into silent contemplation.

Claudia's stomach lurched as panic set in.

How could he not know about that? And what does it mean that he didn't? She'd thought the relationship between Kayla and Nigel had been a long one, but perhaps she had overestimated its length. Then again, the dynamic between them might be different in this lifetime than her last. *What an idiot I am! Why didn't I consider that possibility sooner?*

Claudia had seen them in quick succession in the same place. She'd just assumed that meant they had the same connection here. But if they did have a long-standing relationship, surely Sylvester would have heard about it.

"I will bear this information in mind, but there is no reason for you to worry yourself over this matter," he declared with finality.

Her brows scrunched. Claudia had brought the matter to his attention precisely because it weighed on her mind. Their little exchange had done nothing to resolve the issues she presented; *of course* she was going to worry.

“Are you privy to some information regarding Dragoon that I am not?” she inquired.

Sylvester had already made it clear he knew nothing about any potential connection between Kayla and Nigel, so she could only assume he had some sort of information on Dragoon. Discovering the head of an infamous crime syndicate in Arakaner was hardly something they could ignore otherwise.

“Some,” Sylvester said vaguely. “We keep tabs on them.”

“But you don’t know everything,” she concluded.

Dragoon was a necessary evil in Harland. Claudia understood that. But Sylvester’s nonexplanation of why she should put the matter out of her mind wasn’t the least bit convincing.

Claudia added, “I think it’s still a bit too early to write the matter off.”

She would allow that maybe she was wrong about a relationship between Kayla and Nigel in this life, but Bezel’s presence in Arakaner was an incontrovertible fact. And she had seen him and Kayla together. That alone was reason enough not to let their guard down.

“Why?” Sylvester shot back. “I happened to know about Dragoon and its leader, but that’s not information anyone else should have access to.” That included even a duke’s daughter like Claudia, who perhaps might not even be apprised of such secrets even after she became crown princess.

Regardless, I don’t see how that’s a good reason to dismiss the issue.

“In fact,” Sylvester continued, undeterred, “I would think that’d be something most ladies would rather *not* hear about.”

“Oh, it’s hardly a pleasant topic, to be sure,” Claudia readily agreed. “But it’s a subject you’re privy to, isn’t it?”

“I’m accustomed to these sorts of things.”

Claudia shook her head. “It isn’t an issue of whether one is accustomed to it or not. As crown prince, you *must* keep abreast of such matters so that you may make informed decisions, correct?”

No matter how disagreeable most aristocrats found the discussion of criminal organizations and the sex industry—and whatever plots might be going on amid them—it wasn’t something that could be ignored. Those in power had a duty to stay on top of these situations, even if that meant familiarizing oneself with the nitty-gritty of the nation’s dark side.

“We cannot ignore this simply because speaking about the crime syndicate is unpleasant. It’s also my duty to understand how they think and what they’re after. They may be criminals, but they were also born into poverty—as the least privileged members of our society.”

They were the very people the kingdom was supposed to protect. Instead, they had failed to receive the necessary financial support and were put in a situation where their only option for survival was to turn to a life of crime. Tragically, that created a natural pipeline where most who were born in the slums entered the syndicate.

“Those whose crimes are irredeemable and who have no extenuating circumstances should be appropriately condemned for their actions. However, if we can prevent them from violating the law and dirtying their hands—”

“*If,*” Sylvester emphasized. “And in that case, it should be left to professionals to handle. There is no need to concern yourself. Arakaner has its own perfectly capable criminal investigation agency.”

“I...suppose they would, wouldn’t they?” Sylvester was right, but she couldn’t help but feel like he was trying to discourage her. “Why are you putting so much effort into dissuading me from getting involved?”

Even if he was simply doing it to assuage her worries, something didn’t quite

sit right with her. Claudia had thought they'd grown close after teaming up to combat Bari's political maneuvering. Sylvester had been completely transparent with her about that situation. This time was different, like he was purposely shutting her out.

"I just want to protect you," he said.

Claudia frowned. "And I want to protect you, Syl."

"All the more reason why you shouldn't speak about crime syndicates any further."

"And may I ask why?"

"Because it's dangerous," he said. "You said it yourself: they're criminals. They don't work within the confines of the law like we do."

Sylvester was trying to convince her to stay out of it for her own safety. And if she stayed ignorant about them and what they were up to, they would have no cause to involve themselves with her. Crime syndicates didn't touch aristocrats unless there was something in it for them. They knew better. The upper crust wouldn't hesitate to wipe them out if antagonized.

Were this any other situation, Claudia would nod and agree with him, but she had been on high alert ever since they met Nigel.

"To be clear, I have no intention of involving myself with them directly," she told him.

"That might be true at the moment, but there's no guarantee it will stay that way, not so long as you retain interest in the matter." Sylvester didn't raise his voice, but he was gruff, terse. Before she could argue the point any further, he shot out of his seat. "Apologies. It seems I'm not expressing myself very well. I only want to protect you, which is why I would prefer to nip this in the bud before it can come to haunt either of us later."

"Are you saying that my actions make you uneasy?"

"No, that's not what I mean!" he shouted. "My feelings are irrelevant, in any

case. I only want to protect you, as I have said multiple times now.”

“They absolutely are not irrelevant!” Claudia likewise launched to her feet, shoes clattering against the floor. “I’ve also expressed this multiple times now, but it bears repeating: I wish to protect you as well, Syl. Why won’t you let me think through this issue with you?!”

It wasn’t until the words were out of her mouth that she realized why she was growing so vexed. She couldn’t stomach the way he tried to coddle her by sheltering her and keeping her away from the issue. They were supposed to be partners, walking the path of life and duty together. Why was he trying to shield her from danger now? It came with the territory; it was something he faced all the time.

“This opponent isn’t like any other we’ve faced, Dia. Your half-sister and Raul were never really threats,” Sylvester explained.

Fermina had been a threat where Claudia was concerned, but Sylvester could’ve had her taken care of whenever he wanted. Raul had never been a threat, though he was a potential enemy if the situation between their countries soured in the future. Lestea had never posed any real danger either; she’d never been after Claudia’s life.

“A crime syndicate is a different matter entirely. As is the cardinal and the church. Your life is at risk if you provoke them heedlessly. Arakaner’s issues are a good example of what happens when you oppose the church especially.”

The church could label her a heretic, and even the king couldn’t protect her then. They would need substantial evidence to prove their claims, of course, but there was no telling how much power and influence the church really had or who was under their thumb within the government. Not even the royal family’s Shadows, highly trained and educated in espionage as they were, could discern the true loyalties in people’s hearts.

“I want you to keep out of danger. Your safety is more important to me than anyone else’s,” said Sylvester.

Claudia pursed her lips, letting silence hang between them for a few seconds before she finally answered, “I cannot abide that.”

Sylvester excused himself, presumably sensing that any more argument on the matter was futile. As soon as the door slammed shut behind him, Claudia threw herself onto the couch, her body sinking into the cushions.

“Why won’t he understand?”

He was probably wondering the same thing. Their love didn’t necessarily provide a solution for when they didn’t see eye to eye. But it wasn’t like Claudia wanted to put herself in harm’s way.

Nor do I intend to do anything to hold him back, she thought.

A voice in her head told her the best way to avoid that was to not involve herself, like he’d asked. All she had to do was shut out her own intuition and wait for the storm to pass.

But the very thought of doing nothing left her heart feeling like it might be ripped in two. No matter how much she rationalized his point of view, she couldn’t accept it. She was at a standstill.

The rising tide of emotion was too much to bear. A tear slipped from her eye.



Chapter 10:

The Crown Prince Worries

AFTER THEIR HEATED disagreement, Sylvester couldn't bring himself to sit with Claudia for their next meal. They spent dinner and then breakfast the next day apart. The air around him remained tense and uncomfortable. Tristan had grown so fed up with it that he suggested they take a walk. Evidently, Sylvester's poker face hadn't been enough to hide his morose mood.

It was best to avoid attention since they were trying to keep their identities a secret, so they chose a path along the coast that took them away from the bustling harbor. Having a platoon of bodyguards made it impossible to be completely inconspicuous; fortunately, the route they had chosen was deserted.

Tristan followed behind Sylvester without a word even though this whole walk was his idea. They had been friends long enough for him to know there was no need to force conversation. There was companionable silence aplenty.

As the sound of crashing waves filled Sylvester's ears, his mind wandered back to that moment when he held Claudia in his arms just as the last vestiges of light disappeared. That was the exact instant when her ebony hair melted into the darkness, as if she were a part of it. He couldn't shake the sense that the rest of her might disappear with it. The thought had occurred to him too many times to count.

Although Claudia seemed to radiate self-confidence, he knew she had a more vulnerable side. Anyone else would think her steadfast and unyielding, but there was something ephemeral and fragile about her when he had her wrapped in his arms. That tiny little form of hers held everything he loved and treasured. But it could be so easily broken with only the slightest flex of strength. That was probably why he felt so uneasy if he didn't hold on to her and ground her.

How do I make her understand?

Sylvester was well aware that he'd been more emotional than usual yesterday. A bit too blunt, maybe, but he'd meant every word.

I want to protect her.

That was always foremost on his mind. Claudia had said the same thing to him. They both felt the same way, but their argument had ended without either of them seeing the other's point.

Am I the one in the wrong again? Sylvester wasn't accustomed to navigating romantic relations. Claudia was his first love. No one before her had stirred such emotion within him, and she was the only person he couldn't easily predict. Normally, he enjoyed that about her, but this was one situation in which he didn't have the leisure to sit back and be entertained.

"So that's it," he murmured. "I've lost my composure."

"Have you finally realized you're going too fast for this to be a leisurely walk?" Tristan grumbled.

Sylvester had been so lost in thought that, indeed, he'd sped up considerably, leaving Tristan and his bodyguards scrambling to keep up.

"We're lucky to have a nice, cool morning," Tristan said. "What're you doing, making us sweat?"

"You didn't have to come with me." Sylvester had plenty of bodyguards even without Tristan, plus a few extra Seraphim had assigned who were familiar with the local geography.

"You want me to just throw my hands up and leave? Don't even joke about that. I plan on being your personal guard in the future—but even before that, I'm your best friend." Then, as if he hadn't driven the point home already, Tristan added, "Or are you not aware that I was here well before you and Lady Claudia became an item?"

Sylvester couldn't argue with him, especially since Tristan was being so

candid. *That's his problem. He is always so serious about everything.* Unlike a certain formerly exiled prince whose name he wouldn't mention.

"How do I seem to you?" Sylvester asked him.

"A little too somber, frankly. It's rare for you to have an argument with Lady Claudia, but I would've expected you to be in a worse mood for it."

Sylvester sniffed. "I'm not a child. Do you really think I'd be in a foul mood just because we fought?"

"Uh, yes. I think most people would be."

The prince acquiesced, nodding. Perhaps Tristan had a point. He had seen men who lost their cool over petty disagreements and abruptly cut off further debate.

"It's not like I'm upset with Dia," Sylvester said. "I'm frustrated because my feelings don't seem to be getting across."

Tristan rolled his eyes. "You know, when you hint that you only fought because you love each other, I can't shake the feeling you're just bragging about your relationship."

"No. It's not that simple."

"You sure about that?" Tristan shot him a look filled with equal parts resentment and envy.

If he wanted a partner that bad, he need only pluck up the courage and admit his feelings to Louise. Whether they became officially engaged depended on her response to him, but given the atmosphere between them, Sylvester anticipated favorable results. Not that he was about to give Tristan a nudge in that direction. He needed to figure things out on his own.

"Let me ask you something, Tristan. What do you think of the cardinal?" The question slipped out of Sylvester's lips before he realized it. It was the same one Claudia had asked him before.

Tristan blinked at him. Without wasting any time, he said, "That was a sudden

change of topic. I don't really know the man that well, but he strikes me as a good person, I guess."

"Have you ever heard anything bad about him? Even rumors will suffice."

"Nope. If he were that suspicious, I don't think the church would have sent him to our kingdom, right?"

Harland, along with Bari, was one of the biggest powerhouses on the continent. If the church had sent along someone weak-willed and easily manipulated, one of the kingdom's powerful aristocrats would have had him dancing in their palm in no time. To avoid that very situation, they sent someone who didn't bend to power and had enough political acumen to avoid such traps.

We don't want to get on his bad side, Sylvester thought, largely because Claudia's suspicions were right on the mark; he strongly suspected there was an association between Nigel and Dragoon.

"Does the cardinal have something to do with why you two fought?" Tristan asked, curious.

"It was what started the disagreement, yes. I would prefer her to stay away from anyone who could be a danger to her..." The prince's voice trailed off before he admitted, "But I believe I chose my words poorly when I tried to communicate that."

"You really think your word choice was the only problem?"

"Why, you think there's more to it?"

Tristan nodded. "Think about it. Lady Claudia is intelligent enough to pick up every little nuance. Even if you chose the wrong words, I think she still would've gotten your intentions."

"I see what you mean."

Apparently, Sylvester had been focused on the wrong part of their disagreement. His face twisted in dismay. He was on edge, which meant he

hadn't been able to think straight. He had an inkling as to what it was making him so uneasy, and it was even more reason why he didn't want Claudia involved in this situation.

Especially not if Dragoon and Cardinal Nigel are working together. There was no telling what chaos might ensue if they made the wrong move. And the last thing he wanted was for her to be dragged into it. *My thoughts are just going in circles at this point.*

From his view on the road, the coast was empty. A pleasant sea breeze carried over, accompanied by the rhythmic splash of the waves breaking against the shore. It would have been comforting if not for his situation. There didn't seem to be any way out of this mess.

Everything soon went from bad to worse, however, as a group of rather stereotypically dressed thugs strolled up, blocking his path.

“Give us all your valuables!”

“We ain’t gonna letcha make bank here without payin’ up!”

The emptiness of this path came back to bite us, it seems. I assume they've mistaken us for merchants. Bandits didn't target aristocrats, and they especially didn't mess with foreign princes. *But if they're intent on making this difficult, we have no choice but to respond in kind.*

His bodyguards had already formed a tight circle around him, but they found themselves surrounded in the blink of an eye. It was almost suspicious how smoothly the enemy had managed to do it. Maybe they thought their target would be too intimidated to retaliate if they were closed in on all sides. *Or they have some bigger aim.*

The moment Sylvester spotted the bandits signaling to each other, he reached for his weapon.

“Syl, please don’t run out in front, okay?!” Tristan cried as he prepared to fight.

“We don’t have time to quibble about appropriateness right now!” Sylvester replied. Desperate times called for desperate measures and all that. Sometimes one needed to be a little flexible.

Strange... They have far too many people on their side. Where had they all come from?

As the clash began, the clanging of steel rang out all around him. Every ally and enemy had a sword in hand, as if these bandits had known all along that their prey would be armed.



Sylvester pressed his back to Tristan's so they could protect each other's flanks. Sweat poured down his face, and blood splattered across the ground. A sickening coppery smell hung thick in the air.

I can't expose her to this. To the way a person's face twisted hideously as they drew their last breath. To the warmth of entrails that splattered and spilled out with the slash of a blade. To the throaty cries and pleas for mercy.

All five of Sylvester's senses screamed at him that this was hell if ever there was one, but he ignored them and continued to brandish his weapon.

"Capture a few of them alive!" he bellowed.

Fortunately, he and his bodyguards were infinitely more skilled in battle, and it took no time at all for them to claim victory over the bandits.

Sweat dripped down Tristan's brow as he whipped around and said, "Is this how bandits do things here?"

"Good question. There were quite a few of them. It's odd that the authorities haven't caught wind and come running."

"You're right."

They had taken a less traversed path for their morning walk to avoid people, but this wasn't some deserted back alleyway. In fact, the path along the ocean's edge was completely out in the open.

This strikes me as a smaller part of someone's devious plan. Could the syndicate have realized we're on to them? Sylvester instantly dismissed the possibility. If Dragoon were aware of their suspicions, they would keep a low profile and observe instead. They wouldn't make a move and expose themselves to danger, especially not given Sylvester's royal status.

When the local authorities belatedly arrived, the blood drained from their faces. They explained they had been short-staffed since several other incidents coincided with this coordinated attack on Sylvester.

"Could it really be a coincidence?" Tristan said doubtfully.

“We can’t rule it out. Perhaps we happened to be somewhere they could easily target, and so they did.” Sylvester shrugged. It wasn’t inconceivable that these bandits had been waiting to attack anyone who came along. “That being said, it seems unlikely.”

The enemy’s attack pattern suggested it was premeditated. If similar crimes were being committed elsewhere to preoccupy the local authorities, it made even more sense that this was part of a larger plot.

“We will have to wait for more information before we can determine whether this is a common occurrence or a purposeful setup,” Sylvester concluded.

Seraphim had surely received a report of this by now. Sylvester suspected he would provide them with some sort of explanation.

“Has word been given to Dia about what transpired?”

“Yes,” said Tristan. “The messenger we sent should be arriving at the hotel right about now.”

Claudia was supposed to be visiting her trading firm today, but given the circumstances, it would be best for her to refrain from going out. Depending on how Seraphim handled the situation, they might even need to return to Harland ahead of schedule.

If Arakaner was investing as much into their tourism industry as Seraphim claimed, a scandal would be disastrous. Sylvester and Claudia departing early would be a particularly painful blow. Their visit had been done undercover to keep things private, but some were aware of their true identities—Nigel chief among them.

Harland was also wary of the church’s growing power, which was even more reason Sylvester preferred to avoid any fallout between their nations. *Could that be the mastermind’s intention?* It wasn’t a good turn of events, in any case. The only one who stood to benefit from this was the church. *Or perhaps the cardinal.*

The more Sylvester thought about it, the more tempted he was to exhale the sigh he'd been holding in. "Maybe I should send Dia back and remain by myself," he said.

"In that case, you should go back with her," Tristan said, to the prince's chagrin.

"That will only offend Arakaner."

"Your safety comes before anything else. If you think there's genuine danger, you should return to Harland."

"Your logic is sound, but it's not necessarily the best political move."

Tristan shook his head, exasperated. "You already know I'm not that smart when it comes to stuff like this," he grumbled, as though it would be too difficult for him to come up with a better plan than the rational one he'd already offered.

Sylvester lightly poked his red-haired companion on the head. He wasn't trying to be overly critical of the suggestion. "I'll keep your input in mind. If our safety cannot be guaranteed here, we will have no other course but to return home."

He was certain Seraphim would do everything in his power to prevent them from leaving.

Tristan reached up to massage the area where Sylvester had thumped him. After a moment, his face lit up. "Oh, I know! Why don't you ask Claudia for her input? I bet she would—"

"No."

"But why not? You two are always discussing these kinds of things."

"This particular matter is on a completely different level than the rest," Sylvester said, repeating the sentiment he'd shared with Claudia the day before.

Tristan's brow creased in confusion. "Really? But you've always managed to protect her before, haven't you?"

Claudia had bodyguards from her household along with some Sylvester had assigned her, plus even more sent by Seraphim to ensure her safety. She was adequately protected.

“Of course,” Sylvester replied.

“Then there’s nothing dangerous about it.”

“There are some out there whose attention alone is dangerous.”

Tristan’s mouth twisted. “You mean like a monster who can turn you to stone just by looking at you?”

“I am being entirely serious here,” Sylvester said, unamused.

“Then I guess you were speaking the truth when you blurted out that bit about having lost your composure.” Tristan sighed. His remark implied that Syl would’ve realized sooner how nonsensical he was being if only he were more level-headed about the situation. “Lady Claudia will be the crown princess in the future,” Tristan reminded him. “And even if she wasn’t, she’s a duke’s daughter. She’s gorgeous, isn’t she? And incredibly intelligent. For better or worse, she’s going to grab people’s attention.”

“I don’t mean as a public figure. I mean something more direct.”

Tristan frowned, unconvinced by Sylvester’s argument. “I don’t see the difference, and I doubt Lady Claudia would either.”

Sylvester huffed impatiently. “Are you trying to say I’m mistaken?”

“Don’t you already think you are? You should put a little more faith in the power you possess. I don’t mind if you assign me to guard Lady Claudia directly, if that will help. She’s a friend, and I would happily protect her.”

Tristan paused and drew a deep breath before thumping Sylvester on the head in turn.

“That’s all I can do for you. I can’t magically help you regain your composure. Only Lady Claudia is capable of that, right?”

“Only Dia...”

“Exactly. I’ve trained my butt off to better protect you, but no matter how much I try to connect with you emotionally, it’s beyond me. Claudia’s dainty arms can’t swing a sword, but she can connect with you on a deeper emotional level than anyone else. We all have our strengths and weaknesses.”

Tristan spoke with such ease and fluidity, it was hard to believe he was saying something so profound. It rattled Sylvester. And while Tristan’s countenance was no different than it had always been, he looked more vivid than Sylvester remembered. The way he nodded encouragingly was heartening.

A familiar voice echoed in Sylvester’s head: *“I’ve also expressed this multiple times now, but it bears repeating: I wish to protect you as well, Syl.”*

Is this what she meant? Sylvester wondered.

Perhaps Tristan was right. Claudia had been trying to connect with him emotionally. She wanted them to share their burdens as equals.

And here I was too preoccupied thinking about how to keep her out of danger...

Each partner shared the desire to protect the other, but their ways of doing it were different. It made sense why they’d found it impossible to see eye to eye.

As the puzzle pieces clicked into place, the shadows on his face cleared.

Tristan grinned at him, sensing he’d come to a resolution. “So, I was right,” he teased. “You were just bragging about your love life when you were talking about your argument with her.”

“Very well. I’ll try to come up with something more entertaining for you next time.”

“What? No! I don’t need to hear about your love life!”

Chapter 11:

The Villainess Consults the Foreign Prince

WHILE SYLVESTER was leaving for his walk, another leg of the journey was taking place.

Claudia and Seraphim were seated together in the hotel's dining room. After her disagreement with Sylvester last night, she hadn't felt like attending dinner. Instead, she had requested an opportunity to share breakfast with Seraphim this morning. She cited fatigue as her reason for missing the previous night's meal.

I've completely failed in my objective to be the perfect noble lady, she reflected. It would be ideal if she had better control of her emotions and could more easily adapt to any situation. But this wasn't an official visit; it was a private one. Helen had strongly advised her to rest for that very reason.

"Were you able to recover from your fatigue?" Seraphim asked politely. "I apologize for not being more considerate of you yesterday."

"Not at all. I'm deeply embarrassed because I was the one who got carried away in my excitement without accounting for my own stamina."

"Well, I'm pleased you were able to enjoy yourself. Traveling by carriage must have taken a significant amount of your time, I assume."

Claudia nodded. "It did, but the liveliness of the harbor and its people were most enjoyable to witness."

Per Seraphim's earlier request, Claudia followed up by sharing with him her impressions of what she'd seen so far of his country. At some point during the conversation, her eyes ached with longing for the absent Sylvester.

I am being selfish.

Someone had already informed her that Sylvester left to take a walk with

Tristan this morning. He probably still wasn't over their disagreement from the night before. Dwelling on it threatened to bring down her mood, so she did her best to concentrate on the man in front of her instead.

Seraphim's golden mane was perfectly groomed. When he shifted in his seat, the light hit it in such a way that it looked like flowing satin. The aqua-blue jacket he wore suited him perfectly.

After the political discussion that arose from the baked goods he had presented during their first meal here, Seraphim had kept his word not to broach such a topic again. He was a skilled listener, which made him markedly different from all the other men Claudia had interacted with. It was all too easy to speak to him, especially with his warm, tender gaze fixed on her. She found herself curious as to what his opinion was, given that he was also a crown prince.

"May I inquire about something completely unrelated to our current topic?" she said.

"Certainly. You may ask whatever you like, and I'll answer to the best of my ability."

"In situations where your mind tells you it's the wrong choice but your heart says otherwise, what do you do, Prince Seraphim?"

"Hmm, when feelings are at odds with logic..."

It was a conflict many people grappled with, not just her and Sylvester. Claudia was normally able to resolve the two; this was the first time she'd found it impossible. Seraphim was more experienced in life since he was older, so she hoped his answer might provide her some guidance.

"As long as it's not a situation that requires immediate action, I would prioritize my feelings. If there's something I don't wish to do, I won't do it. Though I will grant you, for those in our position in society, that often isn't an option."

“Indeed it isn’t.”

“Nonetheless, I think if you ignore your own feelings for too long, your heart will eventually give out.”

There was merit to Seraphim’s words. No person, no matter how physically tough, could weather indefinite mental strain.

“I think it’s incredible you’re so diligently trying to find a solution,” he said.

“Really?” Claudia was skeptical. His compliment didn’t really resonate with her.

“As far as I’m aware, most people tend to put off thinking about their problems. They use food or shopping as a way of stress relief. You instead try to address your own thoughts first before facing the problem itself.”

“But there’s no guarantee anything will come of it.”

“As long as it’s not an urgent issue, I see no reason for you to rush yourself. Whatever answer you come up with by the end is valid, provided you assume full responsibility for it.” He paused and murmured, “Let’s see, what else might I add to that...?”

The way he empathized and tried to offer genuine advice was so encouraging that it thawed the layers of ice that had hardened around her heart since her argument with Sylvester. There was something so personable about it, like a friend jumping in to perform stretches before a workout.

“If I might offer another bit of advice, a good way of evaluating your options is to consider whether you’re willing to prioritize yourself at the cost of hurting someone else.”

“Oh?”

“Basically, you must look inside yourself to see whether you’re determined enough to see your decision through even if it means upsetting other people. This might be a bit extreme, but for me personally, I wouldn’t want to prioritize myself if it meant hurting my people—the very people I am committed to

protecting.” Then he added, “Only a tyrant would do such a thing.”

The person or people one might upset changed based on the decision being made, of course.

“You have to ask yourself, would you regret it if the people you care about, the people you love, were hurt by your decision? If you’re able to communicate with them about it beforehand, I think it’s best to discuss matters to avoid such regrets later on.”

Has he seen right through me? Claudia hadn’t shared the specific details with him, but Seraphim seemed to have guessed this matter had to do with Sylvester. Perhaps it was easy for him to deduce, what with Sylvester being absent from their breakfast table.

I should discuss it with Sylvester further, she decided. The fact that he had pushed her away the night before had hurt her feelings, but she knew that wasn’t his intention. He loved her and wanted to protect her.

“Thank you. That was most helpful,” Claudia said.

“Good. I was hoping I could help relieve your worries, if only a little.” Seraphim smiled fondly at her.

Claudia’s cheeks warmed. They hadn’t been acquainted for long, but he was almost like an older brother trying to look out for her. He was twenty-four, after all. Societal debut aside, she was still attending the academy, which probably made her no different from a child in Seraphim’s eyes.

“You plan to visit your trading firm later, yes? It’s a shame I cannot accompany you,” said Seraphim.

“If there is an opportunity during my visit, I would be most pleased if you could teach me more about business in Arakaner.”

“Yes, of course.” His lips curved, his expression as bright as warm rays of spring sunshine. There was something utterly endearing about his gentle disposition.

After Seraphim excused himself, Claudia remained at the dining table, enjoying a cup of tea by herself. She thought she would have an easier time calmly ordering her thoughts here, where she was out in the open and exposed to other people.

She was doing just that when, to her surprise, Seraphim strode back to the table. “Apologies. There was something I forgot to say.”

“And what would that be?”

“Beware of the cardinal,” he warned as he leaned toward her. But it was not his words that immediately grabbed her attention. There was a scent on him she recognized, one she hadn’t caught a whiff of during their meal. Had he applied cologne before returning?

Assuming he did, why this particular one?

Her mind instantly went to Kayla. It was popular in the brothel to pick scents that transferred easily to the client. Claudia was quite confident in her ability to blend fragrances. She was also accustomed enough to other courtesans’ scents to recognize familiar ones.

She stared hard at the man in front of her. He looked every bit like the Seraphim she knew, but something about the way he held himself was decidedly different.

Prince Seraphim is gentler and more relaxed.

This man had squared his shoulders, his body tense. There was only one other person who had left a similar impression on her, and that was the hooded individual she had noticed accompanying Bezel and Kayla at the harbor. The same man whose blond hair she had briefly caught a glimpse of when he’d stepped in to save Sunny.

Could this really be him? She was baffled by the possibility.

On the surface, there was no way to tell this man apart from Seraphim. The

resemblance was uncanny, even assuming he was employed as Seraphim's double. This went beyond the realm of disguise.

But this man is a member of Dragoon, isn't he? There could be no doubts about that, not considering who he was with. Does that mean there's a connection between Prince Seraphim and Dragoon?

With the similarities in their looks, she could imagine no other possibility to explain this. But did that mean it wasn't Nigel who had the underground connections but Seraphim? Was it possible Seraphim himself was unaware of this man?

"Who are you?" Claudia blurted out before she could stop herself.

His eyes widened before his lips peeled back for a toothy smile. "I'm surprised! Figured it out, did you?"

With that, all pretense vanished, and there was no longer anything about him that reminded her of Seraphim—save for his face, which still confused her.

"Shame, 'specially after all that effort I went to disguising myself so I could enter the hotel." He spoke with a hint of amusement in his voice. Gone was any of the gracefulness he'd feigned a moment earlier. "Sorry, can't tell you my name right now."

"How are you connected to Prince Seraphim?" Claudia demanded.

"Can't tell you that either. Not yet."

"What did you mean when you said I should be careful of the cardinal?"

He shrugged with one shoulder and answered, "Exactly what I said. If you give him an opening, he'll eat you alive."

"That's unsettling," she said calmly.

"You got that right. It *is* unsettling!" the man agreed readily. "It's pretty dangerous for me to show my face and all, but that's why I had to warn you. Don't want you goin' down just yet."

Having said his piece, he abruptly turned and left. The way he confidently strode off assured her that any attempts to stop him would be futile. Instead, she assigned someone to follow him—but they returned shortly thereafter to report they'd lost sight of him.

"I suppose there's nothing more I can do here. May as well pay a visit to my trading firm."

That *was* her main reason for visiting.



As she stood from her seat, Claudia decided she would take the mysterious man's warning to heart.

Claudia left the hotel shortly after that encounter. Despite the early hour, her carriage was still moving at a snail's pace—in part because of the morning market but also because of the endless stream of goods from the harbor. If she had been in a rush to get to her destination, it might've bothered her more, but she had given an open-ended estimation of when she would be visiting, so she still had plenty of leeway.

She stared absently out her window at the storefronts they passed, and her eyes happened to land on a group of local guards interrogating Kayla and her entourage. Claudia assumed the authorities wouldn't do such a thing unprompted, but she also had a hard time believing Kayla and the others would do anything conspicuous. There was nothing for them to gain by antagonizing guards.

I wonder what happened.

The man in the hood was with them. She wasn't sure how he'd managed to arrive here so quickly after their run-in at the hotel. Then again, given how slowly her carriage had been moving, perhaps it wasn't all that surprising he had beaten her here.

"Should I just pretend I didn't see anything?" she wondered aloud.

If she was going to honor Sylvester's request for her to stay out of danger, that was her only choice. But what if she regretted not helping them later and blamed Sylvester for it?

Seraphim's advice echoed inside her head. *If I prioritize my own feelings and desires, will I completely disappoint Syl?*

Kayla and Sunny were frowning, their brows drawn tight. They were obviously in need of help. Bezel was an accomplished negotiator, being the head of a

syndicate, and Kayla was no less talented at handling other people. The situation must have been dire if they hadn't managed to talk themselves out of it yet.

Helen followed her mistress's gaze. Having worked out what was happening for herself, she reached over and squeezed Claudia's hand. "It's all right, my lady," she said gently. "I'm sure His Highness will understand. Yesterday was a simple misunderstanding. He isn't the type of person to begrudge you helping those in need."

"You're right, and I wouldn't be true to myself if I didn't act."

Sylvester loved her for who she was, and she wouldn't be that person anymore if she ignored the plights of others. Once her mind was made up, she moved fast, instructing the driver to halt the carriage. Claudia's bodyguards stuck close to her as she approached Kayla and her group.

"Is there an issue?" she said.

One of the guards glanced at her. "Yes'm," he answered with due deference, having noticed immediately that she was part of the aristocracy. "We spotted these shady characters here and are just asking them a few questions."

This wasn't at all the belligerent attitude she had seen him take with Kayla.

"There were several thefts just a short while ago, all at the same time. We're doing our best to investigate and maintain the peace," the guard further explained.

"My goodness! You certainly are working hard. Then these people are criminals, I take it?"

Sunny vigorously shook her head. Claudia ignored her because it would only disrupt the flow of conversation if she gave any acknowledgment. Besides, she didn't actually suspect them of doing anything nefarious.

"We still aren't sure. I was thinking of taking them in, though," said the guard.

"From what I glimpsed from my carriage, they didn't seem to be defiant,"

Claudia said, a note of skepticism in her voice. “Why would you take them into custody?”

“Well, because...” The guard hesitated. “Because they have no clear identification.”

“If you check with the merchant I mentioned before, they’ll verify our identities,” Bezel cut in. He’d stayed silent until that point, but he probably wanted to emphasize to Claudia that they’d done nothing to warrant the authorities’ suspicion.

“Quiet, you lowly bodyguard! I can tell without contacting your merchant that these two are sex workers and you’re their client!”

So Arakaner treats its sex workers no differently, I see.

This had nothing to do with criminality. The guard was taken by Kayla’s sensuality. Claudia could already imagine what he intended to do once he’d “taken them into custody.”

Her eyes narrowed. *I wonder if Miss Kayla isn’t actually connected to the cardinal after all.* If she were, there would be no one better to verify her identity and guarantee the authorities left them alone, even if the people of Arakaner were less familiar with the church than most nations’ citizens. Instead, Bezel had referred the guard to a merchant. Said merchant probably had ties to Dragoon, but Nigel would still be the safer bet if they had any connection to him.

“Wait a moment,” Claudia said. “They have someone to vouch for them, but you refuse to contact this person?”

“Uh, well, I...” The guard’s mouth clamped shut. He must’ve sensed the silent anger radiating from her as he fumbled for excuses. His face paled.

“I saw these people as I was disembarking from the ship that brought me here. They are fellow countrymen. If you suspect them of something illicit, then I cannot stay silent on the matter,” Claudia insisted with a frown.

"I-I misspoke just a moment ago! Um, if these are your countrymen, then, uh...we don't need to continue this!" No sooner had he blurted that out than he and his fellow guards scrambled away, disappearing into the nearby crowds. Apparently, maintaining their pride wasn't worth risking Claudia's ire.

"Really, how ridiculous." The words left her mouth unbidden, but she meant them sincerely. She gently fanned herself with a folding fan, hoping it might settle the storm of emotion raging inside her.

Kayla dipped into a low curtsy, and the others followed her deferential example. "You have my deepest gratitude for rescuing us the way you did," she said.

"Thank you so much!" Sunny added. Her curtsy was considerably lower than Kayla's, to the point she looked like she might topple right over.

"Please, no need to humble yourselves," Claudia replied. "I spoke nothing but the honest truth to that guard. I'm merely glad no injustice was carried out here today."

Kayla's lips pulled into a smile. "I cannot begin to express how much it meant to have you intercede on our behalf," she said, forsaking her usual lethargic way of speaking to which Claudia had been so accustomed in her brothel days. "I especially appreciate that you did it despite the difference in our status. I only wish there was something I could do to repay you."

"I did not interfere hoping for anything in return," Claudia assured her curtly. "You needn't worry yourself." She dipped her head politely, hoping to leave. She didn't want to stay in their presence any longer than necessary, and she really had only helped because she wanted to.

As she was leaving, Kayla respectfully lowered herself again and added, "Please accept my kind regards for so graciously adding a rouge flower to our garden."

Claudia froze. She quickly regained her composure and strode back to her carriage, careful not to give herself away. But Helen, who had accompanied her

through the whole encounter, was struck by Kayla's odd turn of phrase.

"That was a most bizarre expression," she said.

"Y-yes, indeed."

One could safely assume that by garden, Kayla had meant Flower Bed. By rouge flower, she meant Rose. It was the sort of metaphor courtesans often employed. Brothels had their own unique culture, cultivated to keep client information confidential. Kayla couldn't have known for sure that the meaning of her words would get across to someone unfamiliar. But of course, Claudia was familiar, thanks to her time in the brothel.

Miss Kayla obviously knows it was me. The one saving grace was that Sylvester hadn't been there to see everything play out. If he had, he would have picked up on the subtleties of Claudia's reaction, and he would've inquired about it. I never thought I would be able to hide it indefinitely.

There was a good reason Kayla held the top spot at Flower Bed. One couldn't rise to such ranks without being able to see through others.

I wonder if my height and scent gave me away. Many courtesans used special aromas for personal relaxation, on top of perfumes. Claudia had a good nose for discerning scents, and Kayla was no different.

"Still," Helen said, interrupting her thoughts, "I'm surprised to hear about that series of thefts."

Based on what the guard had said, they still hadn't caught all the criminals responsible for them either.

Helen shook her head. "I heard Arakaner was peaceful and secure, but this gives me reservations. I think you should refrain from taking any walks outside, my lady."

Claudia nodded. Though she and Sylvester were here in secret, their visit had prompted the authorities to be more vigilant than ever. It was strange that so many robbers had evaded their crackdown and caused a fuss.

I wonder if this is a sign that there's more going on.

She resolved to discuss it with Sylvester when she returned. Now that she'd cooled her head sufficiently, she was sure they would have a more productive dialogue this time around.

Regardless, I should focus on the firm right now. The local management was probably waiting on tenterhooks for her arrival.

Chapter 12:

The Highest-Ranking Courtesan Meets Her Savior

THE GUARDS' GAZES were locked on Kayla's breasts or bottom, and the lascivious grins on their faces were sickeningly familiar to her. She'd experienced this many times before.

Kayla sighed.

It was still early morning and already her luck was poor. The intent hidden within the guards' questions was all too obvious. They planned to separate her and Sunny from Bezel and his subordinate. Once isolated, they would demand sex. Climbing to the highest rank within the brothel had done nothing to change the way people on the streets regarded her.

Despite their unenviable circumstances, Bezel tried to protect her, protesting that they had someone who could verify their identity and vouch for them.

I'd at least like to find an opportunity to get Sunny out of this mess, she thought.

Sunny had already contended with one of the brothel's most unsavory clients, and it had left her with deeper mental scars than most courtesans. Kayla couldn't stand to see her suffer. But that wasn't the real reason she had made Sunny her attendant and was so intent on protecting her.

Lady Rose went out of her way to step in and save Sunny. It would surely devastate Rose if Sunny continued to face degradation until it shattered her spirit. Lady Rose must be what they call a true aristocrat.

Dressed in a suit, Rose had conducted herself in a way that demonstrated she was noble and pure. Kayla had arrived at the scene later than the other courtesans when Rose first came, but she had watched with everyone else as Rose gallantly interceded to protect Sunny.

In all her years at the brothel, Kayla had never witnessed something so refreshing. There wasn't a soul alive who wouldn't have fallen head over heels for Rose and her dignified manner.

Based on the way the brothel's owner reacted to her, Kayla was certain Rose had a connection to the highest ranks of the aristocracy. It didn't really matter to her what Rose's status was, though. By helping and protecting them, Rose had stirred emotions deep within Kayla's heart.

A brothel was where a girl ended up when she had no one to protect her. From there, her duty was to entertain by encapsulating her client's greatest desires. But in the moment that Rose stood up for them, *she* was the one granting their greatest desire.

Ever since Rose had begun investing in the brothel, their environment had gradually improved. Kayla wasn't the only one who considered her a savior; all the women in the brothel did.

I only regret that I took my sweet time going to see her.

If Kayla had answered the owner's summons sooner, Mirage and Marianne wouldn't have gotten more time with Rose than she did. Kayla had no one else to blame but herself. Still, each time she thought about it, she couldn't help lamenting.

It's all the worse because I can sense how good she would be in bed.

Rose had been skilled enough to bewitch Mirage and Marianne. Kayla had hoped she could get a taste of that for herself, but alas, it was not to be. After that spectacular display with Sunny, every courtesan in the brothel had surged around Rose. Their meeting thereafter had ended with only a few drinks.

Next time, I swear I'll get her to call on me.

Anytime reality became too unpleasant to bear, Kayla let her thoughts wander back to Rose. This was one of those times. As soon as her mind had settled enough, she bided her time, looking for an opportunity to make eye

contact with the hooded man in their company and signal to him. He would be able to sneak Sunny away. Kayla didn't know his name, but she knew she could trust him since Bezel had personally brought him along on this voyage. Bezel was a perfect gentleman with the courtesans. She had great faith in him.

This would all be much faster if I could mention Cardinal Nigel's name. But she wasn't allowed to do that. Even aristocrats were intent on secrecy when it came to their relations with courtesans. That would be all the truer for a man of the cloth like Nigel.

As grateful as Kayla was for Bezel's steadfast refusal to let the guards have their way, she steeled herself. If sacrificing herself to sate their base desires was enough to get them out of this situation, it was a small price to pay.

I only hope they aren't the violent sort.

Kayla wasn't so naive as to hope they might treat her as gently as a lover would, but there were a surprisingly large number of men who had no idea how to treat a woman. She wished they would learn. Then again, it was part of her job to be the assertive one, what with her advanced sexual prowess. Seducing a person was an essential skill to protect oneself.

As she was about to hike up her skirts to solicit the guards, something in the air changed. Something palpable.

The crowd had begun to give their group a wide berth because of how imposing the guards had become. But beyond that, a scent of roses tickled her nose, and a commanding presence immediately stole her attention.

There stood a woman with silken black hair that fell in loose waves around her shoulders, framing a sexy smile. She was wearing a light-colored sundress that contrasted brilliantly with her pale, supple skin. The lady had a graceful and dignified air about her, one that instinctively made any witness want to dip their head in deference. There was also something intimidating in her manner, born of her own nobility, but it was strangely pleasant.

This gorgeous interloper triggered a memory for Kayla.

Her eyes darted away. There was something eerily similar between this person and the woman whom she and all the other courtesans longed to see once more. Her chest seized. Kayla wouldn't mistake her savior for anyone else. And yet, it destroyed her that she couldn't prevail upon this woman's kindness here as she did at the brothel. After all, this was not the Rose she knew who had dressed in a man's suit. A line of propriety had to be drawn here, and Kayla knew it.

"Is there an issue?" the woman asked. Her voice was both higher and softer than Rose's. It made Kayla's heart tremble. When she noticed the harsh, implacable stare the woman was giving the guards, her pulse quickened.

Is she going to save us again? Was it even right for Kayla to hope as much, given who she was—given what she did for a living? Could she dream for a moment that the woman who had intervened on their behalf once before might do so again? Kayla clenched her hands at her sides, trying to tamp down the rising tide of emotion within her.

"They are fellow countrymen. If you suspect them of something illicit, then I cannot stay silent on the matter."

Heat gathered behind Kayla's eyes. She was overjoyed that this woman would call them countrymen. There had to be a good reason Rose had donned men's clothing when she'd paid the brothel a visit, but even in a beautiful sundress, she held herself and spoke just the same.

I suppose a courtesan couldn't possibly become an aristocrat's maid, could she?

Oh, how Kayla envied the women lucky enough to serve Rose. As far as Kayla knew, only lower-ranking aristocratic women could serve as maids to women higher up in the hierarchy.

Kayla realized quite suddenly that the woman's wavy black hair was rather familiar. Yes, she had spotted her before, escorted by two handsome men at the harbor. Considering how many bodyguards she had accompanying her, she

was someone of significant rank indeed.

Especially considering that those two men looked exactly like Prince Sylvester and Prince Seraphim.

She knew their likeness from portraits. The two princes were yet unmarried and extremely popular among the courtesans. Many had received portraits of them as gifts from aristocratic clientele.

Kayla's heart thumped with the realization of just how high-ranking Rose must be if she was accompanied by those two. If anything, Rose's steely, determined demeanor spoke to the nobility of her birth. No commoner, let alone a courtesan such as Kayla, would ever be permitted to serve someone of such significance.

She lifted her gaze to meet the woman's. At the very least, she had to convey her gratitude. Kayla made a discreet attempt to offer her body as thanks, but the woman firmly rebuffed it. *Of course she would. She is so far out of my league that we would never normally have the chance to speak.*

The societal hierarchy was a nigh insurmountable barrier. Having aristocratic clients—and a cardinal as well—didn't nudge Kayla up from the bottom rung. If she couldn't thank the woman for her help, then at the very least Kayla wanted to make it clear she knew the woman's identity. She spoke in metaphor to conceal the meaning, but she did so cleverly enough that she thought Rose would understand. Granted, it was still a shot in the dark.

Sadly, it doesn't seem that Sunny has realized it yet.

In her normal attire, Rose was stunningly gorgeous with a figure that put even a courtesan to shame, and she had all the dignity and grace one might expect of a woman of her station. There was something so intimidating about this combination that one wouldn't normally have the wherewithal to connect her with the woman who'd dressed in men's clothing and come to the brothel. Kayla couldn't blame Sunny for not catching on.

There was also the fact we couldn't see her face when she was dressed in

men's clothing, she reminded herself.

"This is my second time seeing her!" Sunny gushed, referring to the time she had run into the noble lady at a confectionery store. "I'm so honored she remembered who I am!"

In truth, this is your third time, Kayla mentally corrected her. It was a little ironic how Sunny worshipped the ground Rose walked on but hadn't recognized her when she was standing in front of them. How would she react when she finally discovered the truth? *I suppose that will be something to look forward to.*

Kayla had plans to meet the cardinal in the evening. He was a kind, middle-aged man who acted the perfect gentlemen with courtesans. It was only recently that she'd started taking him in as a client, but thus far, she had no complaints about him. *Strangely, around the same time, Bezel began showing his face around the brothel more often.*

Digging into clients' personal lives was prohibited, but in a world where courtesans' lives were valued so little, a woman had to learn to protect herself however she could. There was no reason for her to suspect the cardinal. He hadn't done anything fishy. Yet the current situation was completely unusual. A courtesan typically had bodyguards when she went out, yes—but when the arrangements were made for her to travel abroad to Arakaner, Bezel showed up to accompany her.

I can't help feeling there's something deeper to this.

Whatever it was, Kayla could only pray it didn't involve her. Or Rose, for that matter. The last thing Kayla wanted was for anything to trouble her.

Chapter 13:

The Villainess Visits Her Trading Firm

READING THE REPORTS was an entirely different experience from seeing the firm for herself in person. Claudia was overwhelmed.

The size was awe-inspiring, in part because her firm had an attached storehouse as well as an inn. The property took up several blocks. It was less a single firm and more like the Lindsay District from its sheer size, especially since all the buildings were built in the same cohesive style. The walls were made of white sandstone while the roofs were navy blue and triangular, which she found refreshing.

What was her father thinking, giving her something like this? *And my elder brother didn't oppose the idea at all.* In fact, far from discouraging it, Virgil had pushed their father into it.

Claudia's family had a very different sense of monetary value than the average citizen, given their vast riches, and she wasn't sure she would grow accustomed to it anytime soon.

"Lady Claudia, we are deeply honored you made the long trip all the way here to visit us."

The firm's manager greeted her the moment she alighted from her carriage. All other employees who weren't otherwise occupied had gathered outside to welcome her as well. They bowed their heads in unison. Claudia was stunned by the spectacle.

"I should be the one thanking you for giving me such a warm welcome," she said. "I know you must all be very busy, but I appreciate you taking the time to see me like this. Please, everyone, return to your duties. I don't want to distract you. I'll be happy to rely upon the manager for the rest of my visit."

Despite her request, no one moved. They were all too captivated by her

presence. It wasn't every day that one was able to lay eyes upon a duke's daughter.

"My apologies. I will shoo them off," the manager chimed in when he noticed all his employees ogling her.

She couldn't blame them. It was partly her fault for just standing there. Fortunately, they scattered after the manager harped at them, and he was soon giving her the grand tour.

"Let me start by explaining the layout and purpose of each building. I'm sure it goes without saying, but our customers as well as half of our workers are citizens of Arakaner."

Sales through the firm were limited to local merchants. The inn had its own restaurant inside that was open to tourists but was mainly frequented by locals.

"Our restaurant is quite popular with the local merchants and common folk. It's the only place people can enjoy ingredients grown and produced in the Lindsays' territory."

The Lindsays' region primarily produced crops that didn't spoil easily and could be exported as processed goods. One of their most popular products was wine. The restaurant served as a prime place for people to sample these goods, which in turn provided an especially useful learning experience for merchants on how best to develop their business based on what products they could buy through the firm.

Most of the islands that made up Arakaner were not ideal places for farming, though its main island was able to support some crops. But that was what made her firm so ideal; it was a place where they could acquire crops and processed products from abroad without having to go all the way to Harland or the mainland.

The manager seems to have everything covered here. There's really nothing for me to comment on. From his explanation, Claudia gathered that sales were soaring. There were no inadequacies to address. That was probably part of why

her father had gifted it to her; he knew the venture was succeeding. Profits had grown even more than expected.

The more she learned of her new firm, the more impressive it seemed. But to her father and Virgil, it was inconsequential. One firm among many. Giving it to her wouldn't even put a dent in their family's wealth. It was dizzying to realize the scale of her family's financial power.

This was yet another reminder that her father was a savvy businessman and not to be underestimated. The man had made some poor choices in his past concerning his children, that she would never deny, but she had to acknowledge he'd been an exceptional duke.

It's impressive he managed to maintain a firm of this size. Not only that, but this firm had been a new venture he'd started with no guarantee of success. While many other aristocrats were content to rest on their laurels, her father sought new heights.

After the manager had gone over the gist of everything, they took a small break. It was then that a messenger arrived with word of Sylvester.

The news chilled her to the bone.

Helen moved up beside her, a hand placed supportively at her back. Claudia could only assume her pallor was worse than she thought for Helen to show such open concern.

"Is Syl..." Claudia stopped and swallowed hard. "Pardon, I mean, is His Highness all right?"

"He hasn't sustained any wounds, my lady. He and Prince Seraphim have returned to the hotel together."

The messenger further explained that he'd first gone to the hotel, assuming she would be there, but he'd unfortunately just missed her because she was on her way to the firm. If she'd learned of the news sooner, she could have stayed and seen Sylvester for herself.

“Prince Seraphim is currently reviewing security arrangements. However, there should be no safety concerns traveling by carriage.”

Much like at the hotel, outside entry was prohibited anywhere except the firm, inn, or restaurant. Claudia also had a platoon of bodyguards to ensure her safety. Provided they kept to the main roads while traveling by carriage, no criminals would find an opening to launch an attack on her. It would be impossible to maneuver through the packed crowds, and even if they did, they would never get past her guards. The traffic was far too dense on the roads; the best a thug could hope to accomplish would be to pickpocket unsuspecting pedestrians.

Based on the report, Sylvester’s assailants had targeted him at random and not for his status as crown prince.

Claudia let out a long exhale. She hoped it would help her regain her composure. When a person panicked, their breathing immediately became erratic. Regulating hers would help her keep calm. *Long exhale, hold for a few seconds, then breathe in deep.* She repeated this cycle several times until the tension in her body faded. She instructed the messenger to return to Sylvester with word that she had received his missive and that she was safe.

Everything seems to be in order here at the firm. Given the unfavorable situation we find ourselves in, it would probably be best for me not to linger here.

The moment she thought as much, another messenger arrived. This one had been sent by Nigel to relay that the cardinal would be visiting her at noon. It was a troubling announcement.

What are the chances that after Dragoon contacted me, the cardinal would ask to visit only hours later? Is the Capricious God testing me?

To make matters worse, Sylvester had warned her yesterday not to involve herself with either one. He couldn’t have seen this coming, though. Not even with all his wisdom.

Claudia was curious about what the cardinal was after. He had never requested a meeting with her before. He obviously wanted something.

“I wonder why Syl was so insistent,” she murmured to herself.

No matter how much she had tried to reason with him, he’d held his ground. It was the first time he’d ever been so stubborn with her.

“Perhaps he has his own reasons—circumstances outside the confines of your conversation with him,” Helen suggested.

“Circumstances, hmm?”

Perhaps she’s right. What’s more, was I really trying to understand his point of view at all? It wasn’t until Helen spoke that she realized how closed-minded she had been. Claudia had expected him to be on her side like always. When he wasn’t, she was too shocked to think properly. Maybe I was being just as obstinate as he was.

She had gotten it in her head that he would humor her requests no matter what they were. It was an entitled way of thinking. And that was exactly how her old self had been—entitled and foolish.

Claudia cradled her head in her hands, frustrated by her own inadequacy. “Have I matured at all?” she wondered aloud.

“You most certainly have,” Helen reassured her with great emphasis. “Besides, can’t you empathize with His Highness’s viewpoint?”

She considered that for a moment. Sylvester had insisted, most vehemently, that he wanted to protect her. She couldn’t deny having felt the same. There were people she wanted to protect too.

“You’re always trying to keep me away from danger as well,” Helen said. She hesitated, catching her bottom lip between her teeth before admitting, “In fact, it’s been a bit isolating for me.”

“What?” Claudia’s eyes shot wide open. It had never occurred to her that Helen might be feeling the very same way she had with Sylvester.

"It's happened multiple times now. When you left to confront Lady Lestea, when you went out late one night. In both instances, you left me behind. I can only assume it's because you think I would be out of my depth if I came along. I realize you do it to protect me, but it's vexing." Her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"I'm sorry, I—" Claudia's voice broke off. She couldn't figure out what to say.

All she wanted was to protect Helen. She didn't want to put her in danger. That was why she'd left her at home.

"I'm no better than Syl." Claudia was feeling the exact same frustration toward Sylvester that Helen had felt toward her. But Helen had tucked hers away and kept it all to herself.

Guilt flooded her. All this time, Claudia hadn't realized she'd been making the same mistake. She felt awful.

"There's no need for you to apologize. I realize I'm being too entitled for a maid. If anything, you should scold me for complaining," said Helen.

Claudia vigorously shook her head. "Don't be silly! You may be my maid, but as I've always told you, you're like an older sister to me!" She shot to her feet. "You should be the one scolding *me*!" She grabbed Helen's hands. "I say all this knowing full well how presumptuous it must sound after leaving you out of everything, but would you help me address the problems I am currently facing? Of course, I must warn you that there *will* be danger involved."

"Of course. I would be delighted!"

Helen threw her arms around Claudia, drawing her in a bone-crushing hug. It was only then that Claudia realized how badly Helen was trembling.

"Thank you," Helen managed to squeak out in a strained voice, glad to be included. "I would follow you to the ends of the earth. In fact, I demand you allow me to do just that!"

"I may force you to do things you aren't comfortable with," Claudia warned

her.

“I look forward to it!”

It was heartening to know she had Helen on her side, and that it was by Helen’s own desire. There was no better ally. Claudia felt invincible.

“Now, what shall we do about the cardinal?” she asked.

“I see no harm in meeting with him, do you? It would be more conspicuous if you refused him.”

Helen had a point. Ordinarily, no one would refuse the cardinal if he requested an audience with them. She had a plausible excuse, given the attack on Sylvester—but Nigel had probably already caught wind of it. And he was visiting despite that. Avoiding the cardinal would only arouse his suspicions, and if she knew Sylvester, the last thing he wanted was the church’s eyes on either of them.

“Very well,” she said. “I’ll meet with him.”

Claudia would need to be cautious not to reveal that she had her reservations about him. At the same time, she needed to extract whatever information she could. This was no different from usual. Being a courtesan had necessitated the same sort of caution as being a duke’s daughter. Figuring out a person’s secrets through ordinary conversation was routine for her.

For lunch, she had a meal brought to her from her firm’s restaurant. It was only her second day in Arakaner, yet the familiar food from her family’s region brought her unimaginable comfort. *Odd, when we’re not even that far from home.*

Claudia inwardly laughed at herself for already acting so nostalgic about Harland. Her family home was a substantial distance away, to be sure, but Harland’s coast was visible from Arakaner’s main island. She could hop in a rowboat and easily make it back if she so desired.

When she considered it from that perspective, she found it startling to think a small strip of ocean was enough distance to cultivate a completely different culture than the one she was accustomed to. Intriguing. Perhaps there were more differences between the mainland and these islands than she had yet realized.

While Claudia was occupied with such thoughts, someone came to inform her that Nigel had arrived. She and Helen joined him in a drawing room. Inside, a window with blue siding was cracked open, allowing a pleasant breeze to sweep through.

“We are most honored to have the pleasure of your company, Your Eminence. You do our reputation a great service by visiting.”

He smiled. “I should be the one thanking you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me.”

This time he was dressed in the official attire designated for a man of his position, unlike the more modest garb he’d donned for his visit to the fishing village yesterday. She couldn’t shake the latter image from her mind. Perhaps that was why she didn’t feel the sort of tension she’d come to associate with meeting with a cardinal.

“First, allow me to congratulate you on taking over this firm,” said Nigel.

“Why, thank you. I am afraid it is far too much responsibility for one such as myself, but I swear to do my utmost to keep it successful.”

“With your great wisdom, my lady, I see no need for concern.”

Claudia surreptitiously scrutinized his face throughout their polite exchange, but he revealed nothing. He wasn’t like most adult men, who tended to view her the same way. No doubt they tried to be subtle about it, but she always recognized the lust in their eyes. One didn’t have to be a courtesan to notice a man’s interest. That was precisely what had made Charlotte so self-conscious about her breasts.

But not Nigel. He showed not even a glimmer of interest in her. Perhaps that was because young women like her weren't his type.

I'm not even entirely sure if he really is one of Kayla's clients. But it couldn't be a coincidence that they were both visiting Arakaner at the same time. Moreover, she was certain that Seraphim had some ties to Dragoon as well. In which case, maybe Nigel wasn't the problem. Maybe they were the ones conspiring to take him down. *They are obstacles to each other, especially if they hope to expand their influence.*

The more likely explanation was that they were both conspiring.

It's my duty to ascertain the extent and purpose of their machinations.

"Will you be taking a more active role in business moving forward?" asked Nigel.

"Where our firm in Arakaner is concerned, that is my plan, yes. Although our local manager here will oversee most everything."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I see. In that case, there is an issue with which I would earnestly seek your counsel."

"Certainly, I would be happy to help." Claudia's whole body tensed with anticipation. He was making his move. Thankfully, she was able to keep an unassuming smile on her face so as not to tip him off.

But for what reason would a cardinal—or the church, for that matter—have to rely on a trading firm? The first possibility that popped into her head was that he might request a donation or perhaps assistance with building a church hall inside Arakaner.

Nigel surprised her when he requested neither.

"At present, our church's teachings are not common among the people in Arakaner, which makes for an oppressive atmosphere for the few faithful we do have here."

"Yes, I can only imagine. That must be why you made the long trek all the way

here from the capital, yes? To show your support?"

"Indeed. Arakaner appears to be prospering, at least on the surface, but that doesn't paint an accurate picture for all of its citizenry."

The impoverished fishing village they visited yesterday was a good example to the contrary. Many of Arakaner's rural residents made their livelihoods by fishing, but it was far from a lucrative enterprise. That was why so many dreamed of winning the lottery.

Although a large part of the reason they struggle so much, I suspect, is because of the pressure the church has been putting on them.

The church was most hospitable when dealing with fellow monotheists, but it was harsh and unforgiving to those who weren't. They had ostracized Arakaner for not following the same belief system by placing harsh restrictions on trade with them. All of Arakaner's misfortunes could be attributed to every last one of their neighbors embracing monotheism. This created a barrier between them and the countries they most wanted to foster friendly relations with.

"Distributing food to the destitute is only a temporary solution to a long-standing problem. More must be done to truly help them. There are no monasteries here in Arakaner, which limits the amount of assistance we can provide," explained Nigel.

"Yes, I see what you mean. When you don't have all the resources you require to provide for them, it makes the situation more difficult." Claudia had half a mind to point out that part of their suffering was due to the church's own policies, but she held her tongue. It was safer to agree and express empathy for his point of view.

In fact, those were the two keys to maintaining a pleasant conversation: empathy and understanding. That was true for men and women, even if they didn't outright ask for it.

"We would be able to provide more for them if they were in Harland," Nigel went on. "Which brings me to a little idea I have: perhaps we could help them

leave Arakaner and come to Harland.”

“You want to help them immigrate?”

He quickly shook his head. “No, no. Nothing so drastic as that. Please think of it as a temporary relocation.”

Instigating immigration en masse from another country to one’s own was prohibited. Exceptions could be made if both parties agreed, but Nigel insisted that wasn’t what he was after.

“The cause of their destitution is a lack of marketable skills,” said Nigel. “If there are no jobs that they are qualified for, then it leaves them with no means to escape poverty. We could teach them the skills they need to overcome those hurdles if only there was a monastery here, but as you well know, there is not.”

Monasteries didn’t merely exist for proselytization and conversion; they had members practiced in agriculture and commerce. Anyone who wanted to take lessons from the monastery’s skilled teachers was required to reside at the monastery until they were sufficiently trained.

“So you want to invite them to Harland so that they can attend the monastery there?” Claudia guessed.

“Precisely! You really are every bit as wise as the people say.”

Were this any other nation, the church would turn to the local government and pressure them to assist with building a monastery in the area to provide for the people. Nigel knew better than to hope any such endeavor would produce fruitful results. At least not in Arakaner.

His face fell. “It’s our fault that our own followers here have fallen on such hard times. If only we could better provide for them.”

“I can only imagine how vexing it must be for you,” Claudia said.

“It pains me deeply,” Nigel admitted. “Our hope is to bring them to Harland, where they can acquire the skills they need, then bring them back to Arakaner.”

The reason he was turning to Claudia and her firm for help with the issue was

because, according to the church's official policy, they couldn't involve themselves with Arakaner.

"I would like you to hire a certain number of them to work at your firm. Then you can send them to Harland for training, and neither side will have any reason to disapprove. All you have to do is commence the hiring process. We'll arrange the rest."

"That's all you want from me?" Claudia asked.

"Yes, it's already selfish of us to ask this much of you. I promise not to trouble you any further than that."

If she took him at his word, he was suggesting that the church would shoulder the travel expenses both ways and the cost of training these people. They were simply using her firm as a front to adhere to the law.

"I'm sure Arakaner won't be pleased with the church's involvement, but they stand to benefit in the long run. They won't have to pay anything. And, when their people return, they will have the necessary farming skills to provide for themselves and support their fellow countrymen."

It was a generous arrangement. One that promised to elevate the lowest in society, thereby improving Arakaner as a whole. Were there not bad blood between them, Arakaner might rejoice at the church's assistance.

"That's wonderful! Your proposal is one that stands to benefit everyone involved!" Claudia exclaimed, smiling at the cardinal.

"Indeed. And your assistance in our efforts will give you and your firm further renown. I will be sure to mention your contributions to the pope as well."

"As one of the faithful, it's only natural to do what I can to further the church's goals, but it would be a great honor to have the pope himself hear of my involvement."

"I am deeply grateful for your willingness to assist us, my lady." He added afterward that he would have documents drawn up to ensure everything was in

order and send them to her later.

On the surface, Nigel's request was perfectly reasonable. She stood to benefit as well.

Chapter 14: The Cardinal's Concerns

ONCE THE SUN dipped beyond the horizon, the darkness it left behind amplified the moon's presence. A cottage sat in a remote part of the forest, far from civilization. It had previously been a wooden shack until Dragoon purchased and reconstructed it. The living room was furnished lavishly and decorated with expensive knickknacks. A plush armchair made of auburn leather rested beside the fireplace, which went unused in the summer months. That was where Nigel sat, legs crossed.

The cardinal wasn't wearing his usual kindhearted smile. All emotion had drained from his face, his lips moving stiffly whenever he spoke. He looked for all the world like a lifeless doll. Sylvester was often likened to a statue for his otherworldly beauty, but it was different with Nigel. He simply seemed inhuman, as if there was no blood pumping through his veins.

"How did our plan go?" he asked.

"Everything is proceeding smoothly," Bezel answered, kneeling on the floor. "With all the commotion today, I believe we've managed to completely wipe out the local crime syndicate."

"Hmm. It turned out to be much easier than I'd expected."

Nigel had arranged for someone to leak false information to the local crime syndicate so they would launch an attack on Sylvester. He'd told them that Sylvester was actually the leader of a different syndicate that had begun exerting its authority. In reality, that described Dragoon quite well.

Those at the bottom rungs of society had no idea what the prince of Harland looked like. It had further served Nigel that Sylvester came here in secret, so no one had any idea foreign royalty was in the country.

Seraphim wouldn't be able to sit idly by once he learned Harland's crown

prince had been attacked within his borders. He commenced a harsh crackdown on the local syndicate, effectively abolishing them. This was precisely why most syndicates avoided making a move on the aristocracy, let alone royalty.

Nigel had instructed several of Dragoon's members to commit thefts at the exact same time as the attack, if only to further pressure Seraphim into action.

He may have gotten lucky the first time we tried to assassinate him, but Prince Seraphim's luck won't hold out forever. Arakaner's royal family had been a thorn in the church's side for quite some time. Once they lose their leadership, their United Kingdom will fall into disorder and chaos.

Each individual island had its own military, but without a unifying force, their effectiveness was limited. Once the neighboring countries grew in strength, their end was inevitable. They would've been annexed by some other nation had the Arakaner royal family not taken the reins.

The Viking age may be over, but they are still an eyesore. In the days of old, the Vikings had frequently raided monasteries along the shoreline. It made his blood boil to think these savages still held precious keepsakes that had once decorated those monasteries.

For all the rage festering inside of him, Nigel displayed no outward emotion. His face was completely blank. "Capitalize on this opportunity to get a foothold so that we can annihilate this kingdom," he ordered.

"As you command!" With that, Bezel rose to his feet and left.

It was all too obvious to Nigel that Bezel was eager to escape his presence. He knew Bezel feared him, but that didn't bother him. Kayla would be coming soon; Nigel only needed to wait a little bit longer. The woman knew her place, but she took a vexingly long time with all her preparations.

Nigel reached for a glass of amber liquid at his side and swallowed it down.

The woman all of society praises as the "perfect lady" certainly is adorable. If he'd had ever had a child, they would probably be about the same age as

Claudia. For a duke's daughter, she was surprisingly pleasant to talk to. There was none of the arrogance he might have expected from someone of her station.

Many aristocrats took a heavy-handed approach with him even though he was a cardinal. They mistakenly assumed they were entitled to do so based on their donations to the church. But they were not guests or customers. They were loyal followers.

Claudia seemed to understand that. And fortunately, she didn't lean toward the other extreme of self-deprecation either. He didn't have to walk on eggshells around her, which pleased him.

At this rate, we'll have a steady stream of slaves soon. That was the real motive behind his proposal to her: human trafficking. These people were heretics. Their lives had no other purpose. Plus, if they were sold off as slaves and worked to the bone, he would only have to foot the bill for their departure. There would be no return trip.

Human trafficking was prohibited under international law, but there were always people looking for cheap labor, such as regional lords reigning over lands with meager earnings. They would pay his asking price under the pretense of training them. All they had to do was provide the bare minimum to keep the slaves from dying. It was a low-cost, convenient way to maintain a workforce. It was for the sake of securing a source of slave labor that Nigel had gone to so much trouble abolishing the local syndicate and approaching Claudia for her assistance.

There was a good reason Dragoon continued to prosper in Harland's capital. Part of it was because they understood their place within society and stayed within their limits, but the bigger reason was because they had been acknowledged as a necessary evil.

Dragoon wasn't like other crime syndicates; they retained the local old-fashioned values instilled in them from childhood. A portion of the profits they

made went straight back into supporting the most impoverished members of society. And Dragoon didn't partake in selling illegal substances. If any other criminal group tried to emerge, Dragoon would suppress them.

Keeping Dragoon around also helped the government maintain its low crime rate. They were even willing to present a united front with the syndicate to wipe out illegal substance distribution. If Dragoon fell, there was no telling what sort of syndicate might replace them.

Disorder would only damage public safety. That was why most countries treated such syndicates as a necessary evil. This was also why Nigel was so intent on destroying the local syndicate in Arakaner. Dragoon was under his thumb. He could have them slip in and fill the hole the previous syndicate left behind, thereby expanding his influence. Having a foothold here was even more desirable because it was a port city. Transporting required access to ships. That would benefit him not only with the exportation of slaves but in smuggling goods as well.

Such a shame others don't capitalize on such opportunities, but that's their loss.

What most people didn't realize was that monasteries all over the continent had links to syndicates, though those links differed from region to region. Part of the monks' mission was to safeguard the people in the slums. They would provide food for them and impart vital work skills. Orphans would be taken in to be raised in the monasteries.

Any involvement with the slums would inevitably lead to forming ties with members of the local syndicate. They coexisted amicably, with most monks acknowledging criminals as fellow faithful. Fostering trust between them also ensured the syndicate wouldn't target members of the church.

However, what separated Nigel from his fellows within the church was that he had chosen to rule over the syndicate rather than peacefully coexist with them. It was easy to accomplish. All he had to do was use the destitute they had

taken into the monastery as hostages against the syndicate. The people of the slums had no one else to turn to but the church. He'd merely taken advantage of that.

There was no denying that Dragoon gave back to its community, but their financial offerings didn't equate to looking after each individual person who lived in the slums. The monastery and its monks were the ones who primarily provided for them.

Nigel could order them to do whatever he wanted. They would have no choice but to obey.

It was too late for Dragoon to decry him and the other monks. The people wouldn't believe them. After all, the monastery had always provided for the rich when they needed it. They lived in harmony with the church. The church even had members who were exceedingly skilled at medical care. The people were always extremely grateful when they provided free consultations.

Nigel was confident that the church had wide access to the most capable people in the continent, more than any government body.

And what fortunate timing to have both Prince Sylvester and Lady Claudia here just when I needed them. Perhaps the Capricious God was smiling favorably upon him.

Frankly, Nigel could have used any trading firm to transport his slaves, but it was better to entrust them with a firm that had management he could trust. Claudia being Sylvester's favored bridal candidate was the icing on the cake. She would one day be crown princess, so having her assist in human trafficking would be the perfect blackmail material for him in the future.

Things were playing out surprisingly well for him.

All that remains is to rid myself of that eyesore, Prince Seraphim.

The reason the prince had opted to stay at a hotel in the city rather than at the royal palace was probably so that he could bait out his assassins. Nigel knew

it was greedy to make an attempt on Seraphim's life at this point.

But even if I fail to take his life, it's no great loss.

A failed attempt would result in a dead syndicate member, but he didn't really care about that. It would be their own fault if they failed.

Plus, it will serve as a good opportunity to investigate Prince Seraphim.

Right as Nigel wrapped up his plans, a woman's languid voice echoed in his ears.

Chapter 15:

The Villainess Hurries

CLAUDIA ARRIVED at the hotel just as the sun was setting. Yet even after darkness had completely crept across the land, she still hadn't found an opportunity to see Sylvester. The two maintained periodic contact, but she wasn't able to see him face-to-face.

Discussions between Sylvester and Seraphim were long and drawn out. The two princes were trying to find a way to keep this whole matter under wraps. If it went public, it would be an international scandal. They needed to exercise the utmost discretion if they were going to settle it quietly.

As desperate as Claudia was to see Sylvester, she couldn't interrupt him when he was busy with something important. Not when her reasons were personal in nature. Instead, she spent her time evaluating the cardinal's offer with Helen. At least, until word came that someone was at the hotel to see her. She readily agreed to meet with them after hearing their name and what they looked like.

When Claudia arrived in the hotel lobby, a woman with a heavy sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose was waiting for her. *Sunny*, Claudia thought, recognizing her instantly. Her dour expression gave Claudia a sinking feeling she hadn't brought good tidings.

"Miss Kayla bade me bring you a message," Sunny explained. "She said you would understand what it means. 'The rare flower that blooms on the island is about to fall into the hands of a saint among men.'"

The courtesans often concealed their words in metaphor. If they spoke too candidly, they risked their words reaching the wrong ears and causing problems. The reason Sunny wasn't able to discern the true meaning of Kayla's message was because she hadn't been at the brothel long enough to pick up on that way of speaking.

Similarly, Kayla had no way of knowing whether Claudia would be able to read between the lines. If Claudia had to guess, Kayla was probably taking a gamble and hoping Claudia would be wise enough to see through it.

Once their exchange was done with, Claudia turned to a nearby maid and asked, “Is Prince Seraphim still in a meeting? Send a messenger to Syl immediately!”

In their last correspondence, Sylvester had mentioned he was still with Seraphim, but there was no telling whether they had parted since then. If they were following their usual schedule, it was about time for dinner. Per custom, Seraphim would pray before his meal. It was possible they weren’t together anymore.

No, I don’t have time to wait.

Bodyguards in tow, Claudia dashed toward the prayer room.

I was right, it seems. The cardinal is one of Miss Kayla’s clients!

That also meant he had ties to Dragoon. Kayla wouldn’t have sent Sunny to deliver her message otherwise. Judging by her message, she too realized that Seraphim was in danger, and she’d informed Claudia/Rose in hopes she wouldn’t get wrapped up in it.

At Flower Bed, aristocrats were referred to in metaphor as flowers. Kayla had already deduced that Claudia and Rose were the same person. She had previously referred to her as her namesake, the rose, but it had a double meaning since she sat at the top of the aristocratic hierarchy.

And who among the aristocracy sat even higher and was even more precious? Royalty. Thus, they were *rare* flowers.

The term “saint among men” was used widely to refer to monks, but few had the power and influence necessary to reach a rare flower. That was how Claudia instantly knew that the two being referred to in Kayla’s message were Seraphim and Nigel.

When she reached the prayer room, she spotted Seraphim's guards standing outside it. A cold sweat trickled down her back. This could only mean the discussions between the princes had finished. And Seraphim was likely alone in the room.

Her heart hammered in her chest.

"We must ask you not to enter while His Highness is in prayer!" shouted one of the guards when she approached.

"He may be in danger!" Claudia snapped back at him, ignoring their attempts to stop her. Her bodyguards burst in first to ensure the area was safe.

She couldn't wait for them.

"Prince Seraphim!" Her voice boomed, desperate. She shouldered her way in to find him standing there, half undressed, his chest bare. Apparently this was how his people dressed while in prayer. There was a gruesome scar on his abdomen, but other than that, he looked perfectly well. "Are you all right?!"

"The prince is fine. Never dreamed you'd rush in here, though."

His brusque response caught her off guard, and she froze. The person in front of her wasn't Seraphim. He was the hooded man from Dragoon.

"Hold up a sec," he said, placing his hand on one of the walls. "With how much of a fuss you've kicked up, there ain't gonna be any assassination happening."

"Indeed. I must admit, I did not anticipate you coming here, Lady Claudia," said a familiar voice.

The wall should have been just that: a wall. But even though there was no knob, it swung open to reveal Seraphim hidden inside.

"This room has a secret compartment in case of an attack during prayer. I apologize for having worried you," said Seraphim.

Claudia numbly shook her head. "N-no. As long as you're all right, that's what matters..." Her voice trailed off before she added, "Was it a poor choice to show

up here?"

It was like seeing double with both dressed in the exact same clothing. It was enough to make her head spin, but fortunately, their attitudes were so completely different that it was easy to tell them apart. Besides, she had more important concerns to attend to. Based on what she heard and saw, the hooded man was acting as bait for the prince, trying to catch an assassin in the act. She panicked, thinking she'd ruined their plans by barging in.

"No, it's quite all right," Seraphim reassured her with a smile. "I asked Ruki here to be my double just in case. That's all."

"It's tough work is what it is," Ruki grumbled.

Seraphim glanced at him. "I would be even happier if you agreed to do this permanently."

"I'll pass."

"That's unfortunate." Seraphim looked genuinely disappointed at how quickly Ruki rebuffed him, but he didn't dwell on it for long. When his gaze moved back to Claudia, he was smiling again. "Allow me to explain what's happening. Though before I do, could I ask you to excuse your bodyguards?"

There was no reason to refuse his request. She had her bodyguards wait for her outside the room. The door was left cracked ever so slightly open, as was custom when an unwedded woman was alone with a man.

"First, I believe introductions are in order," said Seraphim. He motioned toward his lookalike. "This is Ruki. He's my half-brother by a different mother."

"Your half-brother?" Claudia repeated in disbelief. If that was true, then they couldn't be twins, even though they looked the part.

"I can understand your surprise. When I first saw him, I thought I was about to be killed by my own reflection," said Seraphim.

Ruki shrugged. "I thought you were a spirit or something."

As Seraphim explained it, Ruki was the king's illegitimate son, born to a

woman he'd bedded one night while visiting Harland many years ago. Seraphim and Ruki were the same age.

"Not the first time the cardinal's gone after Seraphim. He gave the order once before, and I was the one who was supposed to carry it out," said Ruki.

Fortunately, the cardinal only ever met face-to-face with Bezel. He'd never seen Ruki's face himself. Neither of them had any way of knowing that the assassination Ruki was supposed to carry out would reveal the nature of his own birth. Seraphim was the one to suggest that they work together. Ruki was equally anxious to get out from Nigel's thumb, so he agreed to cooperate.

According to the report Nigel received, the assassination ended in failure, with the assassin being killed during his attempt.

"Then Dragoon is cooperating as well?" Claudia asked.

Ruki was accompanying Bezel, after all. This arrangement obviously had to extend beyond just Ruki and Seraphim.

"Bezel's like a dad to me. He raised me. And right now, Dragoon's in a real tough spot, so he was willing to listen to what I had to say," said Ruki.

Her brows furrowed. "What do you mean by 'tough spot'?"

"That bastard—the cardinal—took our families hostage!"

Never mind the cardinal himself, even the regular monks had more power and influence than those living in the slums. If clergymen made accusations, regardless of whether they were true, the local guard would have no reason not to take them at their word. Crime was rampant in the slums, after all. People—the guard included—had very little trust in the slums' inhabitants. There was no guarantee that any investigation would be conducted fairly, least of all if the cardinal used his authority.

In fact, this wasn't merely a hypothetical; Nigel had previously interfered and skillfully guided the investigation so that innocents were found guilty and punished. He didn't even have to sully his hands. He had merely orchestrated it,

all to prove a point to Dragoon that he could have people easily dispatched if he so desired.

All the monks in the monastery built in the slums answered to him. He could have his people set fire to the district and no one would ever suspect him or his cohorts. The people there were his hostages—the very people Dragoon was sworn to protect. They had no choice but to do whatever he told them.

“Hostages...” Claudia murmured.

She was at a loss for words. Of course she’d assumed there was some sort of connection between Nigel and Dragoon, but this was beyond expectation. *What happened to monks being logical and reasonable?* Nigel had complete dominion over Dragoon.

“Pretty messed up, ain’t it? We live for ourselves and for our families stuck in the slums. But he’s snagged us by the neck, got us trapped between a rock and a hard place,” said Ruki.

Seraphim nodded. “Since we have a common enemy, it was easy enough to convince him to work with me.”

“He’s a pretty tough foe too. Even working together, it’s not like Seraphim can do whatever the hell he wants. He’s not even from the same country as us. If I’m being honest, we’ve pretty much got our hands tied here.”

“Then, like a comet, you suddenly appeared,” Seraphim said.

Claudia blinked. “Me?”

“Yep. You showed up at Flower Bed as Rose, right?” Ruki gave her a knowing look. “Imagine my shock when I figured out you were actually a duke’s daughter. Second biggest surprise in my life, next to my first meeting with this guy.”

“The way you word it makes it sound as if there’s something wrong with my face,” said Seraphim.

“Yeah, well, if you want my opinion, there *is* somethin’ wrong with it.” Ruki

shook his head and turned back to her. He further explained that once he found out she cared for the courtesans and was looking after them, he got the idea in his head she might be someone he could reason with. Someone who might work with him. “You’ve got no idea how insanely popular you are. If you set up your own brothel, every last courtesan we’ve got would leave us to work under you.”

He was jesting, of course. All courtesans were under contract; they couldn’t leave no matter how much they might like to. But Ruki’s exaggeration demonstrated how much they adored her, and for that, Claudia was relieved.

“But that wasn’t enough,” Ruki said. “Just ‘cause you’re sympathetic to the courtesans doesn’t guarantee you ain’t one of those religious nuts. I mean, look at the cardinal. I had to be absolutely sure I could trust you, which is why I kept my eye on you.”

“Goodness,” Claudia said, “then am I to understand it was no coincidence when we first ran into each other in front of that confectionery?”

“Nah, wasn’t a coincidence. I had no choice but to show myself since Sunny got in trouble, though.”

She had assumed back then that he was acting as her bodyguard, but apparently that wasn’t the case.

“Anyhow, you showing up like this seals the deal. You’ve obviously got the guts to go toe to toe with the cardinal. You wouldn’t have barged in here to stop an assassination attempt otherwise, right?”

A fervent follower wouldn’t have a good enough opinion of a heretic like Seraphim to bother interfering. That was Ruki’s insinuation, at least. The thought hadn’t even crossed Claudia’s mind; perhaps the more religiously inclined had a more stringent view of Seraphim than she even imagined.

“Well, your intervention served to distinguish you as an ally, at least,” Seraphim said proudly. “You and Prince Sylvester are rather difficult to read, I’m afraid.”

At long last, Claudia understood the situation. It was plain what these two wanted of her. And fortunately for them, she had no intentions of supporting the cardinal.

“May I ask you one question?” she said.

“You needn’t limit yourself to just one. I am happy to answer as many questions as you have, time permitting.”

It was kind of Seraphim to say as much, but since they had driven everyone out of the room and were meeting privately, they couldn’t afford to be in each other’s company alone for any extended period of time.

Claudia decided to prioritize the most important question she could think of. “Prince Seraphim, is your enemy the church? Or the cardinal?”

As far as Arakaner was concerned, Nigel wasn’t the only obstacle in their path. The same couldn’t be said for Ruki—his only issue was with the cardinal.

A smile spread across Seraphim’s lips. “As much as I’d like to be greedy and say both, my most immediate concern is the cardinal. He’s a disgrace to all men of the cloth. Plus, if we’re able to expose his misdeeds, that should help diminish the church’s power.”

The cardinal’s actions were inexcusable. But while he was evil, the same could not be said of the entire church. There were genuinely good people within their ranks. Not to mention the many who would lose their lives without the charity work of the church. The whole continent would devolve into chaos, and war would be imminent. The church was indispensable, thus Claudia did not believe it was wholly evil as an institution.

A world where peace can be maintained even without the power of the church may not necessarily be ideal either, she thought.

There was a reason it existed. If nations were capable of providing for and protecting all their citizenry, of joining hands and helping one another, then the church would never have accrued as much influence as it had. Thus, reality had

proven them necessary.

It was governments which took issue with the unwanted influence of a third party like the church. The people—everyday people—didn't care whether the church had great power. Provided they could maintain their daily lives, it was no matter to them who ruled.

"So?" Ruki prompted her. "You gonna help us out?"

"I will require some time to think it over," Claudia said primly. She wanted time to consult Sylvester about the matter.

He gave a one-shoulder shrug. "Guess it'd be asking too much to want an immediate answer. Personally, I'll be happy as long as you get your husband in on this. He's the last person I'd want as an enemy. I'd rather have him on our side."

She frowned. "I am not married to His Highness."

"Not yet, you mean?" He smirked. "Take it easy on the guy. Seems to me he's pretty dead set on you."

"I would never be cruel to him."

"If you say so."

The way he talked puzzled her. For Ruki to act so terrified of Sylvester could only mean that they had run into each other at some point. But when? Where?

"Prince Sylvester is the one you're really after," she realized.

"Nothing beats having the strongest guy on your team." There was something charming about how unabashedly Ruki admitted it. He was older than Claudia, she knew, but the way he acted was more like a younger brother.

I suppose that's exactly what he is to Prince Seraphim. The way Seraphim looked at Ruki was the same way she looked at Helen.

"Oh, and before I forget, lemme tell you somethin': nothing's more costly than when it's given freely."

Claudia didn't have to think hard to know what he was referring to. He must have caught wind of the request Nigel had made to her.

She smiled calmly back at him and said, "Trust me, I know."

Chapter 16: The Assassin Faces Pain in Exchange for Hope

THEIR UNDERGROUND BASE was as dreary as ever. Perhaps that was inevitable due to the lack of light.

This ain't for me, Ruki thought.

Home was wherever he made it, and since he wanted to keep himself hidden, he couldn't abandon this place no matter how much he disliked it.

"Listen to me closely: don't do anything to put your life in danger. I understand you have the syndicate's best interests in mind, but still," said Bezel.

"C'mon, it'll be fine as long as I keep my hood up."

Bezel couldn't hide his concern. His worrywart ways had grown ever since Ruki failed to assassinate Seraphim and had to start living in hiding. Fortunately, Nigel had no idea what Ruki looked like. That was partly because Ruki always wore his hood up, but it was also because none of the other members had any personal interest in him.

Having a handsome face is a real pain. Doesn't do me any favors at all.

Ruki had made a habit of concealing his face from a young age. Being desirable only put his life in more danger.

Guess it did have some benefits. Had so many perverts try to make a move on me that I got lots of practice killing people.

Murder had become a necessary aspect of his self-defense. It was a bit ironic that he'd done it so much that assassination became his way of life. As far as he knew, he had no blood relatives. He couldn't remember anything before Bezel picked him up off the streets.

Ruki had hated his face so much that he'd tried countless times to disfigure

himself. *But each time Bezel stepped in to stop me.*

Perhaps it was because, despite appearances, Bezel had an affinity for anything cute. His hobbies were pretty feminine by society's standards. He kept it hidden from most, but he loved to gush with the courtesans.

He was always giving me stuffed animals. Ruki had a habit of losing those not long after he received them. He'd leave them lying around once he grew bored, and Bezel would always collect them.

Ruki recalled how exasperated he'd been when he found them sitting beside his pillow at night. He understood the whole thing was just an excuse for Bezel to purchase any stuffed animals he liked. It became tradition for him to give one to Ruki on birthdays and holidays.

While Ruki would never tell Bezel as much to his face, he considered Bezel his only family. It didn't matter that the two weren't blood-related. Many in the slums were the same, valuing found family over all else. They all drank the same muddy water and looked out for one another the best they could.

Since he was always skilled at fending for himself, even as a kid, Ruki would often volunteer to be the decoy. He had no other choice. Many of his friends would have starved to death otherwise.

Here we were scraping to make it by, and that cardinal bastard swoops in like a vulture.

Nigel had taken many people's families hostage. He'd even killed some just to make an example of them. He'd cunningly framed them for crimes they hadn't even committed. Worse, the cardinal had no compunction about taking the lives of women and children too.

What vexed Ruki the most was how he still maintained the image of a good, godly man. Such a thing could only be possible in a world gone mad.

Ruki longed to murder the man with his own two hands. But the cardinal was closely guarded, and he'd warned them that his cohorts would set fire to the

slums if anything happened to him. They could do nothing to oppose him.

And even when we need him most, Seraphim's useless to us.

The man he'd encountered when he was sent on assassination mission turned out to have a face eerily similar to his own, which was how they realized they were half-brothers. They joined sides thereafter, but Ruki's foremost priority when it came to family would always be Bezel and the rest of the people in the slums. Seraphim didn't even live in the same country.

So long as there were hostages, Ruki and the rest of Dragoon would be under Nigel's control. He needed to find local allies if he hoped to overcome his situation. No one would ever believe criminals like him and the other syndicate members even if they tried to go to the authorities. No, he needed someone with power and authority as an ally. Someone other than Seraphim.

Much to Ruki's delight, that was when Rose appeared. She was obviously part of the aristocracy, even though she dressed in men's clothing to disguise herself. After she drove off a particularly malicious client, Rose's reputation spread beyond Flower Bed to other brothels.

Mirage was the longest-serving courtesan at Flower Bed. She had played with Ruki several times when he was younger. *This lady must really be something for Mirage to be that hung up on her.*

If he took Bezel's word for it, Mirage was head over heels. As Mirage would tell it, Rose's appeal went beyond beauty; she had an incredible personality too.

And if she's associated with a duke's house, she must have plenty of power. After all, a duke was second only to the royal family in that regard.

It was Flower Bed's owner who'd informed him that Rose had some association with Duke Lindsay's house. Her appearance was timely, since he was desperate for someone local who might be willing to join his side.

From all the information he could gather, this Rose person had some misgivings about the present state of the brothel. She had offered to help

finance Flower Bed on the condition that the owner improved the courtesans' surroundings. All of this suggested she might be open to working with him and Dragoon.

Ruki scrambled to locate her. But no matter where he looked, he could find no aristocratic lady who dressed in men's attire. He even accessed the underground information network and still nothing.

As far as he could tell, Rose had vanished overnight.

It wasn't until he started tracing information about the cane she'd had with her that he finally got a promising lead. Someone directly from the Lindsay household had purchased it, but there was no telling precisely who. It could have been the duke himself or his heir. Or perhaps it was a gift meant for someone else entirely.

After eliminating all other possibilities through thorough investigation, Ruki arrived at the answer that Claudia herself had bought it. He second-guessed himself initially; there had to be some mistake. But no matter how much he thought about it, there was no other possibility.

Rose had shown such courage and grace during her brief appearance at the brothel. She was obviously an aristocrat. Thus, Ruki concluded that Claudia had to be Rose.

She'd make for a real powerful ally if she joined us.

Alas, though he'd uncovered her identity, he couldn't directly approach her to make his bid for her cooperation.

Most Harlanders were monotheists. Depending on how fervent a believer Claudia was, she could wind up being their enemy. He would need to keep his distance until he could be certain where her allegiances lay.

Bezel had decided to accompany Kayla to the United Kingdom of Arakaner because Nigel had requested that she be given their best protection during her visit. Ruki, meanwhile, went because it would be an opportunity to observe

Claudia. He wanted to see how she would handle the new firm her father had given her, but more importantly, he'd be able to gauge what kind of relationship she had with the cardinal, if any.

He didn't find the concrete answer he had hoped for, but he couldn't sit idly by while the cardinal plotted and schemed. So Ruki took a chance and approached her to give her a warning. He wanted to see what she would do about it. It never even crossed his mind that she would immediately see through his disguise and realize he wasn't Seraphim.

"You got that right. It *is* unsettling! It's pretty dangerous for me to show my face and all, but that's why I had to warn you. Don't want you goin' down just yet."

Ruki said his piece, then quickly excused himself, unable to suppress a grin.

He cackled to himself once he was alone. "She's gotta be insanely perceptive to see through my disguise."

If it had been Sylvester, he might not have been so surprised, but Claudia had only met Seraphim a handful of times. Even their first meeting was incredibly recent. As much as Ruki wanted to get Claudia on his side, he didn't want to make an enemy of her.

It was exhilarating watching Claudia swoop in to rescue Kayla and Sunny. *The way those guards scurried away like rats was freaking hilarious.*

He could see why the courtesans were so taken with her. They weren't accustomed to other people stepping in to protect them. Much like Ruki, courtesans normally had to protect themselves.

She's one interesting woman. The more Ruki got to know her, the more she piqued his curiosity. He found himself in the grips of anticipation, waiting anxiously for what she would do next.

Judging by the fact that the prince wasn't with her, he assumed she was probably headed to her firm. He parted ways with Bezel and the others,

intending to trail her.

Ruki was shuffling down an alleyway when, out of nowhere, someone slammed into him.

“What’re you—?!” His words ended abruptly when an intense pain shot through his stomach. His vision darkened, and he almost thought he was seeing stars.

Ruki had always lived in the shadows, keeping a hood over his head to hide his face. He had never let his guard down before, no matter how elated his mood. Those who left themselves open were the quickest to die. Such was the way of things in the slums. Yet the exact moment he let himself get carried away, someone had exploited his weakness.

His consciousness began to fade.

I really screwed this one up.

As everything went black, Ruki resigned himself that this was it. He was never going to wake up again.

Ruki next awoke choking and sputtering, struggling to breathe. Thrashing about was pointless; he was bound, with his arms secured behind his head and a bucket of water right before his eyes. That explained his rude awakening. His captor must have dunked his head in.

“Couldn’t you find a nicer way to wake me?” Ruki said, panting.

He was glad to still be alive, but he wasn’t a big fan of this whole torture thing.

As his vision cleared, his eyes landed on a clean pair of boots. His mind whirled. *So there’re two people here.*

How long had he been unconscious? *Doesn’t feel like I’ve been out too long. Not for hours, at least.*

It was nothing to brag about, but he'd been through similar experiences before. That was how he could measure the passage of time. Captors never let their prisoners sleep in beds, which meant the longer he had spent unconscious and in discomfort, the sorer he would be. But his body didn't ache too badly this time.

I'm guessing they've got me underground, by the looks of things. It was surely still daylight, but he didn't hear the bustle of daily activity—not even faintly. Building a soundproof house aboveground would be ridiculously expensive, though it was certainly possible. It was much easier to achieve in a basement. When torturing a person, a basement or a remote cabin of some sort were the prime choices. What solidified his conjecture about this being a basement was the stale air that flooded his nose when he inhaled. Dragoon's headquarters were also underground. He'd grown accustomed to the mustiness.

Two against one, huh? Not great odds for me. Moreover, his arms were bound.

One of his captors stood behind him with a firm grip on his scalp, which kept him on his knees. The other sat in a chair directly in front of him.

Ruki managed to crane his neck and look up. A chill raced down his spine as two golden eyes stared back at him. His breath caught in his throat, the blood draining from his face. He knew logically that it wasn't that cold in here, yet his whole body began to tremble.

"What business does Dragoon have with her?" demanded the man in front of them, as if they both already knew to whom he was referring without need of a name.

Holy crap, this is terrifying!

Sylvester's gaze was as frigid as a glacial winter, enough to make Ruki forget it was the middle of summer. His handsome countenance only served to make him even more intimidating. This was the first time Ruki had ever seen Sylvester in person, but his gut immediately told him this was the crown prince. The man

just had an air about him.

No wonder Seraphim said he's scary. Although they were both princes of their respective countries, Seraphim had previously emphasized how frightening Sylvester was.

The atmosphere in the room was stifling. Sylvester would brook nothing but the absolute truth from Ruki. If he lied, his life would be forfeit.

Which is just freaking wonderful, 'cause I've got the feeling he'll kill me even if I tell him the truth!

Experience told Ruki that no one would ever take a criminal like him at his word. Beyond that, this man had absolute authority over whether he lived or died.

Ruki launched into his explanation, half-resigned that these were some of the last words he might ever speak. He had meant to protect Claudia by approaching her. There was nothing for him to feel guilty about, at least not in this regard.

“I mean, think about it. If I were after her life, I—”

He didn’t get to finish that sentence. Sylvester drew his sword from its sheath and pressed the blade to his neck. Ruki went still. A few droplets of water trickled down his forehead and into his eyes, but he didn’t dare blink. The moment he did, the prince would end him. He was sure of it.

“The next time you say anything that unwise, it will be your last,” Sylvester said evenly.

His words were like frost penetrating Ruki’s skin, seizing his heart in a block of ice. It was enough to make him hallucinate his breath coming out as a white mist.

In the next moment, the pressure on the back of his head disappeared, and Sylvester slid his blade back into its sheath. The person at Ruki’s back unbound him. He was free.

Does this mean I've got a second chance? The possibility of survival seemed so surreal.

Ruki could sense eyes on him as he stumbled out of the basement where he'd been held and into an alleyway. The sunlight pained him, but he was genuinely grateful for the scorching heat. Being in Sylvester's presence had left him chilled. Once he was sufficiently warmed, he was tempted to drop to his knees in relief.

I'm alive. By some miracle, I'm still alive.

He didn't understand why, though. Had the prince believed him? Did he still think there was some value in keeping Ruki alive? *Maybe it was my face that got me outta that.* It had never been anything but a thorn in his side before, but it was a face Sylvester must have immediately recognized. He'd probably figured out Ruki (and by extension, Dragoon) was connected to Seraphim.

As glad as he was that he'd escaped death, he couldn't loiter. He'd already lost time because of all this business. Fortunately, his senses hadn't failed him: the sun was still high in the sky. It must have been a mere hour or so since he lost consciousness and faced their questioning.

Ruki picked up the pace. He needed to check on the cardinal and see what he was up to. But first, he needed to make for the Lindsay firm's inn. It was an ideal place to infiltrate because it was always bustling with the coming and going of many merchants.

The firm's purpose was to sell and market its products. The adjacent inn was welcome to all merchants, whether or not it was their first time visiting. If one wanted more of a luxury experience, they simply had to go elsewhere; this wasn't the place.

An additional member of the syndicate had been brought along and was staying at the inn, hidden from the cardinal. They acted as a liaison for Dragoon, and it was also their job to discreetly keep tabs on Claudia. Ruki and Bezel passed messages to each other through them, and thanks to Bezel's latest

missive, he was able to make it to the prayer room in time to switch places with Seraphim.

It alarmed him when he learned Claudia had met with the cardinal, but his priority was the more immediate danger facing Seraphim. If Nigel was being this proactive in carrying out his schemes, he would likely make a bid for Seraphim's life. It was too tempting an opportunity when Seraphim was staying at a less secure inn in the city rather than at the royal palace.

Still, I can't believe he went after Prince Sylvester. He's taking things too far.

The ones responsible for the act were affiliated with the local crime syndicate, but Nigel had been the one to pull their strings. He wasn't after Sylvester's life, though; he only wanted the scandal that came with Sylvester being attacked.

Ruki could still recall the way those golden eyes looked down on him. A chill skated down his back. The remembered terror made his body tremble. He rubbed his arms, trying to shake off the cold sensation it sparked in him.

And that was when Claudia burst in with her bodyguards.

"Prince Seraphim! Are you all right?!"

Ruki rarely prayed to the Capricious God, but this was one instance when he found himself doing just that.

Please tell me she came here hoping to help Seraphim!

She was a sorely needed ally.

At least one thing was certain: Claudia was not a religious zealot. That alone was enough to bring a grin to his face.

Chapter 17:

The Foreign Prince Desires a Comrade

WHEN SERAPHIM first heard about Claudia—or Rose, as was her alias—from Ruki, he was both shocked and relieved. He had experienced a very real fear that Ruki might switch sides, dissatisfied with how little aid Seraphim had been able to provide. The fact that Ruki had turned to searching for a more local ally was sufficient evidence that Seraphim was not doing enough.

All Seraphim could do was reflect bitterly on how powerless he was. They were blood brothers, even if only through their father, but there was an insurmountable wall between them. Familial sentiment didn't mean much. If the occasion called for it, Seraphim would have no choice but to abandon Ruki.

I need more power to make sure it never comes to that, Seraphim thought.

When he learned of the assault on Sylvester, his heart nearly stopped. It vexed him that he hadn't seen it coming—that Nigel was so cunning as to stoop to employing the local crime syndicate against him.

Nigel didn't use Dragoon to do his bidding. No, he instead leaked false information to the local syndicate. Whereas Seraphim usually had the upper hand against the cardinal and the church, he found himself scrambling to combat Nigel's duplicity after the fact.

Dragoon had been none the wiser of the cardinal's ploy. Nigel only informed them about his intentions afterward. While he incited the local syndicate to go after Sylvester, he ordered Dragoon to carry out robberies across the harbor.

Seraphim couldn't help but think he'd been had. *Could he have figured out that I have someone inside Dragoon?*

He couldn't discount the possibility that it was merely coincidence, but the situation called for utmost caution. And while juggling those concerns, he also had to move quickly to resolve the incident.

Nigel was a consistent thorn in his side.

It would be nice if this could at least provide an opportunity to pressure Prince Sylvester into joining hands with me.

He had already informed Sylvester of the church's many misdeeds, but he'd kept his connection to Dragoon hidden at the time, which subsequently meant he couldn't provide any real proof to back up his claims.

This is no time to be worrying about appearances, though. Seraphim couldn't risk Nigel getting a step ahead of him. Not again.

He would have to tell Sylvester about Ruki. About his relationship with Dragoon.

Seraphim's negligence was going to cost him dearly. Responsibility for the attack on Sylvester ultimately fell on his shoulders. Sylvester wasn't one to miss the opportunity to capitalize on the advantage that would give him in negotiations. Even assuming he did, it would still put Seraphim in his debt.

Knots formed in Seraphim's stomach, and they didn't dissipate until after his discussions with Sylvester.

It wasn't until Seraphim found himself toe to toe with a beautiful woman with raven-black hair that he saw the light of hope at last.

"Prince Seraphim, is your enemy the church? Or the cardinal?"

Her lustrous hair fell in waves around her face, its dark color incredibly rare among the people in Arakaner. But it was her eyes that captured him the most, brimming as they were with intense determination.

Claudia's voice, dignified and elegant, made his heart stutter. The knots from before returned, twisting in his stomach as he tried to negotiate an alliance with her.

She's not one to be underestimated.

The pressure was suffocating, though he did an admirable job hiding it behind an impenetrable smile. It wasn't as unpleasant as it might sound, for he realized as he gazed into her eyes that they weren't the color of the sky but of the deep, vast ocean.

Seraphim and his people owed much to the ocean, as fickle and cruel as she could be. The word "cruel" didn't even begin to encompass her capacity for brutality. No matter how much he or his people might resent her for that, they couldn't live without her. She was their very way of life, the divinity to whom they prayed.

The spirits of nature reside in Lady Claudia's eyes, he thought. Their blueness reminded him of the gentle ripples carrying sea-foam, and of the raging waves amid a tempest. The two images couldn't be more opposed, but such was the impression her eyes gave him.

"My most immediate concern is the cardinal. He's a disgrace to all men of the cloth," he told her.

The interests of Arakaner and her people mattered more to him than anything else. He would resort to less moral methods of handling the situation if the need arose.

It was possible Nigel was carrying out these misdeeds at the church's behest—in which case, they had some culpability since he was in no position to refuse them. But even then, he'd crossed a line no man should. He had to be held responsible for that.

Arakaner—or rather, the royal family—viewed the church as an adversary, but not one they wished to annihilate. Peaceful coexistence was the goal, though not one they sought to achieve if it meant joining hands with someone like Nigel. Not even Sylvester and Claudia, who considered themselves faithful to the church, had any desire to align themselves with him.

Lady Claudia in particular strikes me as someone with great empathy. He had heard of her actions at the brothel, when she disguised herself as Rose, and

again when she stepped in to protect Sunny and Kayla from city guards.

This woman, regarded by all as the epitome of the perfect lady, judged people by their character and not by their social status. She displayed far more kindness and nobility than Nigel. If she were to join his side, he was sure he could win this battle.

Ruki had arrived at the same conclusion.

Chapter 18:

The Villainess Resolves Her Conflict with the Crown Prince

AFTER HEARING the full circumstances from Seraphim and Ruki, Claudia immediately made for Sylvester's room. His discussions with Seraphim had ended, so he'd returned to his quarters.

It was pitch black outside the windows, but when he appeared to greet her, Sylvester's golden eyes reminded her of the sun's warm light.

"Dia, are you all right?" he asked immediately.

"I am," she said. "I should be asking you the same. You haven't had an easy time of it, have you, Syl?" Claudia was referring, of course, to the bandit attack. From what she'd been told, there had been a whole group of them. "I heard that you were uninjured, but that didn't stop me from worrying about you."

"I'm sorry it's taken us so long to reunite."

Claudia shook her head. "I understand you were busy with other matters. There's no need for you to apologize."

They were so close now that it would be easy to reach out and touch one another, but they both hesitated. Their last encounter had ended on a bitter note. Several seconds of awkward silence passed between them. But the more they ticked by, the more her concern for him overshadowed any nervousness, and Claudia lurched forward, throwing her arms around him. He caught her gently in his arms. Her love for him surged and overflowed.

"I'm so glad you're all right!"

They held each other tightly. Her heart, which had been so tightly wound, finally relaxed.

Sylvester planted a light kiss on her cheek. That was enough to assure her he felt the same. "Though they had the numbers, none of them were particularly

skilled," he said.

"Yes, but you fought as well."

"I did, but my bodyguards cut most of them down before I even had a chance to do anything."

The thought of him facing such life-threatening danger made her feel as if her heart might split in two. As crown prince, his safety was more important than anyone else's, but that same position was exactly what put him in constant danger.

To think that only now would I come to understand why he warned me to stay out of danger myself, she thought bitterly. Sylvester had been right; Nigel was a terrifying man.

If it were Seraphim and Ruki alone making the claims against the cardinal, she might not have believed them, but Kayla had given her advance warning about the man as well. It wasn't plausible to think that all three of them were in on this together, trying to deceive her. Besides, Claudia wasn't the primary person they wanted on their side anyway.

Prince Seraphim must have spoken to Syl about this. After all, it was Sylvester's cooperation that Seraphim truly desired. Ruki as well. There was a limit to what aid a mere duke's daughter could offer them.

Is the cardinal even in his right mind, using such a high position in the church for evil?

His actions blurred the lines. When he was committing such atrocities, who was the real criminal—him or the syndicate? It was like a real-life parable about the dangers of power. Depending on who wielded it, such authority could be exercised to terrifying ends.

"I understand now why you cautioned me not to get involved," Claudia said.

"It's true that I wanted to protect you, but I realized I was off base when last we spoke. I regretted afterward how harshly I'd spoken to you."

She shook her head. “It’s quite all right. You had your reasons for it, didn’t you? I’m ashamed I didn’t give more thought to what might be going through your head. I’m sorry. I’ve wanted to apologize to you all this time.”

“I’ve felt the same. I’m sorry, Dia.” He gently stroked her head.

All the tension fled her body. Claudia closed her eyes, wanting to enjoy his familiar warmth. She knew it wasn’t good to let him coddle her too much, but surely she could be forgiven for it this time after all they’d been through.

“I let my fears overrule my logic and got carried away.” After a brief pause, he began to explain to her why he’d been so much less understanding than usual. “Before we departed from Harland, Prince Seraphim warned me about how dangerous the cardinal is.”

Sylvester hadn’t merely taken Seraphim at his word. It was fortuitous timing that Claudia thereafter informed him of her plans to visit her newly acquired firm in Arakaner. He couldn’t sit still after hearing the cardinal was visiting Arakaner as well. That was why he had gone to such lengths to accompany her. While enjoying their trip, he’d been gathering information—and after he heard Claudia’s impressions, his suspicions grew.

“The church’s influence is staggering, far overshadowing Harland’s own. I wasn’t confident I could protect you if the situation played out unfavorably,” said Sylvester.

A person’s true faith was hidden to all. No matter how vigilant Sylvester was, he didn’t have the power to peer inside a person’s heart. There was no telling who might be a blind zealot loyal to the cardinal, which was why Sylvester didn’t want Claudia getting involved with Nigel.

“In retrospect, I realize my mistake. I was asking the impossible of you,” said Sylvester. By that he meant there was no purpose in trying to control what she did, though it wasn’t something he fully appreciated until Tristan had pointed out as much to him. Tristan had also told him to have more faith in himself and the people around him. That had helped him see the light. “The way I handled it

was wrong. The correct response was to ensure you would be protected even if you drew the wrong attention.”

“You spoke out of love for me. I understand that. In fact, I understand painfully well how you feel.” She had made the same mistake in trying to keep Helen away from danger, even though that wasn’t what Helen wanted.

“Besides, you’ve always protected me, haven’t you?”

Ruki’s vague remarks had made her realize as much. He’d known better than she did about how watchful Sylvester had been, ensuring her safety. The two had obviously had a run-in at some point, unbeknownst to her.

Sylvester admitted, “I had Shadows assigned to you during our trip. That’s how I knew you’d encountered Dragoon’s leader today on your way to your firm and that you met with the cardinal as well.”

“Were you informed about the details of my conversation with the cardinal?”

He shook his head. “The Shadows didn’t get the exact details of your discussion with him, though I believe it was some sort of business proposal?”

“Yes, and actually, it’s something I’d like to discuss with you.” Claudia went on to mention Seraphim and Ruki’s request to join them.

This time, Sylvester did not dismiss her involvement or tell her to stay out of it. Instead, he simply said, “I would be happy to.”

It was a relief hearing his voice, hearing him say the words she’d hoped for. But when she opened her mouth to continue talking, he held up a hand.

“But it’s late,” said Sylvester. “Can we save the discussions for tomorrow morning? You haven’t even had dinner yet, have you?”

“I haven’t, no. You’re right to suggest we wait. I was just so elated seeing you that I got carried away.”

“I feel the same. Let’s have dinner carried up to the room.”

Sylvester’s room had a perfect view of the ocean, not that they could fully enjoy it. The night blanketed everything. But if Claudia aimed her gaze a little

higher, there was glimmering starlight. They decided to have their meals out on the veranda to better appreciate it.

“The view of the stars is better in the winter, but it’s still a breathtaking sight in summer,” said Sylvester.

“Magnificent, truly, though I think I would enjoy any scenery as long as you’re with me.”

His hand stretched across the table, capturing hers, their fingers threading together. “You said it before I had the chance. With you by my side, I could find enjoyment in anything. Don’t ever leave me, please.”

Claudia sucked in a breath. He had spoken the words so casually, but they filled her with deep affection. Heat built behind her eyes. She nodded vigorously, hoping it might express a fraction of her feelings.

“I won’t,” she said. “I’ll be with you forever.”

They had only been apart for a day at most, but it was enough for them to experience intense loneliness and longing for one another.

“It feels like I haven’t seen your face for days,” Sylvester reflected with a sad shake of his head. “I would like you to stay with me tonight.”

“But I—”

“I swear I won’t compromise your chastity.”

Claudia had been strict on both of them to maintain her image as the perfect lady. She had come this far; she couldn’t bend her principles now. Fortunately, Sylvester understood. If he was asking her anyway, and with the promise of respecting those principles, then she saw no reason not to be true to her own desires. Like Sylvester, she didn’t want them to be apart either—not for a moment longer than absolutely necessary.

When she agreed to his request, his lips pulled into the most heartwarming smile. He was beautiful. Enchanting, even. No, it went beyond that. If that were the extent of his appeal, she would have no trouble retaining her reason.

Sylvester had an irresistible sexual appeal, made even more powerful by the fact that no one else had ever seen this side of him: eyes brimming with desire, cheeks flushed, fingertips hot as fire caressing hers. These were parts of him only she could enjoy.

The atmosphere between them was so charged that her mind froze. They leaned in, as if magnetically drawn to one another. She could feel his breath on her lips. All she had to do was close her eyes.

Despite the sizzling tension between them, there was a line they absolutely couldn't cross. Claudia refused to budge on that. And so, to that end, she insisted on having some alone time to bathe herself. It pained her to be apart from Sylvester for even a moment, that much was true, but hygiene was nonnegotiable. Sylvester was on the same page, and they separated so they could both clean up.

"Lady Claudia, are you all right?" Helen asked.

Now that Claudia had changed into her bedclothes, her face had grown stiff. Even she was conscious of it. "I'm not the least bit all right."

Come now, you're a former courtesan! Show some backbone. I know you have it in you! Yet for as much as she inwardly chided herself, she was so nervous that she feared her head might explode.

"You could always cancel if you'd rather not—"

"I want to be with him as much as he wants to be with me," Claudia insisted.

She knew Helen was right. There was no reason for her to throw caution to the wind, potentially endangering her chastity. At the same time, she knew they both would be sorely disappointed if she went back on her word. *And I would regret it if I told him no now.*

Claudia was the type who preferred to regret doing something rather than regret not doing it. *Oh, no, but we can't actually do it. Goodness, what am I*

thinking?

Unfortunately, her determination to go through with her decision didn't soothe her nerves at all.

Helen planted her hands on Claudia's shoulders. "If the need arises, crush his nether region in your fist."

"That's...incredibly grisly advice."

"Your body is much too important." Under her breath, Helen added, "If only I had known it would come to this, we could have prepared a chastity belt for him."

Claudia grimaced. *How in the world does she know about such things when she's not a courtesan in this lifetime?*

A chastity belt, as the name implied, was a device equipped to one's nether region that made it impossible to have sex. There were versions made for both men and women. Most came with a lock and key. They were not commonly used; the general population probably didn't even know they existed.

I suppose I could see how she'd come to know of it. Men and women are equally curious about such things. It would make sense if Helen had a friend who was particularly experienced when it came to sex, or if she knew a wife who feared her husband might be cheating on her. That could explain how she'd become aware of the devices.

Regardless, it wouldn't be normal for a duke's daughter like Claudia to be in possession of such knowledge. She chose not to react to it. But Helen's commentary relieved some of Claudia's nervousness.

How odd. I would never have expected something so inconsequential would help me relax.

When Claudia was finally at ease enough to smile again, she made her way to Sylvester's quarters.

There was something different about the room when she slipped through his door, which was strange since she'd been there just earlier. Maybe it was the reduced light. Or maybe it was Sylvester was sitting comfortably on the sofa in loungewear when she entered. She couldn't be sure.

Her gaze traveled from her beloved to the table beside the sofa, where a bottle of spirits sat. An aristocratic lady like herself was considered an adult as soon as she made her societal debut. She was well within her right to have alcohol if she so chose.

But Claudia decided she didn't need it. Sylvester's magnetism was more than enough to make her feel tipsy. His hair was still damp from his bath, which gave him even more appeal. The heat of the water had left his skin flushed too. She couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Care for a drink?" Sylvester asked.

"I'll pass on that."

"Wise. I considered having one, but it would dull my reasoning."

Sylvester made a good point. Claudia couldn't risk muddling her judgment, even if she was tense enough to crave the relaxation alcohol could provide.

"Are you nervous too, Syl?"

"Wouldn't it be stranger if I wasn't? I can't tell you how many times I wanted to run out to the veranda and scream."

While they had agreed to stay in his quarters for the night before they parted earlier, Sylvester confessed he wished they had chosen her room instead. It was too late for that now.

"I can't believe I made you walk through the halls," he said.

Claudia blinked at him. "It wasn't a far walk. My room is just beside yours. It wasn't as if I had to go outside." It hadn't taken more than a dozen or so seconds for her to reach it.

"I don't know what I was thinking, letting you walk around in your

sleepwear."

"Please don't beat yourself up over it. As you can see, I made sure to wear something over it." With a dressing gown over top, she was still perfectly presentable in front of company. Not that she would have any; there were no other guests staying on this floor save for them.

The only people in the corridors were her maids and bodyguards. Sylvester was normally never bothered by them; to him, they were nothing more than air. But tonight was different.

He captured her by the hand and drew her closer. Since he didn't leave his seat, she was forced to peer down at him. Sylvester wrapped his arms around her waist. His golden eyes peeked up past the swell of her breasts to her face.

"Will you grant me the privilege of removing your dressing gown?"

Claudia's breath caught in her throat. His voice was entreating, which was a new experience; he'd never sounded like this before. Blood rushed to her cheeks.

That's not fair, she thought.

Faced with that boyish, pleading look, who could possibly refuse him? Oh, she knew he had the body of a grown man—she was under no illusions there—but he was being too adorable to resist.

He looks thinner when he's fully clothed. Maybe it was because his loungewear was made of softer, sleeker fabric, but it emphasized the lines of his body. His height was probably what made him seem so lithe. But when she ran a hand over him, she realized how much muscle was hidden beneath his clothes. It was shocking.

Claudia's brain wasn't working anymore. "Cute" was the only word she could come up with to describe him. *I mustn't be fooled by the adorable way he's staring up at me!*

She tried to talk herself out of indulging him, but she couldn't bring herself to

do so. Acquiescing, she finally nodded.

His fingers glided from her waist up her back. They felt anything but innocent and shy. Sylvester lifted himself off the sofa as his hands came to rest at her shoulders. He hooked his fingers in the fabric of her dressing gown, grazing her shoulder blades. There shouldn't have been anything terribly sensuous about it, but she felt heat building in her core.

It didn't help that it was a light, flimsy thing only used in summer. She could feel the warmth of his fingers straight through it, and he was so agonizingly slow and intentional with them.

Claudia's vision wavered. She found herself looking anywhere but directly at Sylvester, too embarrassed to meet his gaze. She didn't want him to know how this was making her feel. Her heart drummed in her ears.

I'm way too sensitive to his touch.

Beads of sweat dotted her brow. The temperatures fell off at night in Arakaner, so she couldn't use the heat as an excuse for her perspiration. His hands were nowhere near her chest or anywhere else suggestive, but her pulse raced. Her whole body became feverishly hot. If she wasn't careful, she thought she might even moan.

Chapter 19:

The Crown Prince Suffers from Uncontainable Passion

SYLVESTER WAS UTTERLY ELATED at Claudia's willingness to humor his request. At the same time, he was nearly driven mad by his utter inability to give her proper consideration.

I'm an incurable idiot!

He could scarcely believe his own lack of foresight in allowing her to walk the halls dressed in her evening attire. She might have had a handful of maids to protect her on her way here, but the fact that they were also women did little to ease his concern. Claudia's appeal was universal; anyone could be affected, same sex or no.

Anxiety and anticipation for the night swirled in his chest. It was a tidal wave of emotion he had never experienced before. His thoughts tangled, impossible to string together. He hardly needed all this tripping him up. Sylvester was already prone to mistakes when it came to their relationship, as his history had proven. The most recent faux pas was only a day old.

What if I perform terribly and she hates me for it? He shook his head at the thought. *No, no. We're not going to take it all the way.*

Nor would they be able to do much of anything. Sylvester wasn't confident he could stop himself if they started. He planned to keep things chaste, to simply spend time in her company. They would sleep in the same bed together, but that was it.

I should be fine as long as I don't let my hands wander. Losing self-control would be the surest way to disappoint her. He couldn't allow himself to forget the importance of keeping his promises. Even if he couldn't hide his desire for her, he had absolutely no intention of ruining something she valued.

The bath had done nothing to settle the simmering heat of his desire.

Sylvester grabbed a bottle of alcohol. It was the only thing that might ease his nerves. *But wait*, he told himself. *I can't allow myself to lose reason*. And that was precisely what alcohol would do to him. Sylvester was no lightweight, but all the same, it was best to avoid impairing his judgment.

He glared at the bottle of liquor as if it had somehow personally offended him. Were the bottle a person, it probably wouldn't have appreciated his misplaced blame.

Shortly afterward, one of the servants announced Claudia's arrival. Sylvester hesitated. At first, he thought he should stand to welcome her—throw his arms wide and thank her for coming. But it wasn't as if he had sent her a formal invitation, and this wasn't a party. It was a bit too exaggerated to greet her like that, especially when he was in his loungewear.

I haven't a clue how to welcome her!

Sylvester couldn't keep her waiting outside his room any longer than he already had. He gave up and remained lounging on the sofa as she entered.

I hope this doesn't make me seem too arrogant.

Some might argue he was entitled to a little arrogance. Sylvester ranked second only to his father the king, putting him at the top of the societal hierarchy. That was no reason to act high-handed in front of his beloved, though. He wasn't the type to desire an obedient partner who heeded his every word. Claudia wouldn't be pleased with that sort of relationship either.

Anxiety swirled inside him. Would he make a negative impression by sitting when she entered? For better or worse, the worry didn't linger in his mind for long. He was bewitched the moment Claudia stepped into the room.

Her hair still hadn't dried completely. In its damp state, it wasn't as voluminous as he was accustomed to seeing. Few people ever got to see her like this, straight out of the bath. Her moist skin was even more captivating under the dimmed lights. Her blue eyes were dewy, shining as beautifully as azure gems. He loved the way his reflection looked in them. Most of all, he

loved that she was looking at him and no one else.

The reason he felt so much more restless was likely because they were both in their sleepwear. Claudia was always dignified and inscrutable when in her formal dress. One would never imagine she would look so adorable and innocent in her nightclothes, but she did. Desire washed over him—he wanted to carry her to bed and pin her beneath him.

But before he could get too swept up in the emotion, his stomach sank with regret.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, letting you walk around in your sleepwear,” he said.

They should have stayed in her room. He should have been the one to make the trip. For as much as he wanted to cradle his head in his hands, frustrated with his own misjudgment, Sylvester couldn’t bring himself to peel his gaze away from her. Before he even realized what he was doing, his hands were reaching for her. Her body heat traveled through his fingertips, like a flame that threatened to sear straight through the binding threads of reason. It was a pure miracle he managed to withstand it.

“Will you grant me the privilege of removing your dressing gown?” His own voice surprised him, sounding childlike and wheedling. Where had it even come from? As pathetic as he felt, he wasn’t about to take back his request.

All Sylvester could do was wait on tenterhooks for her reply.

There was something erotic about peering up at her past the swell of her breasts. A chill crawled down the nape of his neck. He almost couldn’t believe she was allowing him to do something so intimate. It was proof that she loved him dearly, which sent another surge of emotion through him.

A light dusting of pink colored her cheeks as she nodded at him. The moment he had her permission, Sylvester couldn’t wait to act. He treated her like a porcelain doll, his fingers gentle and cautious as they glided across her body, gliding up from her waist to her back.

I must be careful not to frighten her, Sylvester told himself. He knew women's bodies were much different than men's. He wasn't quite as muscular and imposing as Virgil, but he was still taller and more physically powerful than Claudia. If he let his excitement take hold, he might intimidate her.

Sylvester gingerly lifted himself to his feet. His hands trembled as they slid to her delicate shoulders. It was strange that he was so nervous. He should have been used to low necklines and the skin they revealed, but there was something more vulnerable about nightclothes than a formal gown.

Claudia's shoulders were so slight, they fit perfectly in the palms of his cupped hands. There was a small tremor beneath her supple skin, reminding him that he needed to be even gentler with her. But then, as soon as he glimpsed the deepening color in her cheeks, desire stirred even stronger and more insistent within him.

In the split second he helped her shrug off her dressing gown and let it puddle on the floor, he caught a titillating glimpse of her neck, pale and inviting. The image refused to leave his mind.

Sylvester was hit with the impulse to pepper kisses all over her body. He restrained himself, taking her by the hand and guiding her to his bed. Claudia followed obediently. She was quiet the whole time, never putting up any resistance. Heat built behind his eyes. His deep affection for her was impossible to describe.

How should I put it into words?

Sylvester didn't know. He just found her profoundly endearing. He loved her with every fiber of his being, to the point of insanity. His emotions were a tempest raging inside him, far beyond the scope of any adjective in his lexicon.

I can't allow myself to lose control. He would hurt her if he didn't rein it in. Careful not to be too obvious, he took several deep breaths to calm himself.

Sylvester had extensively studied how best to treat one's beloved. The subject had preoccupied his mind so much that he'd experienced several sleepless

nights because of it. Any textbook he consulted suggested the same basic concept: composure. If he was too caught up in himself, he'd be unable to gauge her reactions.

A man should watch for even the most minute reactions during foreplay to avoid anything a woman dislikes and bring pleasure where she is—wait. Calm down.

His thoughts had gotten carried away. So too had his body, it seemed. When had they arrived at his bed? Sylvester couldn't quite recall. He'd been too busy reciting the literature to himself, and the next thing he knew, Claudia was pinned underneath him.

Sylvester panicked.

Judging by their posture, he'd grabbed her by the waist before pushing her down. And after he'd sworn to himself he would keep physical contact to a minimum!

Sylvester almost wanted to praise himself for not getting completely lost in his desire, but he hadn't the headspace for such optimism. Not when her misty eyes were staring up at him with such passion.

His fingers wandered first to her flushed cheek, then to the protruding outline of her plush lips. She let out a muffled moan, her mouth still closed. Raven-black locks of hair fanned out across the bed beneath her. Her breasts rose and fell with the rhythm of her breathing.

Everywhere he touched was so soft and inviting. His mind went blank. No matter where he looked, there was something to tempt him, awakening the impulses within. All heat and blood in his body had raced to his lower half, leaving him almost dizzy.

Composure was impossible.

And yet, despite the odds stacked against him, he gritted his teeth and swallowed his lust. Sylvester couldn't completely seal away his desperation for

her, though. His arms wound around her, pulling her flush against him.

“I love you, Dia.”

“And I love you, Syl.”

Her dainty hand brushed across his cheek, a hand so different from his own. She was stroking his face as if to console him. Again, heat pooled behind his eyes.

“I love you more than words can ever convey,” Sylvester told her earnestly.

Claudia returned the sentiment with a smile.

Unable to contain his emotions, he leaned closer, bringing their lips together again and again. Each time, he caught her bottom lip between his and briefly sucked on it. Her shoulders jumped with surprise. Sylvester wanted to worship every inch of her body.

“Syl, we can’t,” she said, breathless from their prolonged kisses.

His own breathing had probably grown uneven for the same reason. Her lips had become swollen and red, the color as vivid as if she’d applied lipstick. But his saliva had applied a sensuous sheen to them, which culminated in the hue of a ripe, red apple.

Tempted as he was to continue, he instead sprinkled kisses across the other parts of her face. He loved everything about her, even the way he could see her veins where her skin was thinnest. There was even a small mole he’d never discovered before, and it sent his heart fluttering.

“Dia, my Dia...”

He called her name in lieu of professing his love again, planting kisses on her as he did so. She moaned beneath him, happily soaking up his displays of affection, which in turn brought him immeasurable joy. Sylvester lost himself in it—and that was his mistake.

“Dia?”

Her reactions became increasingly subdued.

Anxiety sprouted within him. Claudia wasn't answering when he called her name. His heart thudded unevenly in his chest. He feared it might stop entirely as he hauled himself up to get a better look at Claudia's face. And when he did, all tension instantly vanished from his body.

"Zzz..."

She was fast asleep.

After everything that happened yesterday, combined with how busy she had been looking after her firm and receiving the cardinal when he popped in for a surprise visit—to say nothing of all the anxiety that brought with it—the events must have taken their toll on her.

Apparently, Sylvester still had more reason in him than he gave himself credit for. He threw his head back, staring up at the ceiling. He tried to be analytical about the situation as he struggled to accept it.

"Dia isn't at fault," he decided immediately.

That was an inarguable fact. Though, he reflected, he was at fault for being too monotonous with his overtures.

"I'll just go to sleep too."

Better to resign himself to unconsciousness. Stewing on the situation any longer wouldn't be healthy. Yet he very much doubted he would be able to sleep at all.

Sylvester flopped down beside Claudia. It was worth a try, at least. But he made a mistake facing her. The suppleness of her skin and the voluptuousness of her figure was pure poison for his resolve.



Unable to quell the growing desire within him—and with no outlet for it—Sylvester retired instead to the sofa. He thought maybe he could distract himself with paperwork, if nothing else, but he couldn't bring himself to pick up a single page. His mind wasn't in the right place for work.

Thus, with no options at all, he spent the night restless and miserable until morning came.

Chapter 20:

The Villainess Receives a Declaration from the Crown Prince

CLAUDIA AWOKE feeling refreshed. Where she might normally doze off again, she managed to immediately rise from bed. Her body was light, free of all the built-up fatigue.

But something was different. For starters, Helen was normally waiting at her bedside in the mornings.

Wait, where am I?!

As soon as she realized she wasn't in her room, the events of last night came flooding back.

Oh no! I can't believe I fell asleep on him!

The two had moved to the bed at Sylvester's behest. After he pushed her onto it, she'd been all nerves and embarrassment. His breath—hot, moist, and erratic—had caressed her skin. Sylvester's kisses were impatient, but his fingers had been gentle. Their lips met so many times that she'd struggled to breathe by the end.

The passion of that moment washed over her anew, just as vivid as last night. Claudia clapped her hands over her cheeks.

I remember the passion, the urgency, and most of all, how badly I craved more. The stimulation had been blissfully pleasant, though she found herself thinking it wasn't quite enough—that she wanted *more*.

Sylvester's body, chiseled and muscular, had pinned her in place, but she hadn't felt uncomfortable about it at all. In fact, it was reassuring. She'd felt protected.

But falling asleep at such a moment? Unthinkable!

Claudia scolded herself inwardly. How could she call herself a (former)

courtesan after such a slipup?

As if things weren't bad enough, there was no sign that Sylvester had slept beside her. His quarters had a guest bedroom. Perhaps he had fallen asleep there.

She scanned her surroundings. The buildup of heat in her body cooled instantly. All the blood drained from her face.

"Oh, so you're awake now?" Sylvester was perched on the same sofa as last night, when she'd first entered his room. The difference now being the substantial dark circles beneath his eyes.

"Syl, I'm so sorry!" Claudia felt terrible for making him suffer a sleepless night when he was surely as fatigued as she'd been. She could only imagine how he felt too, after she'd fallen asleep on him.

Sylvester shook his head, his silver hair swishing across his forehead. "It's fine," he said in a thin voice. "If you feel rejuvenated, that's all that matters."

"Have you been awake this whole time?"

"I tried to fall asleep, but I couldn't. You don't have to worry, though. I'm accustomed to all-nighters." He lifted himself from the sofa and shuffled toward her, then plunked himself on the bed. His hand reached through the air to her disheveled hair. There was something so soothing about his strokes that she nearly let her eyes flutter shut again.

"Seeing you sleep peacefully and watching you wake this morning has done wonders for me."

"T-truly?"

"I won't let you sleep at all on our first night together as husband and wife."

"Syl!?" she gasped.

"I will make love to you all night and all day."

"Syl, um..."

“And if you aren’t too sore, we will continue even after that. I will shower you with my affections for days on end. I’ll be sure to finish all my work in advance so no one can interrupt us.” As if that weren’t enough, he added that he’d dump any emergency work on his father to handle in the meantime.

Claudia grew flustered. Those were dark promises indeed. And for as much as he claimed it hadn’t affected him, the all-nighter had clearly done a number on the man.

“Syl! Don’t you think you should get some sleep? Right now?”

“You want me to fall asleep without you?”

“I promise to stay at your side until you’re asleep!” Claudia assured him. “I’ll even sing you a lullaby!”

“Will you? Then I assume you won’t mind being a body pillow for me.”

“Eep!” She squeaked as he captured her in his arms and flopped onto the bed. There was a noisy creak as they bounced against the springs. No sooner did they settle back down than she heard slow, rhythmic breaths in her ear. Sylvester had already fallen asleep.

As I suspected, he must’ve been really fatigued. What irks me most is that I only added to his troubles.

Guilt hung over her like a dark cloud. They couldn’t engage in a full sexual encounter, given her intent to maintain her chastity, but she knew of other ways to pleasure men while avoiding that. If she’d used one of those techniques on him last night, he might have been able to sleep normally.

Though I suppose one time wouldn’t have been enough for him. She recalled his promise to not let her rest day or night after they married. That proved he planned to have relations with her multiple times as soon as they were able.

Still caged inside his arms, Claudia took the opportunity to study his face. *Now that I think about it, this is the first time I’ve ever seen him sleeping.* There were occasions during their encounters when he’d dozed a bit, but that was

different. He was dead to the world right now, left completely vulnerable.

Maybe it was only because he was so exhausted, but she also knew he wouldn't allow her to see him like this if he didn't trust her implicitly. This was proof their relationship was different, special. It warmed her heart.

Her eyes landed on the bags beneath his eyes. It made her chest ache to know she was responsible, but she dismissed it. She was too preoccupied appreciating his face. Even with his eyes closed, he was still beautiful.

Sylvester awoke just before noon. He and Claudia took their lunch together. Any awkwardness that had existed before was gone after they dressed for the day. They were back to their usual selves, though the fact that they'd spent the night together remained—even if Claudia had spent it asleep while Sylvester had been wide awake. The only slight difference was a romantic air that seemed to stick to them like syrup.

Am I the only one who finds it a bit embarrassing? Claudia snuck a glance at him. He seemed as calm as ever on the surface. But when their gazes clashed, his normally cold golden eyes thawed. His expression turned sensuous, and her cheeks flamed. Their relationship had become special somehow, and they were both intensely aware of it.

Too flustered to maintain eye contact, Claudia dropped her gaze to her lap, where she was wringing her hands. Part of her wanted to bask in the sugary-sweet atmosphere between them, but there were more important matters.

“About the cardinal...” she began.

“Yes, you wanted to discuss the contract between him and your firm. If it's explicitly between your firm and the church, I doubt there's any issue with it—but something strikes me as suspicious.”

“So you also suspect he's scheming,” Claudia surmised.

Instead of answering her implied question, he asked, “What do you plan to

do?"

"I was hoping to find some way to involve Arakaner in our contract."

As Nigel himself had stated, all parties stood to benefit from this arrangement. He had insisted that Arakaner would publicly oppose it, but she was doubtful. More like, they wouldn't want to work personally with the cardinal. They had nothing against the church as a whole. Seraphim had made it public that he bore no ill will toward monotheism. If Arakaner and the church made some concessions, it was perfectly possible they could work together.

"I believe it's not the church's desire to go through with this but rather the cardinal's alone," said Claudia.

Nigel essentially said he wanted to keep her firmly in the dark about the details, that the church would take full responsibility for all costs and logistics. The cardinal had severely misjudged her if he thought she would accept such an arrangement without question. It didn't matter that he was only borrowing her firm's name; if her company was involved, then she was responsible for whatever happened.

Assuming she couldn't find a way to bring Arakaner into it, then she at least wanted an official contract stipulating her right to conduct inspections. He wouldn't be able to plan anything too nefarious so long as she had the opportunity to intervene.

"Things would be easier for us if we let Dragoon take control of the harbor," Sylvester said thoughtfully.

They knew Nigel intended to put the harbor under Dragoon's domain thanks to the information Seraphim and Ruki had shared with them. His aim was most likely to make the harbor their main base as they expanded their dominion into Arakaner. If he had any other motives, the syndicate wasn't aware of them. Nigel was a cautious man. He didn't want his plans leaked, so he avoided offering Dragoon any more information than was necessary.

"Do you think Prince Seraphim would allow that?"

Sylvester shrugged. “He has connections to Dragoon already. I doubt he minds.” He told her about his run-in with Ruki yesterday. After she rescued Kayla and Sunny and left to visit her firm, Sylvester managed to get his hands on Ruki and interrogate him. “The Shadow I had assigned to you informed me about him. Even they hadn’t been able to see through his disguise as the prince. They were impressed that you could.”

Claudia could hardly fault the Shadow for being unable to distinguish between them. It went beyond a simple disguise; the half-brothers were practically identical. If Claudia hadn’t already seen the two of them separately, she might have remained unaware.

“So you even had one of your Shadows protecting me,” she murmured.

“I wanted to make sure you were as safe as possible, knowing we might make an enemy of the church.”

The Shadow was ultimately a failsafe. Sylvester had kept them a secret from her because he didn’t want to cause her unnecessary anxiety.

“I knew there had to be a link between Prince Seraphim and Dragoon after finding out about Ruki,” Sylvester said. “Not that Prince Seraphim allowed me the opportunity to confront him about it. He brought it up preemptively during our discussions.”

“Did he really?”

“He likely thought it would reflect poorly upon him if he continued to hide it. After that surprise attack on me, he was already at a political disadvantage. It would have only hurt him more if I brought it up first.”

Regardless, at the time of their meeting, Seraphim would have had no reason to believe Sylvester knew about his half-brother or would ever find out about him. He wouldn’t have learned about the incident between Sylvester and Ruki until after their meetings had concluded.

“He probably made the decision to come clean to you because he thought it

was likely to come out later,” Claudia concluded.

“True. It was probably the best way, in his judgment, to mitigate the fallout after the attack on me. A wise call on his part, but it’s no reason for me to go easy on him.”

Through Ruki, Seraphim had strong ties to Dragoon. He benefited indirectly from Harland overlooking some of Dragoon’s actions, deeming the syndicate a necessary evil. And because of this, Seraphim couldn’t take a hard approach against them or Sylvester. He’d managed to lessen the impact of what could have been a political scandal with him at the center, what with the attack on Sylvester in his homeland—but the way Sylvester told it, he’d held the advantage through all of their negotiations.

“The eyewitness account of a criminal isn’t credible enough to use as evidence, but the information they can provide is still useful. It’s time for the curtain to fall on the cardinal.”

If Ruki had heard Sylvester say that, he would’ve been overjoyed. He was getting exactly what he desired; Sylvester was going to act. It spoke volumes about how unscrupulous Nigel was to spur Harland’s crown prince to action so quickly.

I only wish I’d noticed what was happening sooner, Claudia thought. It was an unrealistic expectation, but her heart ached for all the people who had fallen victim to him—for those in the slums who had been taken as hostages and subsequently murdered to serve as an example. Nigel had done it so cleverly, so underhandedly, that the government and king were none the wiser. Only Dragoon knew the true depths of his depravity.

So savage and inhumane.

It didn’t end there. Some in the slums who relied on the monastery for assistance were being ostracized by the monks. Without the monastery to turn to, they were left with nothing and no one. People only ended up in the slums when they had nowhere else to go. They were the most vulnerable in society.

She could only imagine what fate awaited them after they were turned out on the streets. Ruki's anger at the church—at Nigel in particular—was completely justified.

She and Sylvester wouldn't have learned any of these details if not for Ruki's trust in her. Seraphim, too, had only shared what he knew with Sylvester because he'd been backed into a corner.

They had to act promptly. It was now or never.

While she was glad they would be able to save people from further suffering, Claudia couldn't shake the deep remorse she felt over the ones they had failed to protect.

Three days later, Claudia and Sylvester paid a visit to Nigel at his cottage. They had sent a messenger ahead to inform the cardinal that they were coming to discuss business. Claudia fully intended to move forward with their arrangement and sign the contract he provided.

Nigel's cottage sat in a remote location, far from civilization. Most of Arakaner's people didn't have the best impression of the clergy, not with the complex political relationship between their nation and the church. No one attempted to stop the church from handing out food or proselytizing, but that didn't mean they were friendly. Their caution might very well turn to hostility. According to Nigel, it was safer to take up residence out in the forest than in town.

"The road to his cottage is better maintained than the one to that fishing village," Claudia observed.

"The interior of his cottage is the height of luxury from what I hear, even though the place looks rather plain on the outside."

It would be hard to discern at a single glance, but the smoothness of their ride spoke to how diligently the road had been serviced; it was no different from the

stone roads in town. It required substantial hard work to keep a dirt stretch like this so well maintained. That was a privilege few people could enjoy, and fewer still could afford to decorate a remote cottage in a foreign country like a luxury hotel. Only the exterior was made to look inconspicuous and dilapidated.

A knot formed in Sylvester's brow as he muttered to himself, "No different from the Viking era."

Corruption had existed in the church for decades. The most prominent example was how fervently they preached asceticism while filling their pockets at every opportunity.

The clergy partook in trade to maintain their livelihoods. Governments had granted them special tax exemptions for it because, unlike ordinary merchants, they weren't primarily out for profit. Some in the church had taken advantage of those exemptions to get rich. The exemptions had only been granted on the promise that the clergy wouldn't misuse the governments' goodwill, but not all had been true to their word—and Sylvester's ancestors had been victims of the corrupt clergy's greed. It wasn't surprising he would hold some bitterness.

"Coastal monasteries were often the targets of raids in that era," Claudia recalled.

The Vikings seemed barbaric to most people, but they had been nothing short of efficient. They would never attack places that weren't rich enough to make the effort worth it. The church acted as if they were innocent victims, but they were the ones who abandoned their teachings and broke promises with the governments that allied with them. Their misdeeds didn't entirely negate their victimhood, of course. Regardless of circumstances, the Vikings were still thieves who'd committed a great many crimes. But one couldn't ignore the corruption present in the church either. Where Nigel was concerned, his sins went far beyond simple corruption.

One of the lower-ranking clergymen stepped out of the cottage to welcome them the moment their carriage rolled up, apparently having heard their

approach.

The exterior of the cottage fit perfectly with its woodland surroundings. It made sense that it had originally been a logger's cabin. The place was only one story and not very large, at least from what Claudia could tell looking at it head-on.

The clergyman guided them inside to the drawing room, where Nigel awaited them. What had once looked like a warm and welcoming smile now struck Claudia as chilly after having learned the man's true nature.

"I had no idea you would be coming along as well, Your Highness," said Nigel. "What an honor."

"I was so taken by your proposal that I decided to share it with His Highness. I hope you don't mind," Claudia said. "And speaking of, I'd like to take you up on it."

"Thank you! You do a great service to your fellow faithful. Over here is the contract I had prepared for our arrangement."

Claudia glanced over the paperwork. It detailed exactly what the cardinal had promised: that the church would cover all expenses. Nothing was more costly than when it was given freely. She sensed from the outset that the cardinal was up to something.

Originally, she'd hoped to uncover something illicit about the cardinal through the contract, but consulting with Sylvester about the matter had encouraged her to revise the plan.

Claudia signed the contract with a smile on her face.

It was ultimately Nigel who held Dragoon's reins, not the church itself. The chances of it being complicit in this—of Nigel acting on its orders—were slim to none, realistically. The more people who were involved with such a conspiracy, the more likely the truth would become public.

Harland embraced monotheism, but that didn't mean its government or king

trusted the church blindly. Nor did any other government, for that matter. It wasn't for lack of faith; lines needed to be drawn where organizations ruled by the laity were concerned to protect the interests of both sides. Strain was an inevitable part of any relationship, even if neither side intended it. It was a matter of course for the government to gather information and keep a watchful eye on the church.

Hypothetically, if Nigel were acting on orders from the church, then the corruption would be on a grander scale. Too large for Harland not to have caught on by now. Granted, perfection was beyond the limits of human capability. Those guarding the secret could no more keep it under wraps than those trying to discover it could pin down all the details.

Nigel's actions were beyond the pale. He was a criminal. The only way the church could be in on it was if every last member was an insane fanatic.

No. The only way he could have kept this secret for so long was by acting alone, Claudia thought.

A commotion broke out at the front entrance, shattering the peaceful atmosphere. Seraphim burst in with knights at his heel. It was just as Claudia and Sylvester had planned.

"Cardinal Nigel, I regret to inform you that we must take you into custody," said Prince Seraphim.

"Goodness," Nigel said with a look of surprise. "That is troubling to hear." He didn't look the least bit panicked, however. He was probably feeling smug because there was no evidence of his misdeeds.

It was too soon to say whether his confidence was misplaced. The only evidence they had at this point was the testimony from Ruki and the rest of Dragoon. According to them, the reason their organization had expanded so much in recent years was because of Nigel's devious strategizing. He'd used similar tactics elsewhere as he had here in arranging for the local syndicate to launch an attack on Sylvester.

On the outside, it looked as if Dragoon came out on top, having bested the local competition—but in truth, Nigel’s perfectly timed indictments against members of the opposition had helped to weaken them until they couldn’t put up a fight. It was a dangerous game. The government kept constant tabs on Dragoon’s growth. The last thing they wanted was for power to centralize wholly in Dragoon’s hands, which was why, out of caution, Dragoon had set up sister organizations to give the impression they weren’t all under the same leadership.

Nigel had never involved himself directly in any of it, save for the indictments. But even those were made under someone else’s name. He was only responsible for leaking information to the right people to ensure something was done. Nigel perfectly understood how much influence he wielded. He only ever involved himself to the extent that he still had plausible deniability. Even if it was true that he’d taken advantage of his position to use confidential information against people, there was no proof.

Kayla could corroborate the information Dragoon offered about the cardinal. Nigel was like any other man who enjoyed showing off to women. During their intimate moments, he had boasted to her about his actions. He probably thought he was safe in doing so since Dragoon funded the Flower Bed.

That aside, a courtesan’s social status was far too low for anyone to believe her words. People would put no more faith in her word than a criminal’s. While they might not be able to summon her as a witness against him, Claudia knew there was still value in the information Kayla could provide. Most of what Nigel said to her sounded like the haughty ramblings of a braggart at first, but if they matched his statements to the intel Dragoon provided, it painted a bigger picture.

At one point, he had invited Kayla out to visit a lake, bragging about how skilled he was at hiding his own tracks and about how much wealth he’d accumulated. He also took her to other places, such as a meadow, claiming she couldn’t have true appreciation for the sights unless she saw them herself. The

characteristics of the places they visited together matched the information Dragoon had about Nigel's movements.

All those places must've been somehow relevant to his crimes.

If all he wanted was to show her the beauty of the sights, then he could simply have invited her sans all the bragging. What he'd really wanted to show Kayla was not the natural views but the extent of his own authority over the places he went.

Do all those in positions of power have the same inclinations?

Claudia had dealt with similarly prideful clients during her time as a courtesan. Those in power (aristocrats) who most wished to boast would always take her out to see their lands, places steeped in family history. Wealthy merchants would take her to view their properties, such as theaters and the like. In the case of the clergymen, the first place to come to mind was the grand cathedral in the capital.

Strangely, all the places Nigel spoke of had abandoned monasteries or church halls. It reminded her of his cottage. Plain on the outside and obviously hiding something else within.

Sylvester was of the same mind. He ordered his fastest riders out to the locations mentioned. As a result, they discovered precisely how the cardinal had gained his wealth.

Troops were being deployed to the slums and suburbs of the capital to gather evidence of the cardinal's crimes.

For the past three days, Sylvester and Claudia had worked tirelessly. The whole operation needed to be a coordinated effort to ensure that Nigel didn't catch wind of what was happening. They needed to arrest him promptly once it began to make sure he couldn't orchestrate the destruction of evidence.

Any mistake would cost them dearly. The situation required speed and discretion. If they let their guard down for even a second, they would afford

him a chance to escape. Their best move would be to match the cardinal's arrest to the launch of the investigation in Harland.

Nigel glanced at Sylvester, who offered the cardinal an empathetic look. "It's truly unfortunate that we must do this, but you're suspected of criminal action. We must arrest you. Rest at ease, for we will have you transferred to Harland promptly."

It would be far more comfortable for him to be detained by a country faithful to the church's teachings than one that wasn't. Treating the cardinal with such kindness was a ploy to keep his guard down. But since suspicion had already been cast on him, any further action would have to be negotiated directly with the church—not with Nigel. Harland would hold the church responsible for his many transgressions.

"I will do my utmost to see you are treated appropriately, so please cooperate," Sylvester said.

"But of course," said Nigel, betraying no concern for his well-being. "If I am suspected of wrongdoing, all the more reason to do as is asked of me to prove my innocence." His lips bent in a languid smile despite his precarious position.

Does he think himself immune to legal repercussions because he's a cardinal? That was preposterous. Once his crimes were uncovered, he would have to face judgment. Some political consideration might be afforded to him, but there would still be steep consequences.

"I apologize for taking up your time like this, Your Eminence. This is surely some sort of mistake," Seraphim said diplomatically as his knights circled around the cardinal.

There was something unnerving to Claudia about the cardinal's obvious lack of concern.

Chapter 21:

The Villainess Discovers That Even with Disappointment Comes Hope

UPON THEIR RETURN to Harland, Claudia made her way to the Lindsay family estate. Sylvester arrived later to report the results of their investigation. She invited him to her private quarters and personally prepared a pot of tea.

I can only hope this helps relieve his fatigue a little. Claudia imbued her pours with that fervent wish.

Sylvester's face betrayed nothing, but she was sure he was exhausted. The church would not sit idly when one of their cardinals had been arrested. She'd heard about the uproar at the castle.

Unbeknownst to most, Sylvester had secretly considered sending assassins after the cardinal after he tried to involve Claudia in his nefarious schemes. It was hardly an advisable course of action. If people began to suspect his involvement—that he hadn't gone through the proper legal channels to mete out judgment—then it could threaten his position. Judging a clergyman for crimes was an incredibly delicate affair. One had to approach it in a manner agreeable to the public.

After a long beat of enjoying the aroma of his tea, Sylvester finally brought it to his lips and took a sip. His muscles loosened and his shoulders relaxed. It was like her wish had come true.

"You are excellent at brewing tea," he said.

"I'm glad it was to your taste."

"I am eager to earn the privilege of sampling it daily." He let out a little sigh, which seemed to reveal the exhaustion he had expertly kept hidden.

The investigation may be over at this point, but there is still much to deal with in the aftermath.

If it would provide him even a small measure of comfort, she too wished she could brew tea for him daily. Alas, there were bigger topics to discuss, and the moment Sylvester launched into them, the atmosphere in the room suddenly felt oppressive. She could already guess the investigation hadn't gone well before he even opened his mouth. But what he revealed left her flabbergasted; she doubted her own ears.

"I never dreamed there wouldn't be even a single piece of evidence of his involvement," she said, stunned.

The first step of the process was to bring the matter to the authorities' attention. To that end, they had dispatched troops to the slums and the suburbs of the capital where illegal casinos were located. The cardinal had been running them. He had started them in old, deserted monasteries, employing the monks under his command to administer them directly.

That explained why they had been so impossible to find. If a crime syndicate had been responsible, the government might have been able to discover them sooner. No one imagined that the *clergy* of all people were running the show.

"I suspect they gained the knowledge of how to run them from Dragoon," said Sylvester. "How clever."

Congregations wouldn't have tipped off the authorities, even though the people were being guided to more remote locations than their regular church hall. But no one would think to question it when they heard it was for a "special sermon."

"Only those who were particularly strong in their faith were allowed to gamble to ensure no rumors got out," Sylvester added.

It would have raised suspicions if people who didn't normally attend church suddenly had a religious awakening and became regulars. The cardinal had been prudent in that respect.

Claudia said, "I guess being religious doesn't preclude them from enjoying gambling."

"Ironic, isn't it? Especially given the way the church preaches self-restraint. They used man's nature—or more precisely, his weakness—against him."

The expediency with which they had conducted their investigation at least rewarded them one thing: they had managed to apprehend every member of the clergy involved in the cardinal's schemes. All the hostages who had been taken from the slums were released. A vigilance committee was formed and would conduct patrols alongside the local guard to ensure that no unfair suspicion was placed upon innocents.

"All the clergymen we arrested insisted the cardinal wasn't responsible," Sylvester said with a frown. "They claimed they were the ones who betrayed him and his teachings and turned to crime. We interrogated each and every one, but as far as we could tell, it wasn't that they were fanatics gone mad. No, they were terrified of what vengeance they might face from the cardinal if they spoke against him."

"If that's true, wouldn't it ensure their safety to speak out and see that he remains behind bars?" asked Claudia.

"It's possible he has taken their families hostage, like he did with Dragoon."

That was sadly the most plausible explanation. Anyone would keep their lips sealed if it meant their family's safety.

"We can't discount the possibility, certainly," Claudia agreed with a somber nod.

Regardless, their silence meant the cardinal had something to hold over their heads, whether it was hostages or not. Nigel's utter lack of humanity was nauseating.

"It is frustrating," Sylvester said. "I have to concede that the cardinal is cleverer than I gave him credit for, but I *will* hold him as accountable as I can."

They had to make sure the same mistake never happened again.

All the clergymen they had apprehended were directly under Nigel's

command, and the illegal casinos were not limited to the slums and the suburbs of the capital. There were many more sprinkled throughout Dragoon's territory. It was done on such a large scale that Nigel couldn't plead ignorance and hope it would save him from all repercussions.

"He will be transferred back to the church," said Sylvester. "And never again will he be allowed to set foot inside Harland."

"Yes, but he will be free to enter any other kingdom."

The clergy worked across the continent, in many different territories. Claudia didn't see how banishment would punish Nigel when every other country's door would still be open to him. It didn't sit well with her how he'd more or less gotten off scot-free.

Claudia was disheartened.

Sylvester gave her a forced, bitter smile. "I feel the same way you do. I'll make sure all our allies are on the same page on this matter. If we make it internationally known that he is a potentially dangerous individual, which should at least limit the extent to which he's able to scheme and plot."

Realistically, it was rare for anything to end with all parties happy and all loose ends tied up. They had to be grateful for what little they had accomplished; discovering Nigel and his misdeeds was something, at least. As important as ideals were, one had to draw a line and differentiate between what was conceivably possible and what wasn't. This was an especially important skill for those in power.

Claudia acknowledged that, but she still swore to herself she would never let something like this happen again. *And if he ever shows his face to me again, there will be no mercy.*

It irked her that there were so many loopholes for him to escape the punishment he deserved. There was no guarantee he wouldn't get right back to his old tricks after this.

"On the bright side, this should bring Prince Seraphim much relief," she said.

Plus, Ruki and the rest of Dragoon could rest easy knowing their families were safe.

"And," Sylvester added, "the future of your firm is assured."

"Yes, even though Prince Seraphim revealed that his interest in sugar was only a facade." Seraphim's main aim was to reduce the church's power. The desire he'd expressed for access to sugar was only a means to an end.

After their crimes, the clergy and Nigel were labeled as criminals in Harland, but they avoided outwardly condemning the church for what had happened. It wasn't as if the whole institution was responsible. Nevertheless, Harland wasn't about to show deference after being wronged. They had demanded a portion of the rights to the sugar trade from the church. This enabled them to purchase sugarcane seeds directly so they could produce their own sugar and rely less on the church. For their part, the church had agreed to cede the rights with the condition that Harland abide by the market price they set.

It would be pointless for Harland to sell sugarcane seeds to Arakaner if they didn't have the technology to cultivate and process it. That was where the bargain Claudia struck with Nigel came into play. Her firm would recruit people from Arakaner and send them to Harland, where they could learn the skills to harvest sugar. The church would be involved insofar as choosing the candidates and where they would go for their education.

The church couldn't prohibit Harland from imparting knowledge, though. There was no law against it. Even if they decided to draft one now, an international assembly would need to agree before it passed. Naturally, Harland would oppose such a measure, and it wasn't realistic for the church to try to control agricultural education. That was why they had never tried to do so before.

Thanks to Nigel, the church would cover all expenses for the endeavor. They could have dismissed the contract Claudia signed on account of Nigel being

corrupt, but that would have only created a scandal as it was tantamount to admitting he was a criminal.

Claudia would have preferred for them to do just that, but the church chose to honor the contract instead. It would do too much damage to their public image if everyone thought a cardinal responsible for so many nefarious crimes.

In the event that the church couldn't financially cover everything, Arakaner agreed to step up. It only made sense, given that their citizens were involved.

Claudia's firm had earned immense trust from Arakaner and its people for its role in offering such humanitarian aid. Trust was paramount in business. She had received reports detailing how overwhelmed the firm was with a sudden influx of customers.

Besides recruiting people for this education program, we'll need to hire more staff to keep up with demand. Business was booming, but it also meant more work.

Sylvester glanced at her desk, which was covered in piles of documents. He smiled gently at her. "It seems we've both been overwhelmed by our respective duties."

She was about to agree with him when Virgil showed up at the doorway.

"Sorry," he said, "but this is the only opening I had in my schedule to help you with paperwork. It wasn't my intention to interrupt your time with the prince." Virgil moved briskly to her desk to retrieve the stack he'd agreed to help her with, fully intending to leave once he'd done so.

"If you're busy, you needn't push yourself," Claudia called after him.

"It's no trouble, especially for you, Dee. Never hesitate to ask me if you need help."

Sylvester's eyes darkened. "Virgil is helping you with your work?"

"Oh, yes. With his help, I'm somehow managing." She glanced at Virgil as she spoke and added, "Thank you."

His face broke out into a great big smile. “This is nothing. I’m always happy to do what I can for you.”

Virgil left the room in high spirits with his share of the paperwork.

Sylvester glared bitterly after Claudia’s brother. “Virgil, you little snake. You’ve never helped me out when I needed it!”

“Really? He hasn’t?” Claudia asked, lips parting in surprise.

“Ever since I returned to Harland, he has been giving me the brush-off.”

Apparently, Virgil’s help was a special privilege he afforded Claudia because she was his little sister. She was too grateful to him to say anything, so she simply laughed and said nothing else.

Days later, after a parliamentary assembly, a new law was passed with the king’s seal of approval. They had implemented sanctions to restrict the church’s power.

The arrests of so many clergymen had proven that even the church wasn’t above corruption. Demanding that the church cleanse their ranks wasn’t enough. They needed their own measures in place, written into the law, for there was no telling when something similar might happen again if they didn’t. And so, Sylvester took the lead in drafting the bill.

The source of the problem was the authority Harland had afforded its cardinal—namely, granting him the powers of a judicial officer. Originally, the position allowed the cardinal to be an adviser to the judicature and offer his opinion once a criminal had been apprehended and criminal charges were being determined. During the judgment, he was also allowed to advise over the ethics upheld during the investigation.

The latter was the biggest problem, the privilege Nigel had taken special advantage of. He was privy to the full details of ongoing investigations. The very position of cardinal was a symbol of ethics and morality; the investigators had

trusted him too much and offered information they shouldn't have because he was the judicial officer. This intel had allowed him to manipulate the city guard.

It didn't help matters that the cardinal had been allowed to reside in the royal palace, which made it all the easier for him to react to political infighting between aristocrats. He was only able to directly command lower-ranking clergymen, but that hadn't stopped him from making use of the information gathered at the castle for ill ends.

The clergy had testified to using the cardinal's power and influence as a front to accomplish their evil. Thus, Sylvester had moved to reduce said power.

Some believed Nigel to be innocent, but his guilt or lack thereof was irrelevant to the contents of the proposed bill, so it passed without issue. The challenge was that they had to be roundabout in how they accomplished this power reduction, given that Harland hadn't openly condemned the church for the incident with Nigel.

On the surface, they had to make clear they planned to continue honoring their relationship with the church. So they didn't remove or otherwise alter the position of judicial officer. Instead, they established a Legal Affairs Agency over which the judicial officer would preside. This gave the outward appearance of investing more power in the cardinal, but it accomplished their true motive of removing the judicial officer's presence from the royal palace. The Legal Affairs Agency had no real authority. It was mostly paperwork, essentially an administrative office.

Whichever cardinal the church sent Harland in the future, he would not be able to brazenly walk the halls of the castle like the previous one. Nor would he receive information about criminal investigations or domestic matters in real time, as Nigel had.

The cardinal would have less influence in political matters and at the castle, but it would not reduce his responsibility or status as a cardinal, so the church couldn't complain. They would be foolish to do so, for protesting would

essentially mean demanding the government give them more power.

Sylvester's bill created a ripple effect that went beyond Harland, reaching all the way to Bari.

Epilogue

FROM THE OUTSIDE, the building appeared to be a bustling pub. If one took the nearby alleyway and wove around to the back, it gave a decidedly different impression. The noise out front was thunderous, but in the back, silence hung thick. There, a cellar door with a flight of stairs led underground to a brick room used for storage. It was filled with stacks of boxes containing the pub's stock of liquor.

A corridor opened at the back of the cellar, revealing a more spacious underground complex. The lack of sunlight made the air musty. This was the path Claudia had taken, with Helen at her heels. Ruki had assured her that he and the other men had thoroughly cleaned the complex ahead of her arrival. Helen must have disagreed. She couldn't hide her displeasure, taking a retreating step the moment they entered the complex.

"This 'cleaning' does not pass muster. Not even close," Helen declared. "I cannot allow Lady Rose to walk such filthy halls."

Ruki was acting as their guide. He gave a one-shoulder shrug. "Give us a break, wouldja? We did the best we could."

Claudia was there in her Rose disguise—not as an investor as with Flower Bed but to assume the leadership of Dragoon.

Life truly is unpredictable, isn't it? The foremost example of unpredictability she could think of was her sudden reawakening as her fourteen-year-old self, but this was a close second. She never would have imagined herself becoming the boss of a crime syndicate.

They finally reached the largest room inside the complex. At the back was a chair fashioned to look like a throne. It was made of gold and dotted with sparkling rubies.

Claudia pinched the bridge of her nose, fighting off a headache brought on by

the unnecessary opulence. The throne was glaringly out of place in the dank underground.

“You don’t honestly expect me to sit on that, do you?” she asked.

Ruki snickered. “Pretty awesome, ain’t it?”

“The design leaves much to be desired,” said Helen, “but it will do.”

Claudia whipped around to gape at her maid, shocked she would agree. It was difficult to see past the black lace veil of her fascinator, but Claudia could easily picture Helen’s expression being prim and businesslike.

“You will be sitting at the top of this syndicate,” Helen reminded her, as if she didn’t already know. “This level of luxury is necessary.”

Necessary? Is it really? Claudia tried to shoot a questioning look back at Helen. Whether Helen saw or not, she didn’t respond. Claudia suspected the maid was ignoring her, the black lace obscuring Helen’s view of her face notwithstanding.

Claudia had given up doing everything on her own without involving Helen. There was still much she couldn’t tell Helen, but she shared as much as she could and conceded to let the woman assist her. It didn’t seem fair that Helen was betraying her in this matter after all that.

Though she still had her reservations, Claudia took a seat on the gaudy chair. “I’ll bet some aren’t pleased with me becoming the boss,” she said petulantly, huffing a sigh. There was no telling who might be listening to their conversation, so Claudia lowered her voice to match her more androgynous appearance.

Ruki’s face brightened, his lips peeling back in a toothy grin. “I think you’d be surprised.”

Claudia was dumbfounded.

“Don’t forget, Boss Lady, you’re our savior. You’ll see how the guys feel about you soon.”

The members who had filed in while they spoke all dropped to their knees.

Only those part of the capital's central branch were in attendance for this meeting, and even then, it was limited to the core membership. Yet there were still over fifty present. With all of them gathered here, the room suddenly felt cramped.

Some of the men glared at one another when they knocked shoulders, trying to huddle in together, but not one of them glowered at Claudia. These men, hardened criminals themselves, were here as representatives for the sort of brutes Claudia would be leading henceforth—and every last one took a knee without complaint.

"See?" Ruki shot her a smug look. "They're all grateful to you, Boss Lady."

Claudia's mind shifted back to the events that had brought them here. Had she really done anything to warrant such gratitude?

After Sylvester's mass arrest of the clergy, the investigation into their misdeeds extended to Dragoon due to their collusion. The syndicate members were granted a degree of leniency out of consideration for their families being taken hostage, but they weren't completely absolved. A compromise was struck: in exchange for not bringing charges against any individual, they would be divested of some of the power they currently held.

It was unfortunate that no proof could be found of Nigel's direct involvement, but the investigation did uncover connections between Dragoon and sister organizations, which suggested they held much more power than the government previously thought.

The first step was to dismantle the syndicate's chief source of income: the brothels. But if the government didn't step in, then another syndicate would simply take Dragoon's place to run the pleasure houses, and they would simply do so more secretly to avoid legal consequences. Monitoring the sex trade would prove even more challenging if it went underground—which was why the government took a different route.

Harland's administration would henceforth establish government-run

brothels. With the sex trade under their purview, hygiene standards would be implemented, and Dragoon would lose their source of financial support.

During the parliamentary assembly on the matter, there was virtually no pushback. Claudia had done her utmost to lend support for the proposal beforehand. She secured financial backing from her family by arguing it was only ethical to aid fellow women. The revenue from her firm would also be helping fund the endeavor. Other aristocrats were encouraged by her contributions and her speech to offer further financial assistance, giving the government everything they needed to jumpstart the program.

Furthermore, Bezel would be forced to retire, which presented them with a dilemma. If they weakened Dragoon too much, another syndicate would simply rise and take their place. That would render the many long years of allowing Dragoon to exist meaningless.

After intense debate on the matter, parliament decided the new leader of Dragoon would need to be someone under the government's direct influence. Dragoon would continue to exist even without Bezel as its leader. In his place—of the many candidates that were considered—parliament decided on Rose for her connection to the Lindsay household. Claudia had suggested it to Sylvester, who had pulled some strings to make sure she won the spot.

I was sure he would oppose me on this matter.

He had agreed to it on the condition she wouldn't show her face and would take his Shadows with her to ensure her protection. Claudia hadn't been completely honest with him, though. As far as he knew, Rose was a character she had newly come up with. She didn't mention her previous visit to Flower Bed.

Bezel and Ruki had agreed to parliament's decisions. They were happy to oblige as long as their families wouldn't be threatened anymore, though it did mean that Bezel could no longer be a part of Dragoon. Parliament had to make it seem as though Dragoon had been completely disbanded after all, at least to

the public. The narrative would be that Claudia (as Rose) had risen to form a new syndicate.

In the wake of all of this, Claudia thought it only natural that Dragoon's members would revolt—but to her great surprise, they bowed their heads.

Ruki sensed her surprise and seemed to enjoy it immensely. He snickered and explained, "Without you, we'd still be under that bastard's thumb."

It had all started with Rose's visit to Flower Bed. Ruki would still be searching in vain for someone in power to help them if he hadn't found her. Ruki—and by extension, Dragoon—wouldn't have stuck their necks out to deliver the information they had without Claudia. If they slipped and trusted the wrong person, word might get back to the cardinal, and it would be their families suffering the consequences. Likewise, Seraphim wouldn't have confided in Sylvester about his connection to Dragoon if it weren't for Claudia's involvement. And without all the intel between them, Sylvester never would have been able to bring Nigel and his collaborators to justice.

"I'll admit, there woulda been a real uprising if they sent a random person to act as our leader," said Ruki.

The members already knew of Rose and her deeds, which was why they were so quick to accept her. It helped that the courtesans at the brothel—such as Mirage, who'd been born into the slums—vouched for her trustworthiness.

Ruki shifted his gaze to the courtesans in question. Kayla, Mirage, and Marianne had come to watch.

It's an honor to know they believe in me and in my ability as the new leader of the syndicate, Claudia thought.

Claudia had her own concerns, of course. Syndicates were community-based criminal organizations. Dragoon was but one of many out there. If another syndicate encroached on their territory, it would lead to conflict. Claudia wasn't confident she could navigate that, even with her past memories as a courtesan.

It will be fine. I'm not doing this alone, she reminded herself.

Helen was standing right beside her, and there were many others supporting her as well. All the men kneeling and bowing their heads would be her comrades henceforth. Knowing that her sisters—the courtesans—were watching her, Claudia sat straighter, her determination renewed.

Ruki nodded encouragingly. His words echoed more powerfully than before. “None of this woulda happened without you, Boss Lady. The only reason we all get to be part of this new system is ‘cause of you. We might be criminals, but believe me when I say we don’t ever forget a debt.”

The other men in the room nodded in agreement. They treasured family—blood *and* chosen family—above all else. They had little regard for the law, but that was one value they would never compromise on.

Helen stepped forward, leaning in toward Claudia’s ear. “Lady Rose,” she said. “They’re waiting for you to speak.”

Claudia bobbed her head, acknowledging Helen’s words. With her cane in hand, she took to her feet. The gazes of over fifty men were focused on her. She still wasn’t quite accustomed to her new position, but it was a stepping stone toward making her vision a reality—that much she knew for certain. All she could do was find her footing and take the first step forward for the future she sought.

Lanterns bathed the walls in an orange glow. The air had grown hot enough to give her a sheen of sweat, a consequence of having so many people gathered in one place. Strangely, it wasn’t unpleasant. If anything, it lifted her spirits to even greater heights.

Claudia lifted her cane and slammed it down. The noise echoed through the chamber.

“From this moment begins a new era.” Her low voice cut through the silence, reaching only the ears of those present before being swallowed up by the thick walls around them.

No one could see Claudia's face through the black lace veil of her hat, but her presence had the sort of gravity that only someone with great charisma possessed.

Audible gulps sounded among the crowd.

"I can only imagine how much you've all suffered under the cardinal's tyranny. It will be difficult for those of you with deep scars to overcome your trauma. But that's precisely why..." Her blue eyes shone bright. "I will become your hope. Together, we will establish this new era!"

Having a goal would help them be optimistic about the future. This wasn't simply a change in leadership but a paradigm shift for the syndicate. It provided the perfect opportunity for a radical shift in values and perception. Claudia's presence would stir up the winds of change for these people, who had always relied on breaking the law to make their way through life.

"Engrave my words upon your hearts! Your days of subjugation are over! From this moment forward, instead of the cardinal, we will become a necessary cog in the machine of this country."

Dragoon and Claudia would be taking this step forward together. Immediate reformation was impossible, but people were capable of change. Claudia had learned that firsthand; her life as a courtesan had helped change her way of thinking.

All of you will follow my lead as I strive for my version of justice.

While she would lead them, she didn't intend to force her values upon them entirely.

"I will prove that even if you're born into the lowest class of society, you still deserve to hold your head high! Come what may, I will never stop. I will never run away. I will crush any enemy who blocks my path! And I will become a shield for those who most need protecting!"

Never again would she let these men—*her* men—and their families suffer the

indignities Nigel had forced upon them. Nor would she let the weak and vulnerable, who needed aid most, suffer.

“This day marks the founding of a new syndicate: Rose Garden! Never forget that we are in this together! Your family is now my family! And again: from now on, Dragoon has been reborn!”

A gust of wind seemed to whip through the room, which was wholly impossible. There were no windows, but there was no denying what each man in the room had felt: the winds of change, brought by the very woman who stood before them. She spoke with such charisma, such confidence, that they all believed her words were genuine—that change *would* happen.

Fists shot into the air, accompanied by roaring and howling. The booming voices of her men were loud enough to drown out all other sounds.

A banquet followed Claudia’s inauguration. The members of her syndicate spilled out of the main room and into the cellar, everyone merrily guzzling tankards of alcohol. Claudia left Bezel and Ruki to oversee the rest of the celebration. She excused herself, taking Helen along with her.

Or at least, she *tried* to leave.

“Oh, Lady Rose, where are you going?” Kayla said in a singsong voice, catching her before she could escape. Mirage and Marianne quickly joined her.

“The main event hasn’t yet begun,” Mirage purred.

Marianne added, “We’ve been so lonely since you only visited us once and never came back.”

They clung to her on both sides, refusing to let her slip away.

Fortunately, Helen jumped to her rescue. “Ladies, I’m afraid Lady Rose is incredibly busy at the moment!” She peeled the women away and stepped between them and Claudia.

I knew I made a wise choice involving her! And thank goodness too. It would

have been too difficult to fend off the courtesans otherwise, what with there being three of them. Especially when they were all seasoned professionals.

“Oh? You’re going to keep her all to yourself?” said Kayla.

“I am Lady Rose’s maid,” Helen reminded Kayla, lifting her chin triumphantly.

“Aw, darn.” Kayla puffed her cheeks in a pout.

Unfortunately, the part about Claudia being busy was true. She had somewhere else to be. “The brothels will be put under the government’s management, so I will visit Flower Bed soon enough,” she assured them.

“It’s a promise!” Kayla agreed.

Mirage grinned. “I expect you to choose me as your permanent partner.”

“Well, I for one will be polishing my skills so that next time, you won’t so easily out-seduce me, Lady Rose,” Marianne said.



Claudia shifted her gaze uneasily. “I’m not really a client anymore, though.” And to begin with, she had no intention of going to bed with any of them. The courtesans understood that, but it didn’t stop them from being eager to see her again.

Together with Helen, Claudia managed to peel herself away from the circle of boisterous women before clambering up the stairs to the surface.

When they reached the carriage, they were greeted by a man whose long, golden hair glowed beneath the moonlight.

“You’ve been waiting outside for me?” Claudia asked in disbelief.

“I plan to be brief,” Seraphim said. “I’ll be heading back home afterward.”

Meeting with him was the next item on her schedule, in fact. He had sent a sudden message earlier, expressing his desire to see her tonight.

Seraphim had managed to steal away from his official duties in Harland just to meet with her. “I wanted to let you know that the United Kingdom of Arakaner has decided to back you politically,” he said.

It was so sudden that her mind went blank. “Pardon?”

Claudia had earned Arakaner’s trust by using her firm to aid in the humanitarian effort for their country. That alone had been a substantial accomplishment.

“Thanks to you, we have obtained almost everything we wanted,” Seraphim said.

The contract she had signed with the church ensured that they would have access to the education necessary to begin producing sugar themselves, and without having to finance most of it. This in spite of the fact that sugar had only been an excuse to weaken the church’s influence. By exposing the clergy’s corruption, Harland had greatly reduced the church’s power, and Arakaner benefited immensely from all of it.

“I didn’t do it alone,” Claudia said. “In fact, what I contributed is comparatively trivial.”

“You are every bit as modest as people say. Though I will acknowledge that we only managed to successfully corner Cardinal Nigel because of Prince Sylvester’s cooperation.”

Sadly, they hadn’t been able to bring the man to justice for his misdeeds, but Seraphim still seemed pleased to have delivered him a blow, thereby removing him from their immediate vicinity.

“I couldn’t have done anything on my own even though Ruki wished it of me.” A ghost of a smile appeared on Seraphim’s face. “And the person he puts his faith in is not Prince Sylvester but you, Lady Claudia.”

Claudia tilted her head. As far as she understood, Sylvester was the person they’d truly wanted on their side, not her.

He seemed to read her mind. “Oh, to be sure, the more powerful the individual, the better in this case—provided we could rely on them for assistance.”

Seraphim insisted they had only managed to trust Sylvester because of Claudia, and that was only a one-time thing. There was no guarantee he’d come through again in the future. Claudia was different.

“You would never abandon the weak and vulnerable,” said Seraphim. “And that is exactly why Arakaner values you so much.”

Claudia gave him a stern look. “Were I to interpret your words a little more unkindly, it would sound as if you’re saying there’s still some value in using me.”

She recalled her conversation with Sylvester after he invited her to the castle in the wake of Seraphim’s welcome party. He had warned her that Seraphim might approach her in hopes of gaining her support.

Seraphim laughed. “A bit harsh, I must say.”

“Nothing is more costly than when it is given freely,” she reminded him.

“True. You’re absolutely right about that. But you still stand to benefit from this, don’t you?”

“That depends,” she said cautiously. “What would you require of me for your support? I assume that’s what you’re after, isn’t it?”

He grinned at her. It was the same expression he’d worn when she asked him before whether his enemy was the church or Nigel. “Lady Claudia, I simply want a link to you.”

“That is awfully vague.”

“I would prefer you to think of it as having one more place you can turn to for assistance.”

“I will oblige you that, so long as our interests are one and the same,” Claudia allowed.

Seraphim nodded. “I will happily compromise for now. After all, we haven’t been acquainted for very long.”

The implication was that he planned to win her trust, though Claudia wasn’t sure where all his zeal came from.

Side Story:

The Foreign Prince Receives a Swift Kick from His Younger Brother

“Aw, TOO BAD. She turned you down.”

“Listening, were you?”

Seraphim’s half-brother, Ruki, stood by the stairs leading down into the cellar. He was dressed in his usual black attire and sporting a mischievous grin. This was the happiest Seraphim had ever seen him. He was in such good spirits, he looked like he might start humming, and all because he had solidified Claudia as an ally.

Even though Nigel and the threat he posed were long gone, Ruki kept his hood up. It had become his habit after hiding his face for so long. When Seraphim inquired about it once, Ruki told him it was because his handsomeness was an inconvenience. Seraphim hadn’t known how to react. Personally, he’d hoped for Ruki to live without the need to keep his face hidden.

It was good that Ruki appeared when he did because Seraphim had planned to pay him a visit before leaving anyway, but the timing was a bit awkward.

“I’m a little embarrassed you had to see that,” Seraphim admitted.

Ruki gave him a look. “Lady Claudia’s marryin’ Prince Sylvester, ain’t she?”

“Indeed.”

“Don’t think you’re fit for the role of secret paramour.”

Seraphim shrugged. “Is that how it looked to you?”

“Nah, just sayin’.”

As half-brothers with different mothers, they weren’t really twins, no matter how alike they looked. But the way they thought was extremely similar. Seraphim sensed that Ruki felt the same way toward Claudia as he did.

"I think we could put up a better fight against the church with her on our side."

"Yeah, I get that's your ambition. But it ain't like it's personal. You don't actually hate the church, do you?"

"No. They're merely an obstacle to Arakaner's growing power."

"Y'know, Lady Claudia ain't gonna help you out if you're only doin' it for selfish reasons."

"I know that. I'm sure she sees right through me." Claudia was analytical enough to calmly assess the situation. Seraphim knew she wasn't the type to yield easily. "But she's too valuable to give up on."

"I getcha. So what, you gonna take on Prince Sylvester and fight for her? Not a fight I'd wanna pick, if I were you."

"I was hoping we could...resolve it peacefully," Seraphim said haltingly before reflecting on his own foolishness. His mind raced, trying to come up with some other way to make things work.

"Seems to me you've got a habit of takin' the hard road, even after you've accomplished what you set out to do," said Ruki.

He had a point. Seraphim had already gotten everything he wanted, thanks to Sylvester's cooperation in putting the church in line. But his focus had changed to Claudia herself, and if he hoped to gain her assistance against the church, he would need to convince Sylvester.

"Do I seem like a fool to you?" Seraphim asked.

"Ain't nothin' foolish about doin' everything you can to get what you want." He gave Seraphim's shin a light kick. "Give it all you've got."

"So you have no intention of helping me?"

"No way am I gonna make an enemy of Prince Sylvester. He scares me."

Seraphim frowned. "I don't find the idea any more appealing than you do."

Ruki clicked his tongue. “Is there even anything I can do to help?”

“Just knowing you’re in my corner would be encouraging enough.”

“What the hell?” Ruki scoffed. “Well, I’ll think about it as long as there’s somethin’ in it for me.”

“How businesslike. I’m relieved.” That was a lie. Seraphim found it rather disheartening, but he would never say as much. He was in no position to demand a closer emotional connection with Ruki. Their current relationship was convenient for them both.

“I can promise you this, at least: I’ll letcha know if I get the order to take your head.”

“Why, thank you. I hope that offer still stands even if Prince Sylvester is the one behind it.”

“Dunno if I can promise that.”

Seraphim knew Sylvester had captured Ruki before, but he had no idea what his half-brother had gone through. All he knew was that in the wake of the encounter, Ruki gave the crown prince a wide berth.

“My gut tells me he’s not the kinda guy you wanna mess with,” said Ruki.

They had spoken before about how terrifying Harland’s royalty could be. One look into that frightening abyss had been enough to ward Ruki off ever ending up on their bad side again.

“Try to make sure you don’t do anything too stupid and get yourself killed, ‘kay?”

Seraphim studied his half-brother. “Are you concerned for me?”

“Dummy. I’ve got a nice thing goin’ here, bein’ related to royalty. It’d suck to lose that connection.”

Seraphim couldn’t help but smile at Ruki’s prickly response. “In that case, try to keep yourself out of danger as well.”

“Who do you think you’re talkin’ to? I’m a member of Rose Garden.” Ruki had spent his whole life with death’s shadow hanging over him. Unless he had a mind to stop living on the edge, Seraphim couldn’t possibly convince him to stay out of danger. Not that it would stop the prince from nagging him about it.

“All I am saying is that I want you to stay ali—ouch!”

This time, it wasn’t just a nudge. Ruki had slammed his foot into Seraphim’s shin, sending the foreign prince sprawling to the ground with tears in his eyes. Ruki stomped off without a word, but Seraphim sensed that his words had hit home.

Side Story: The Cardinal's Quiet Smile

IT WAS EARLY MORNING, well before the sun's amber rays heated the grand cathedral. The chilly night air still pervaded its halls.

The cathedral was a culmination of the clergy's and faithful's contributions. Its simple stone design could not begin to rival the magnificence of the grand cathedral in Harland's capital, but there were elaborate carvings on the walls and pillars as well as an enormous colonnade fit for giants that gave it unmistakable character. Each pillar in the colonnade was as thick as ten grown men. It was difficult to appreciate the full effect of the architecture unless viewing it from a distance, however. Walking among the pillars made one feel tiny—insignificant.

Past the colonnade, in the innermost sanctum of the grand cathedral, was the pope's personal quarters. The atmosphere was austere here. The room's owner, the pope himself, was an elderly man with a notable white beard. In his old age, he appeared simultaneously frail and yet impervious as a megalith, so unflinching that not even an earthquake could move him.

Nigel knelt before the pope, his head bowed.

The pope regarded him with great melancholy as he said, "This has been a most lamentable turn of events."

"I am deeply ashamed, Your Holiness."

"This is precisely why I expressed that you place far too much trust in other people," said the pope.

All men were capable of sin, even the clergy. The pope had told Nigel before that it was important—necessary, even—to express doubt in people, lecturing him with a look in his eyes reminiscent of a grandfather instilling values in his grandson.

Nigel bowed his head even lower. “I never imagined my subordinates would be so audacious as to commit those acts of evil,” he said. “Were I more virtuous myself, this would never have happened. It is entirely my fault.”

“They must have begun to harbor greed after earning the privilege of being selected as your subordinates. We must count our blessings that you, at least, were not condemned alongside them.”

The pope believed Nigel was innocent, a paragon of the faithful, due to Nigel’s manipulations. Thus, he thought this scandal born of Nigel’s direct subordinates deceiving him.

“Nonetheless,” the pope continued, “I will have to punish you. For the moment, I shall sentence you to confinement. There is no reason for you to worry overmuch. Everyone here knows how devout you are. I’m sure you will be released from confinement soon enough.”

“I will use this opportunity to reflect on my many mistakes—and I swear that in the process, I shall take your words to heart, Your Holiness.”

There were many clergymen who enjoyed privileges they otherwise wouldn’t if not for what Nigel had done. He’d made enough advantageous political ties within the church that this “censure,” if it could even be called that, was only for show. After the scandal, he would no longer be able to take a position in a foreign country, but that was nothing terribly catastrophic for him. If anything, he was glad to be rid of the duties that came with being cardinal.

“I can only imagine how stressful it must have been for you, arrested and put in restraints as you were. Be sure to rest and recover,” said the pope.

“I am grateful for your compassion, Your Holiness.” Nigel politely excused himself and left the room, striding back through the colonnade. Although it was summer, a cool breeze washed over him in the long corridor. He continued at an even pace, face expressionless.

The connection between Dragoon and Lady Claudia was most unexpected. Granted, Nigel had sensed Dragoon breaking away from him. They had never

once hid their dissatisfaction with him before, but out of nowhere, they had begun acting more obedient. *I thought it was Prince Seraphim who had gotten in their ear.*

There were traces of Dragoon leaking information to the United Kingdom of Arakaner. Dragoon had reported to him that their first assassination attempt on Seraphim had failed, that the assassin had been slain in the process. That, Nigel suspected, was when they first joined forces.

Seraphim was like a predator, always on the hunt for an opportunity to weaken the church. If given the chance, he would take it. *Fortunately, I made sure to leave no evidence behind, so I'll have plausible deniability even if he does catch on and start investigating.*

Nigel had taken families captive to blackmail Dragoon, but he knew there was a limit to how long and how well he could rule through fear. Syndicates were naturally antiestablishment organizations. The more hostages he killed to keep Dragoon in line, the less leverage he had. If he kept it up, there would eventually be no one left. He didn't want to risk losing more of them unless he was absolutely certain Dragoon had betrayed him.

If only they'd remained docile and obedient.

He had limited his contact with them by only interacting with Bezel directly. There was nothing concrete to suggest all members of Dragoon had switched sides. That was why he'd gone out of his way to pay for a courtesan to leak information about the illegal casinos which had become his main source of income. If the intel he offered then matched what Seraphim received, Nigel would have his answer. Once he had his proof, he would reveal the connection between the syndicate and Seraphim and dust his hands of both. The cardinal had been clever enough to ensure there was nothing to tie him to any of his crimes, so they wouldn't be able to turn it around on him.

Yet ultimately, it was Claudia who had moved against him and not Seraphim. *I have to wonder where and when she made contact with Dragoon.* However long

he contemplated the mystery, he hadn't the faintest clue as to the answer.

Instead of being vexed that he was outplayed, Nigel was elated. His face, which was always devoid as a doll's, was colored with genuine, human emotion.

His whole life, he'd been ridiculously bored.

In all the stratagems he came up with, people acted precisely the way he predicted. Even the pope was no exception; the man didn't have a sliver of suspicion that Nigel was the true culprit. For as much as he lectured Nigel on being too trusting, Nigel thought it was the pope who lacked the ability to cast doubt on others.

Nigel could remember how much he had struggled when he was younger to claw his way up to the cardinal position. It was as he reached middle age, gray hairs blending in with the blond ones on his head, that everything turned stagnant. Life grew cyclical. Predictable.

He was sick of it.

Then, out of nowhere, there was a disturbance in the form of Claudia Lindsay.

How long has it been since I last anticipated the coming days with any excitement?

The church's influence in smaller and midsize countries was as strong ever. Nigel still had options, even if he couldn't enter Harland directly. His pulse fluttered with the thought of how he might corner Claudia and how much resistance she would be capable of putting up against the church.

His once dispassionate face contorted with eager expectation. The grin that cracked his lips was not the innocent, blithe smile he employed to disarm other people. It was malicious and sinister.

Side Story:

The King's Younger Brother Shares Drinks with the Duke's Heir

BEFORE HIM were ebony locks and a pair of azure eyes. Not even when darkness descended upon the land could it cast shadows on those eyes, which shone vibrantly with determination. Virgil's likeness to his sister served as a keen reminder of Claudia.

Did I make a terrible mistake inviting him? Raul wondered.

He had summoned Virgil to his quarters at the embassy because he thought only Virgil could empathize and commiserate with him. The wisest course would have been to make a reservation at a proper establishment, but he wasn't in the mood to go walking around outside. Instead, he'd prepared a selection of the embassy's best liquor and snacks and arranged them on the drawing room table.

Raul was confident in the quality of their entrees, given that the embassy's official chef had made them personally. They were likely better than the standard fare one could expect at a restaurant around here.

Although he and Virgil wouldn't be able to enjoy the liberation that came with strolling outdoors, the embassy was skilled at providing for its guests. Judging by Virgil's expression, the duke's heir was not altogether displeased by the offerings.

Knowing Virgil as he did, Raul suspected the man wouldn't have bothered coming if he hadn't wanted to.

"I thought you weren't fond of alcohol," said Virgil.

Raul shrugged. "Tonight is an exception. I'm sure you understand where I'm coming from."

He had been growing steadily closer to Virgil ever since the Lindsay siblings

provided an academy tour for Raul and his entourage. It was refreshing in a way, interacting with someone as candid as Virgil. People often called him the Ice Scion. Raul had, at times, fallen victim to Virgil's frigid looks, but it had never made him feel uncomfortable.

The ones who throw that moniker around probably deserve his coldness the most. They knew they were in the wrong, which made them defensively prejudiced against Virgil and his unyielding straightforwardness.

Virgil didn't glare at someone as long as they observed proper etiquette and social mores, even if (as in Raul's case) said person harbored romantic feelings for his sister. If Raul encroached on Claudia's personal space too much, Virgil would either glower at him or stand between them, but he wouldn't interfere as long as Raul was a gentleman. Raul just had to toe the line Virgil had set.

Unlike Sylvester, Virgil never masked his feelings. It made him much easier to read.

"If you imbibe heavily when your stomach isn't used to it, you'll regret it in the morning," Virgil said.

Raul fixed him with a look. "If I had proper self-control, I wouldn't have invited you to join me." He threw his head back and drained a glass. Then he reached for the snacks with a sigh. Judging by Virgil's warning, he wanted Raul to at least put something in his stomach.

The Barian prince would be sailing home the following day. Virgil was probably concerned about him being hungover on the ship. Raul was accustomed to the trip by this point, but it was still a long one.

Raul's mind was somewhere else entirely, however.

"I can't even see her off," he grumbled, snatching some jerky from the table. It wasn't something he usually chose to eat if he had other options.

The salty flavor hit his tongue first. It was almost overwhelming, but the savoriness of the meat spread throughout his mouth the more he chewed. The

embassy's chef deserved all his renown. Yet the more jerky Raul ate, the deeper the wrinkle in his brow became. He really preferred sweet to salty.

Virgil nodded solemnly and said, "I'll be sure to see her off in your stead. I've also ensured our finest knights will accompany her on the trip."

It was only after Raul had scheduled his return to Bari for the summer that Claudia made plans to visit Arakaner. It would be a nice retreat for the season with its cooler temperatures, and it provided her an opportunity to visit the firm her father had gifted her for her birthday.

On those points, Raul had no complaints. He had heard before what a wonderful summer destination Arakaner was. No, the issue was that Sylvester would be going along with her.

"It never even crossed my mind that Syl would insist on going as well," Virgil said.

"Remembering it makes my blood boil," Raul snarled under his breath.

And of course, he hadn't found out about it until he was making the rounds to pay his farewells before he set off for home. Sylvester had shared the news with an inscrutable smile on his face. Raul thought he deserved praise for not grabbing the other prince by the collar and thrashing him. Sylvester had kept his plans so confidential that not even the Lindsays were privy until the last minute, at which point they had no choice but to oblige the prince.

Knowing him, he wanted to keep it from Virgil as long as possible so he couldn't interfere.

In truth, Virgil had wanted to accompany Claudia himself, but he was already saddled with duties as the family heir. That included plans to visit their family's territory during the summer. Sylvester didn't deliver the news until after Virgil had resigned himself to stay behind. Virgil had gone straight to the palace to protest.

Claudia was still only a *candidate* for marriage, at least publicly. It would fly in

the face of tradition for the crown prince to accompany her on a private trip, Virgil argued.

Sylvester had already prepared a response: "*It's pure coincidence that her trip aligns with my plans for an official visit.*" His defense was corroborated by his official schedule. It went without saying that he'd manipulated things to his benefit.

"I must admit, I was tempted to grab Syl by the collar myself," Virgil said.

Raul lifted his gaze to find Virgil grimacing, his nose wrinkled in displeasure. They shared the same sentiment; it was like looking in a mirror. He lifted a hand and massaged the wrinkle from his forehead. At least this was proof he'd made the right choice by inviting Virgil here.

When Lestea learned of the news, she'd gone completely stiff—her smile still plastered on her face. Raul couldn't trust her to empathize, though. They both felt the same way toward Claudia, but it was precisely for that reason that he wasn't comfortable confiding in her. Virgil was a much safer choice, since he was Claudia's older brother. While they might butt heads down the line politically, in private, Raul knew he could trust the man.

"How's Claudia taking all this?"

"Dee was shocked when she heard, but she soon went back to being her normal self. Tristan will be going along with them, so I doubt they'll be completely alone together."

Raul made a face. "And you really think we can rely on Tristan? He doesn't strike me as the type to stand firm against Sylvester."

Tristan was supposed to be Sylvester's right hand and personal guard, but he was more like a chamberlain than anything else. Raul knew they had been friends since they were children, but Tristan didn't have enough of a backbone to stand up to Sylvester when it really counted.

"He's a principled man with his heart in the right place. Should Syl stray from

the moral path, Tristan will correct him.” As if that weren’t enough, Virgil added, “Trust that I will drill its importance into him before he leaves.”

All Raul could picture was the light vanishing from Tristan’s eyes as Virgil lectured him for an eternity, but he opted to brush off the thought. At the very least, Virgil seemed confident that Tristan would intervene when necessary.

“Besides,” Virgil continued, “Syl would never do anything to make Dee hate him.”

“I suppose, though I’m not sure how reliable a metric that is.” Much as Raul refused to accept it, he knew they were in love. That was the problem. What woman would spurn the man she loved when he expressed a physical interest in her?

Worse yet, they were going to a foreign country. It didn’t matter that one could view the Arakanerian shore from Harland’s coast; their daily lives would be entirely different—which gave way to the possibility that Claudia might be more apt to make poor judgments.

Raul could see their silhouettes in his mind, separate at first until they converged. He shook his head vigorously to drive it from his head. “Enough! I can’t think about it anymore! I keep picturing the worst possibilities!”

He reached for the bottle and splashed more liquor into his glass. Then he snatched up the glass and guzzled it, taking no time to savor its luxurious aroma or the depth of its flavor. Heat raced through his veins, his eyes growing misty.

It was all the alcohol’s fault.

“I’m such a coward,” he muttered.

Raul knew he had no chance of winning Claudia’s heart, but feelings weren’t logical—which was why he’d refused to give up so easily. There was a pang in his chest from having his inevitable defeat thrown in his face like this. No matter how much he loved Claudia, he was still only a friend. There was only so much a friend could do in these situations. And nothing was more painful than

being restrained by the boundaries friendship imposed, forever an outsider looking in.

"I am no less a coward than you," Virgil said.

Unable to sit idly by and watch Raul drown his sorrows, Virgil moved from his seat on the other side of the table to plant himself directly beside Raul. He reached up and stroked the loose curls on Raul's head. There was something comforting about the size of his hand.

My older brother never stroked my head, Raul thought. Even if his brother *had* offered such physical affection, Raul wasn't sure it would have the same effect.

He let out a quiet sigh.

He'd probably immediately tell me to abandon my emotions. Raul could already imagine it. If he acted this depressed in front of his older brother, the king would regard him coldly and remind him that this was why emotions were unnecessary. The man never changed.

Virgil was different. He appeared cold and unfeeling on the surface, but his actions proved there was far more to him.

And while we're on the subject, is it just me or is he treating me like a little brother? As far as Raul had heard, Virgil seemed to think of Sylvester and Tristan as younger siblings. Perhaps that now extended to Raul as well.

The embarrassment of it was too much to bear. Raul knocked Virgil's hand away. "You look a little too composed for someone who calls himself a coward."

"I suppose I would compared with a man sobbing into his drink."

Raul gaped at him, indignant. "I was not! It's all this heat going to my head from the alcohol!"

"If you say so." Virgil smiled as he nursed his own drink. He was much more used to drinking than Raul, and it showed. It provoked Raul's competitive spirit.

I have a reputation for looking just as suave when I drink!

Not entirely a good thing, if he was being truthful. That very reputation had driven him further and further away from his beloved sweets.

Raul let out a long exhale, glaring at the glass in front of him. He might not be as used to drinking as Virgil, but he could look the mature, dapper gentleman while doing it. With slow, intentional movements, he gripped his glass.

Before he could lift it to his lips, Virgil interrupted by saying, “You’ve been chugging far too much of that. Put something in your stomach first.”

“I was eating the jerky, wasn’t I?!”

“Hardly. You nibbled endlessly on a tidbit and that was it. Your chef knew you weren’t a drinker and provided us with more nourishing snacks to compensate. Don’t let his consideration for you go to waste.”

Raul lowered his gaze to the table. Virgil was right; among the regular fare, there were more substantial snacks, like sandwiches. Normally these were catered specifically for guests, but Virgil knew Raul didn’t drink much. That was how he knew the chef had prepared these dishes specifically for Raul.

Now that Virgil had entered “mother hen” mode, he’d continue to nag if Raul didn’t heed him. Resigned, Raul reached for one of the sandwiches.

“If only everyone else listened as well as you do,” Virgil said forlornly.

“That just goes to show how well they know you.”

Although Virgil was much easier to read than Sylvester, it was hard to know exactly where his boundaries were. Not knowing what might set him off made it difficult to disobey him.

Oh, this sandwich is actually pretty good. It was made just the way Raul liked, and the familiar flavors set him at ease. He found himself plucking up another without really thinking about it. It was exactly as Virgil said: the chef had prepared these especially for Raul.

Once Raul had filled his belly, Virgil mysteriously mussed his hair again. When he shot a questioning look at the other man, Virgil returned it with a gentle

smile—the same exact one he usually reserved for Claudia. The surprise almost made Raul choke on the last bite of his sandwich. He only narrowly managed to gulp it down. When he dodged out of Virgil's reach, Virgil didn't chase after him.

"You do realize I'm royalty, don't you?" said Raul.

"Yes. Hard to believe you and Syl are both princes when you're so different."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that it's a good thing you're so personable."

"Then make me your brother-in-law instead."

All warmth faded from Virgil's gaze then, his eyes turning stone cold. "No."

It was nice knowing where he stood with Virgil, but Raul couldn't help sighing at the fact that the man would never be on his side. Not in the way he wanted.

I guess that makes me even more of a fool for not being able to give up.

The itch to reach for his glass returned. Desperate to escape it, he changed the subject. He didn't want to risk downing more and getting all misty-eyed again; Virgil would really think he was crying.

"Say, I hear Claudia can brew an impressive pot of tea. Is that true?"

Virgil perked up. "Yes, absolutely! In fact, the whole reason she learned was because she wanted to cheer me up."

Other people in Virgil's social circle had listened to him brag so much about Claudia that they were absolutely sick of it. Raul hadn't known Virgil as long, so the stories were new to him. He was entertained by tales of Claudia's younger days too.

Had it been pure boasting, Raul would have gotten fed up quickly, but Virgil's voice and expression oozed such affection that Raul found it endearing. Plus, it was a safe topic that didn't risk further damaging his ego.

Side Story: The Assassin Encounters His Half-Brother

“I KNOW IT MUST sound like you drew the short straw, but you’re the only one in our crew who can feasibly escape.”

Ruki raked a hand through his hair. “Guess there ain’t no other choice, then.”

Bezel had chosen him out of everyone else. The request this time was for an assassination. And not just any assassination; the target was none other than the crown prince of the United Kingdom of Arakaner. This wasn’t a mission they would normally agree to undertake, given how high the chance of failure was.

But Dragoon could not refuse this one because the request came from Nigel.

The cardinal had taken their families in the slums hostage. Ever since, he sat at the top of their organization. Any “request” he made was more of a command, given the consequences if they refused.

“That piece of crap will be fine as long as it looks like we made an attempt, even if it fails,” Bezel assured him. There was no need to make a serious effort to carry it out. “Even he’s gotta realize there’s no way it’d ever succeed. As long as you kick up a fuss, that’ll be enough.”

It would be quite a task to leave signs that he had infiltrated the crown prince’s quarters *and* manage to escape unscathed. Few people had the ability to do the latter, especially when the target was royalty. Plus, the target was the heir to his kingdom. He would have a security detail with him wherever he went.

No one in Dragoon was more skilled at covert operations than Ruki, which was why he resigned himself so quickly. It wasn’t Bezel’s fault for asking the impossible. The blame lay solely with Nigel.

“You say that,” said Ruki, “but do you really think he’ll be satisfied?”

"He has to be. I won't let him keep treating us like pawns he can throw away," Bezel growled, eyes bloodshot. Between that and the deep crease in his brow, his expression was menacing enough to make a grown man shriek in terror. At his sides, his hands were balled into trembling fists.

Ruki averted his gaze. He could sense all too keenly how furious Bezel was, having grown up in his care.

For a while now, Bezel had reluctantly sent his men to their deaths on Nigel's orders. Ruki had watched his fair share of cohorts breathe their last despite trying his best to save them.

I mean, I get it. Our lives ain't worth much, he thought bitterly.

Society placed them at the bottom rung of the hierarchy. Life was a desperate struggle. Joining the syndicate and partaking in its crimes was the only way they could make it. After risking their lives to build up Dragoon, watching the organization and its members sacrifice those lives so easily had to be unbearable for Bezel. It certainly was for Ruki.

I feel so damn powerless.

No matter how much they postured and tried to pretend otherwise, Nigel had reminded them of how weak and vulnerable they really were. No one would ever listen to Ruki or the rest of Dragoon, let alone believe them. It didn't matter how much they might protest. At the end of the day, *they* would be the villains, not the cardinal.

Dragoon had always lived in the shadows, trying to avoid notice—but the cardinal had a blade at their throats. It was all they could do to placate him in hopes of protecting their families. Realistically, they had no ground to stand on. They were at Nigel's mercy entirely.

So pathetic...

Ruki had never desired authority in his life. As long as he had enough money and could afford food, clothing, and shelter, that was enough. Being in a

position of power meant duties and obligation. Ruki much preferred his freedom. To him, power would only be a burden.

At least, that was what he used to think.

Is there really nothing I can do?!

It was like the cards were stacked against him because he was unlucky enough to have been born into the slums. Without power—without authority or influence—there was no way he'd ever be able to expose Nigel as the crook he really was.

“Never thought I’d be sent abroad,” Ruki said to himself.

Nigel had requested that the assassination attempt be carried out in a small country neighboring Harland. Seraphim, the crown prince of Arakaner, would be staying at the embassy there.

It was fortunate they could make their way entirely by land, but it had still taken two whole weeks on horseback to get from Harland’s capital to the embassy. Ruki wanted to shout several expletives at Nigel for making him travel so far. Clergymen were accustomed to moving across the continent because they had churches set up all over, but it wasn’t the same for syndicate members.

“No syndicate member in his right mind would ever leave his own territory.”

While Dragoon had pulled some strings to ensure Ruki crossed the border smoothly, it was difficult planning an assassination without knowing the local geography. Two other members had accompanied him in case he needed backup, but they would be moving separately until the day of the actual mission. They wouldn’t be any help at this stage.

In exactly one week, a party would be held at the embassy. The plan was to target the crown prince in the middle of the night, when he would be asleep.

This is so stupid. I bet Nigel’s got his own personal assassin and doesn’t even

need us.

The church had plenty of talented individuals. Ruki could tell that some of the cardinal's subordinates were even trained in the art of war. It wouldn't surprise him if there were skilled assassins among them.

Since he's not using one of them, this really is a suicide mission. Jerk really gets under my skin.

In contrast to all those who branched out to acquire balanced skillsets, there were only a few true specialists. The latter were not in such supply that one could treat them like sacrificial pawns. Dragoon was different, at least as far as Nigel was concerned. No matter how many of their members died or suffered, it would be no inconvenience to him.

Asshole!

With a cloud of melancholy hanging over him, Ruki proceeded to map out the lay of the land for his mission. He also needed to go over all the information he had on hand. That would be his lifeline, his only chance of coming out of this alive. No matter how reluctant he was to do Nigel's bidding, he couldn't ignore protocol.

The embassy was in the city's high-end district. The overall style of the architecture didn't differ all too significantly from Harland's; from the buildings to the cobblestone streets, the sights were somewhat familiar. It helped that the culture of the neighboring kingdom was nearly identical as well. Feeling that much less of a visitor to a foreign land, he was able to focus on his work.

Ruki operated alone, disguised as a traveler. He kept his hood low as he always did to hide his face, but his usual black attire was stuffed away in his pack. His two cohorts were off gathering information elsewhere. They would meet up later to go over their plan with more scrutiny.

He shuffled along, scanning his surroundings like a tourist would. The high-end district was in the mercantile quarter of the city, but the streets were clean without a single vagrant or piece of litter to be found.

Ruki tilted his head back. The sky above was a deep blue, the rays of the sun beating down on him unimpeded. He disliked being out in the light, feeling exposed. He slipped into the shadows of a nearby building, where he caught a floral scent. On closer inspection, he found he'd stopped beside a flower shop.

These weren't the sorts of flowers one might expect a street urchin to be peddling. There were myriad varieties in a rainbow of colors, all lined up in buckets of water outside the front of the shop. He was hit with the nearly irresistible urge to kick one of them over. The last thing he wanted was for the shop's owner to notice him and approach, so he scurried away.

Flowers ain't for me, he thought.

Something about them made him deeply uncomfortable in his own skin: a sense of not belonging akin to how an accidental drip of paint looked out of place on a blank canvas. Ruki didn't think he could ever get accustomed to the kind of lifestyle the people there led. This whole environment was too different from the one he'd grown up in.

The night of the operation finally arrived, and the embassy was bustling with guests. Ruki had to wait as the hour grew late and they spilled outside, leaving one by one. Cleaning in the wake of the party had been pushed back into the following day. The party venue had been left as is, with the lights snuffed out.

Now this is more like it.

It was a dark place in total disarray, and as he loitered, an unpleasant stench wafted up his nose. He still didn't feel very motivated to carry out this mission, but at least this place was more comfortable.

Under the shroud of darkness, Ruki followed the route he and his cohorts had planned out. The security patrols followed their usual schedule. As the guards changed shifts, Ruki took the opportunity to slip deeper into the embassy.

Huh. This is way easier than I expected.

Perhaps that was because he was so accustomed to clandestine missions in Harland, a substantially larger and more carefully guarded country. The security here seemed comparatively light.

Ruki steeled himself. He couldn't risk letting his guard down. If assassinating a prince was truly this easy, Nigel would have contracted a specialist instead of bothering with Dragoon. There was less risk the fewer people knew about it. Even though Nigel had Dragoon under his thumb, there was no guarantee its members would keep quiet about his designs.

This must be some kinda trap, Ruki decided.

Dragoon had no real intention of carrying out this assassination. As soon as he did the bare minimum, he was going to make a run for it. His mind was already made up.

Fortunately, his infiltration was complete. All that remained was to leave a trace that an assassin had been here. To that end, he would have to make sure someone discovered him, but it wasn't quite time for that yet. When the clamor broke out, he needed to be as close to the target as possible.

Relying on the information they had gathered beforehand, Ruki made his way to the most impressive quarters in the building. The full layout of the building was kept secret, as was always the case with embassies. It was a preventative measure to discourage rogues like Ruki from infiltrating.

Now that he was this deep, Ruki would have to play the rest by ear and trust his intuition. He had to estimate his position from experience and mentally map his escape route.

It's about time.

There were more patrols in this area. He'd also found a room with a guard standing out front. It was possible that only a vault lay beyond the door, but Ruki's gut told him otherwise. A room containing something inanimate had a very different atmosphere than one with a person inside. Based on his experiences, he gathered it was the latter.

Ruki resolved himself. *All that's left after this is to hightail it outta here!*

He stepped into the guard's periphery to make sure he was spotted, then expertly dodged around the corner. That split second was enough for the guard to belt out a warning that they had an intruder. Lights flashed in previously unlit corridors. In an instant, the whole place brightened.

Where there was light, there were also shadows. He scurried between them, following the route he'd mapped in his head. His cohorts initiated their diversion tactics in the middle of all of this, which reduced the number of people he had on his tail. Now that they'd made this much of a commotion, everyone would know this had been an assassination attempt.

All that remained was to steal into a room he'd marked in his mental map. Through there, he could hop out a window and be free of this place. This was quite the detour from his target's presumed room. Anyone investigating the infiltration would simply assume he had gotten lost.

Quiet as a mouse, he slipped into the room. The moment he crossed the threshold, a sensation skittered across his skin. Inside, a band of personal guards was protecting someone—presumably someone important. They seemed just as shocked as he was.

Ruki's instinct was to take advantage of this brief vulnerability.

When he and his cohorts investigated beforehand, this room had been empty. His original plan was completely off the rails now, but that was just the way of things. No plan ever went perfectly, so Ruki knew how to roll with the punches. It was a bit like how Dragoon had been coasting until Nigel swooped in and put them in a chokehold.

You gotta be freakin' kidding me!

This was how things always were for him in the darkness, where everything was rotten. Each day was a slog, like wading through a quagmire. His only choice was to struggle in vain if he had any hope of staying alive, of protecting his chosen family.

In that case, I'm takin' you with me!

If he was going to die, he wouldn't be going alone. Ruki already knew his life had no value, but that didn't mean going down without a fight. Society treated those born into the slums like trash—or perhaps innocent, helpless babes.

Hope you enjoy bein' killed by the kinda people you treat like garbage!

These same thoughts always went through his head when facing down an enemy. It wasn't that he was eager to die. Quite the opposite, in fact. Ruki was always greedily searching for any avenue to guarantee his survival.

Ruki's breathing stilled, his steps silent as he lurched forward, taking the most direct path to his target. He slid out a knife, his fingers tightening around the hilt. He wasn't about to miss this brief opportunity.

The guards reached for their own weapons, but Ruki was slightly faster. He leapt into the air, landed a kick on one guard, and spun around to land gracefully—only to spring forward again. He was drawn to his targets like a magnet.

It was then that something far outside the scope of his (admittedly spur-of-the-moment) plan occurred. One of the guards shouted something, though Ruki couldn't make out the words. He was too distracted by what he saw—a near-perfect copy of himself.

The same handsome face that had been a thorn in his side since childhood, marking him as a target of kidnappers and perverts, was staring back at him. Much as he hated it, he *knew* this face. His copy must have sensed their similarity as well, despite the fact that only Ruki's eyes were uncovered. Their shocked faces were perfect mirror images of each other.

That split second of hesitation allowed the guards to catch up.

“Don't kill him!” Ruki's copy shouted.

Nevertheless, one of the guards had already brought his sword down. Ruki narrowly managed to evade it, only because the guard had faltered after

hearing his master's order.

But Ruki couldn't escape completely. These were elite guards. They wouldn't let him slip through their fingers. Scarcely a second passed before they had him surrounded and pinned to the ground.

Seriously? Doppelgängers actually exist?

Superstition had it that if one encountered their doppelgänger, they would die instantly. Strangely, he didn't feel he would be dying today.

"His face," said the copy.

One of the guards yanked Ruki's mask off. Everyone in the room was shocked by what they saw beneath.

His copy—doppelgänger?—smiled softly at him. "Let's discuss this, shall we?"

They moved Ruki to another room before launching into an interrogation, though his doppelgänger was more interested in where he was from than in the assassination attempt itself.

When the copy asked about Ruki's parentage, he replied, "I don't remember squat about my mom."

In fact, he didn't have any memories to speak of before Bezel picked him up off the streets. He didn't even remember having a mother at all. Such was the case for many of the children in the slums.

"I assume that means you were abandoned, then?"

Ruki shrugged. "Who knows."

Maybe Bezel would be able to answer that question, but Ruki could not. It was perfectly normal for kids like him to be orphans. He assumed he was the same.

"It's impossible for us not to be blood-related somehow, not when we look this similar," his doppelgänger insisted.

Ruki didn't really care. The only family he cared about—and actively wanted

to protect—lived in the slums. His blood relatives were irrelevant to him.

“Would you be willing to become my body double?”

“No,” Ruki said curtly.

“You didn’t even consider it.” Undeterred, his doppelgänger continued, “I guarantee you would be better off working for me.”

“Still a no.”

The guards’ tempers flared at Ruki’s surly attitude toward their master, but that had no effect on his answers. If the options were to abandon his chosen family and live on his own or die here and now, he would pick the latter in a heartbeat.

“May I ask your reason for refusing?”

Ruki stared at his doppelgänger. “Lemme ask *you* somethin’ first. Are you a big shot or what?”

“Well, I may not seem it, but I’m the prince of a kingdom.”

“You’ve *gotta* be kiddin’ me.” Ruki hung his head. Why hadn’t he realized it sooner? The person in front of him fit the description of his target completely.

In my defense, no one—least of all me—coulda predicted that Arakaner’s crown prince was practically my identical twin!

Yet he was. Identical, yes, but also the prince of a country. A person of authority. Ruki already knew he wouldn’t get off scot-free. *Might as well make the most of this opportunity.*

It was common knowledge that the United Kingdom of Arakaner had a hostile relationship with the church. Hedging his bets, Ruki revealed everything to Seraphim. Once he’d finished his story, Seraphim agreed to join sides with Ruki, but that didn’t solve Ruki’s core problem.

“Another one of ours died! When the hell are you gonna make a move?!”

“I’m sorry,” Seraphim said calmly, “but we need something decisive if we’re going to move against the cardinal.”

“Your apologies don’t do squat for me!”

What Ruki wanted was help. He gritted his teeth, emotion swelling like a tidal wave. Frankly, he didn’t *want* to rely on anyone, but this was one matter he couldn’t handle on his own. He had no choice but to seek someone else’s aid.

“I’m powerless to stop it myself,” he muttered.

“I swore to you that I would take him down, and I meant it. I only ask that you have a little more patience, please,” said Seraphim.

Ruki knew the prince wasn’t trying to shrug him off. Seraphim’s grave expression suggested he couldn’t stomach the cardinal either.

Is waiting seriously all I can do?

The fact that this was taking so long proved Nigel was a fearsome adversary even for royalty. Someone like Ruki wouldn’t stand a chance. He was a nobody as far as society was concerned.

Still, he couldn’t just sit around and do nothing. Wasn’t there some other way? His instincts urged him to search. Life had never been easy. It was always like trudging through mud, fighting to stay upright.

This is my way of doin’ things.

Being the king’s illegitimate son didn’t change anything. It didn’t—*couldn’t*—change him. The people in the slums, the people he’d fought alongside for survival, meant everything to him. They were family.

Side Story: The Crown Prince Reads with the Knight Captain's Son

THE ROYAL LIBRARY was located inside the palace. This vast, open space was chock-full of foreign and domestic tomes alike, with people perpetually milling about its aisles during the day. Only those with special permission were allowed to check anything out of the library. That was part of the reason why it was always so busy; most people had no choice but to continue coming back until they had finished their reading.

As crown prince, Sylvester had permission to borrow whatever he wanted, so he rarely had cause to visit the library. Today, like many other days, he had entrusted a maid with retrieving his list of books and hauling them back to his private quarters.

The sun cast an impressive shadow on the sizable stack of tomes.

"You're awfully diligent, Syl," said Tristan.

"No amount of literature is enough when it comes to this particular subject."

"I know exactly what you mean." Tristan wasn't the studious type, but this was one topic in which he had a vested interest. He reached for one of the books and flipped through it.

The two of them lounged on a sofa, perusing the pages of whichever title captured their interest. It was part of Sylvester's regular education to learn how best to engage women, but he'd grown painfully aware lately of just how inexperienced he was with the fairer sex, especially where Claudia was concerned.

He had tried borrowing some romance novels, but he'd given up reading them when their contents didn't match what he knew of Claudia. The whole point of fiction was to provide entertainment. Their contents didn't necessarily reflect real life.

At the very least, I know that Dia doesn't appreciate words or actions that aren't grounded in reality.

Although, from what he had gathered, she wasn't entirely opposed to exaggerated overtures. She had been quite shocked when he reserved a whole store and a theater stage for their dates in the past, but she hadn't been displeased. It was hard to tell where to draw the line, though.

Sylvester's brow furrowed as he stumbled upon something that puzzled him. "A man shouldn't be overbearing with a woman, but at times it is necessary to force them along." What does that mean?"

Was it just him, or was that completely contradictory?

Tristan's face scrunched as he contemplated the issue too. "Not being overbearing makes perfect sense to me, but would a lady really be pleased to be forced into anything? Baffling."

As if to illustrate the point, the book listed several examples in which a woman preferred the man to take the lead and push things forward, but Sylvester couldn't agree with any of it. If a lady didn't enthusiastically consent, then the only answer was to back off and respect her wishes.

I suppose this means there's a limit to how much I can learn through literature. Prose alone wasn't enough to give him insight into the more nuanced aspects of a woman's heart.

"In the end, it all seems to come down to how the woman you're with responds to things."

That was the case with all interpersonal relationships, not just romance. What was the correct choice for one person could be the incorrect choice for someone else. Thus, he felt like he was going in circles. He was no closer to finding the answers he sought.

Sylvester leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling, weight shifting back. The sofa creaked beneath him.

Beside Sylvester, Tristan suddenly slammed his book shut. Sylvester glanced at him, surprised to find Tristan's face beet red. He could more or less guess what the subject matter had been.

"Was it that intense?" Sylvester asked.

"I think it's a bit too, um...early for me to consider." Tristan passed the book to him.

Sylvester cracked the front cover open and thumbed through the pages, eyes racing across the words. When he at last arrived at the page Tristan must have been reading before he slammed it shut, Sylvester froze.

"Too early for you too?" Tristan said.

"I think it is more a problem of propriety."

The page in question described having a ribald encounter in the bushes. The previous pages of the book had discussed ways to grow closer to one's beloved, so it wasn't surprising Tristan had been enthralled until that point. But the author had taken a bit of a leap going from that topic to illicit encounters in public.

"Committing such an act in public seems questionable to me," said Sylvester.

Tristan nodded vigorously. "It's strange, isn't it?"

"At the very least, I don't think this is a book one should use as a reference."

The royal library had a wide variety of literature on its shelves. It provided a plethora of sources for research, but the sheer amount of available information also required one be particular about which books they used. There were many relationship books, but some of them—such as this one—tended more toward erotic encounters. Neither Sylvester nor Tristan had any need for advice about short-term flings.

"What about you, Syl?"

"What about me?"

"It's too soon for me," said Tristan, "but you and Lady Claudia are ready to take that next step in your relationship, aren't you?"

Sylvester's lips thinned into a taut line. "Have you forgotten that Dia is renowned as the perfect lady? I am no more inclined to use this book as a reference than you are."

"Oh. I suppose you have a point there."

No matter how prepared a lady might be for a carnal encounter, Sylvester very much doubted she would be keen on taking a tumble in the bushes. He nudged the book away, sliding it across the table, glad to have dispelled any strange notions in Tristan's head.

He would be lying if he said he didn't desire Claudia, but the feeling had to be mutual. There would be no point in taking her to bed if her heart wasn't in it; she would only hate him for it later.

Tristan arched a brow at him. "Then I take it you have no ulterior motives for accompanying her to the United Kingdom of Arakaner."

"Of course not."

Sylvester had decided to go with her for a different reason entirely. That said, the thought of the two of them staying together—even in different rooms—was exhilarating.

"Good," Tristan said, pleased. "It's a relief to know I won't have to deal with any secret intentions on your part while I'm there."

Indignant, Sylvester shot back, "What sort of person do you take me for?"

"When it comes to Lady Claudia, I take you for a man who finds it impossible to retain his composure. It flies right out the window."

The prince frowned. "Saying it 'flies right out the window' is an exaggeration."

"Which suggests you acknowledge I'm right, to some degree."

"When it comes to Lady Louise, you're no better at maintaining your cool,

Tristan.”

“True. But I’m not comfortable with the idea of being dragged into your romantic squabbles again.”

Sylvester shook his head, sighing. “You’re still holding on to that?”

Tristan had never forgotten what happened when Claudia rejected Sylvester’s initial proposal.

“It wasn’t my intention to take my frustrations out on you,” Sylvester reminded him.

“Oh, sure. You didn’t take it out on me. It’s just that the whole air around you turned so frigid, it gave me chills. That’s all.” The mere memory of it sent a shiver through Tristan. He rubbed his arms to chase away the icy remembrance.

Sylvester, meanwhile, couldn’t recall the moment in clear detail. He’d assumed he reacted with perfect poise—as was expected of him—until Tristan later pointed out that he’d been very much not his normal self.

“I’m sorry for making you walk on eggshells.”

Tristan smiled, pleased with Sylvester’s apology. “I’m just glad everything was resolved smoothly.”

That was one thing Sylvester really liked about Tristan: his ability to quickly bounce back from anything. It helped Sylvester reflect on his own mistakes without being bogged down by guilt or other negative emotions. Instead, he could focus on making sure it didn’t happen again.

“Trust me, it will pain me to have to drag you along on our dates as well,” Sylvester said.

“What?”

Officially, his visit to Arakaner was to be an undercover observation, which was why Tristan was coming along. But Sylvester had every intention of capitalizing on the opportunity to spend time with Claudia. He wouldn’t waste a moment.

"I thought you said you had no ulterior motives!"

"I don't. But I'm sure you'll still feel like I'm flaunting my relationship."

Even if Sylvester wasn't trying to do it, being in the same environment made it inevitable.

Tristan pursed his lips and screwed his eyes shut. After a long moment, he opened them again and reached for the book Sylvester had pushed away, as if he needed an immediate escape from reality. But he hadn't been thinking properly when he did it because a few pages in, he slammed it shut again.

Bonus Chapter: The Villainess Sins Anew

IT HAD BARELY BEEN a month since Claudia had returned from Arakaner. The late summer heat was excruciating. She retreated to the gazebo for some fresh air to cool herself down.

Actually, there were several gazebos dotting the vast gardens of the Lindsay estate. Each was reserved for use in a different season. The one Claudia found herself in was intended for the summer months. A line of tall trees on one side cast a long shadow over it, positioned carefully so as not to obstruct the gentle breeze that swept through.

The gazebo was constructed of white marble, and it was even cooler to the touch than it looked. That was probably why the now fully grown Candy was out there with her, sprawled across the marble flooring. She looked almost lifeless with her little limbs stretched out, like a puddle of spilled milk. Occasionally, Candy would flip over in her sleep, her fur tickling Claudia's feet.

"I see you've discovered how cool it is out here," Claudia said to the snoozing feline.

"In fact, I think Candy may be better versed in finding cool places than we are," Helen chimed in.

The little fluffball had grown immensely. Helen smiled affectionately at her. As she told it, Candy had already claimed the coolest area in the servants' dormitory for herself.

Since returning to Harland, Claudia had found the amount of paperwork waiting for her had increased exponentially. She had brought it out here with her, attending to it while enjoying the breeze.

It had been easy to stay focused in the early morning hours, but around the time she took a light lunch, she was covered in a layer of sweat. The documents

were beginning to stick to her arms. She decided it was time for a break.

As if on cue, Candy rose up from the ground and wandered out of the gazebo. Curiosity piqued, Claudia hauled herself to her feet and followed the cat. The sudden burst of sunlight when she stepped out of the shade was almost blinding, but Claudia wasn't about to let herself lose sight of Candy. She tented her hands over her eyes to shield them from the summer sun. Candy didn't keep to the path, of course, so Claudia had to be careful not to tromp over flowers as she followed.

"Lady Claudia," Helen said disapprovingly, "this is dangerous."

"Oh, it's not that bad," Claudia assured her.

Admittedly, the ground was a bit unstable beneath her, but it wasn't so bad that she feared losing her balance. The groundskeeper was diligent in removing any stones that one might otherwise trip over. The gardens were carefully maintained, but the moment she stepped off the beaten path, it was like she was seeing a different side of their estate she'd never experienced before.

There was greenery for as far as the eye could see, and the smell of earth hung thick in the air. It tickled the adventurous part of her soul. Despite the hot sun beating down on her, her heart thrummed in anticipation. Perhaps this excitement stemmed from the fact that she'd never been able to move about so freely before, since her mother's watchful eye had always been on her when she was younger.

"I wonder where Candy is headed," Claudia murmured.

"If we continue in this direction, we'll arrive in the rear gardens."

"We're still far from the stables, aren't we?"

"Indeed. Your family's estate is enormous."

Claudia tried to get her bearings by conjuring up the layout of her family's estate in her mind. This was her family home, yet she only actively used a very limited portion. For instance, she had never once visited the servants'

dormitory before.

"I don't believe you'll find anything interesting up ahead," Helen warned her. "It's just a space where the servants hang clothes to dry and such."

"Truly? Can't I at least have a little peek at it?" Claudia clapped her hands together, holding them out in a pleading gesture. "I promise I won't get in anyone's way."

She knew the power her presence could have. No one would be too pleased at someone who caused them anxiety showing up without any notice. All Claudia wanted was to find out where exactly Candy was going. She promised Helen she wouldn't linger for too long.

"How could I possibly refuse you when you entreat me so adorably?" said Helen.

Claudia's attempt at employing puppy-dog eyes had been successful.

Helen views me with the biased gaze of a doting mother.

Frankly, Claudia didn't find herself the least bit adorable. Not with her sharp, narrow eyes and pronounced facial features. They all conveyed the image of someone who was incredibly strong-willed—qualities that were better highlighted by confidence and pride. But they didn't make her adorable. Helen was one of the few people who could call her that.

Since Helen had graciously indulged her, Claudia continued to chase after Candy. It was easy to tell where her family's gardens transitioned to the rear gardens. The manicured lawn fell away to enormous splotches of exposed earth.

"I wonder if all this is Candy's personal territory," said Claudia.

"I believe she splits it with the senior cats, who occupy the area during different times of the day."

Claudia worried Candy would feel disadvantaged as the younger feline encroaching on a veteran's territory, but it was a relief to hear she was getting

along with the others. Cats had their own rules for coexistence, it seemed.

Following Candy, Claudia ducked into the shadows of a building. She was shocked by what entered her view when she did.

White.

Pure white.

For as far as the eye could see.

The hanging sheets were so bright that she had to squint because the sun's rays seemed to refract off of them. But there was something pleasant about the way they flapped in the breeze. When a sudden gust stole through, they all danced together. Claudia felt like a child again. A voice in the back of her head—the adult one—had to remind her to maintain proper decorum.

But she couldn't stop herself from rushing forward. The gentle waves of her raven hair danced among the ocean of sheets, her dark color nearly drowned out by the sheer volume of white.

It was almost like being in another world.

No, this is reality. There was nothing odd about this. It was a completely normal part of life. At the same time, she couldn't deny that this was a slice of her world she had never known until now.

"Lady Claudia, are you all right?" Although they were only separated by a thin layer of white fabric, Helen couldn't mask her concern.

"Yes. I was just thinking it must be terribly difficult hanging out this much laundry. Though I'm sure it will dry quickly in this heat." She tilted her head back, glancing up at the sky.

Something brushed up against her leg. Candy was pressing her fluffy body into Claudia, as if trying to make sure Claudia hadn't forgotten about her. Funny. Claudia had been the one following Candy, but perhaps the cat had intended to guide her back here from the start.

"I think it's about time for us to leave," Helen said, her voice rising in pitch.

“All right,” Claudia said, squatting to stroke Candy.

Another gust of wind whipped one of the sheets. Behind it, Claudia caught a glimpse of three pairs of bare feet. When she looked up, she found three maids stripped down to their underwear and sopping wet. They had their hands over their mouths, trying their best not to so much as breathe and give their position away—though it was too late for that.

“L-Lady Claudia!” Helen cried shrilly, throwing herself in front of Claudia to block her view. “They were doing the laundry. I swear to you they weren’t messing around and ignoring their duties!” This explained why her voice had abruptly risen; Helen had noticed them before Claudia did.

The maids hung their heads in unison. “Our deepest apologies for displaying such impropriety in front of you, my lady!” They had been most careful to keep themselves hidden the moment they noticed her arrival. Based on their nearly nude states, Claudia could guess they had been playing in the water to cool off while also doing the laundry.

“None of that, please. I owe you an apology for interrupting,” she told them.

I can understand why they’d do this. It’s so hot outside! Claudia would have loved to join them if she could. She glanced up at Helen, fully knowing that even as indulgent as she was, Helen wouldn’t permit such a thing.

Helen seemed to sense what was going through Claudia’s head. “Don’t even think about it,” she said.

“Just my feet?”

“If you wish to cool your feet, I can have some cold water prepared for you in your room.”

Claudia frowned. “I’d like to do it out here in the open.”

“People would see you,” Helen reminded her.

And that’s not a concern for the maids? Claudia thought petulantly, but she knew where Helen was coming from. They were too exposed out here; just as

Claudia had stumbled into this area, someone else could do the same. The maids had understood the risk and stripped down anyway. The consequences would be much steeper for someone with a lofty position like Claudia.

“Oh, very well,” she said. “But I expect you to keep your word that we can do it in private.”

“Of course. Shall we make our way back now?”

“Yes, let’s. I wish to take a cold bath immediately.”

The bath would take time to prepare. Meanwhile, Claudia couldn’t shake the image of the maids in their unmentionables from her mind. She longed to join them, to freely pour a bucket of cold water over her head.

While she was waiting for the bath, she played with Candy in her room. She had a stuffed animal tied to the end of a long string, which she dangled through the air. Candy transformed into an agile hunter, giving chase. Claudia was careful to drag the toy in all directions to keep its path dynamic. But the more vigorous her movements, the more sweat began to pour from her skin. It wasn’t unbearable, since she knew she would soon be washing it all away.

“Lady Claudia,” said Helen, “your bath is ready.”

“Thank you.” Claudia paused to glance at Candy. “Would you like to join me, little one?” She knew better than to think the cat could understand human words, but she couldn’t help grinning when Candy scurried away in response.

“I’m afraid Candy hates getting wet,” Helen told her.

“As I understand it, such is the case for most cats.”

“Indeed. I’m just glad she seems to enjoy being brushed.”

Now that Helen mentioned it, Claudia realized she had never seen a speck of dirt on the white fluffball. That must have been due to Helen’s diligent brushing.

Claudia gave up on the idea of dragging Candy along with her and headed for the bath.

The bathroom was decorated in a milky brown hue, with tiles stretching across the floor, its architecture specialized to ensure no water would lead into adjacent rooms. A large tub with intricate legs sat in the middle, acting as the most eye-catching piece. Potted plants were lined along the edges, completing the room's color palette.

The tub was already filled. Several buckets of steaming water sat nearby to ensure Claudia didn't get too cold.

As soon as she stepped into the bathroom, she found three familiar faces waiting for her: maids who had served her for ages. It was their duty to assist with washing her body and hair. To speed her bathing along, two would typically work on washing her hair while the other focused on scrubbing her body.

But this time would be different. Namely because Claudia intended to change their usual routine.

“All right, everyone, could you strip down?”

“Lady Claudia?!” Helen gasped.

Claudia glanced over her shoulder. “You said it would be fine as long as we did it in private, remember?”

“I said that, yes, but...” Helen hesitated. “I didn’t think you meant to include us in this.”

“I don’t intend to force anyone. Well, except you, Helen.”

“So I’m not allowed to refuse?” Helen asked wryly.

“Surely you want to wash off your sweat as much as I do,” Claudia shot back with a grin.

Helen averted her gaze as she began peeling off her uniform. The heat affected everyone without exception. The other maids, who had also hesitated at first, followed Helen’s example of discarding her uniform to the side.

Claudia was pleased by this development—until the maids tried to start washing her. She stopped them, saying, “I can lather just as well as you girls can.”

During her brothel days, she’d had no other choice but to do everything on her own. She could wash her own body just fine. Not that she was ever allowed to do so in this lifetime, since she was a duke’s daughter.

“Today is special,” Claudia said. “Surely you ladies won’t mind me making some selfish demands once in a blue moon.”

“I am more than happy to indulge any request you have. What would you like us to do instead?” asked Helen.

“Why don’t we help each other wash off the sweat? Like this!”

“Eek!”

Claudia had created a handful of bubbles with soap, which she then smeared on Helen.

“Anything goes, as long as we’re washing each other!”

What had so appealed to her about the maids playing in the rear gardens was that it had been a group activity. Seeing women gathered for such fun brought back memories of her time in the brothel, when she and the senior courtesans (including Helen) had engaged in similar tomfoolery. In this lifetime, she had Louise and Charlotte, but she could never do something so inappropriate with them. That was why, as silly as it seemed, this was what she wanted—to play around with the other women.

“Very well,” said Helen. “Then I’ll return the favor!” Helen lathered some soap and began slinging it at Claudia. All the girls soon joined in, squealing and giggling. It was easy because they had known each other for years, though the maids were careful never to cross the line as they played. Claudia hurled clumps of bubbles at them haphazardly.

“Oh no, Lady Claudia! I can see your chest!”

Claudia cocked her head at them. She saw no reason for them to act so embarrassed now, after all their time together.

“And? You ladies are surely accustomed to seeing it by now.” In fact, these maids had seen much more of her naked body than that, since they oversaw her care. The only reason she had such supple, silky skin was because of their meticulous maintenance routine.

“It isn’t the same,” Helen argued. “Not when we aren’t in work mode.”

“But you ladies have all the same parts I do.”

“No, my lady. Your body is the ideal.”

Claudia arched a brow. “Mine? Not yours, Helen?”

“I will admit my chest is more pronounced than yours, but in terms of overall balance, you are second to none.”

The other maids nodded in unison.

“Exactly, Lady Claudia! We all admire you greatly!”

“It cannot be overstated what a great honor it is to even touch your skin.”

“Yes! As far as we’re concerned, you are utterly perfect, my lady!” said another maid. “Oh dear, I think I might want to boast about today. Do you think I should?”

“You had best not,” Helen scolded her. “Do you have any idea what would happen if word got back to Miss Martha?”

The maids were all speaking so quickly that it was hard to keep up, but if Claudia wasn’t mistaken, there were some seriously exaggerated statements thrown into the mix.

“I agree,” Claudia said, dropping her voice to a whisper to match their hushed tones. “If Martha were to find out we’d done this, all of you would be in trouble.”

It went without saying that Claudia would be in hot water too. Martha had

softened greatly over the years, having been a stickler when Claudia was younger, but she was still insistent on proper etiquette.

“Precisely,” said Helen, “which is why you mustn’t get carried away. If you tempt the other ladies too much, it will only give the game away.”

“I wasn’t trying to tempt anyone,” Claudia said, confused. She hadn’t given the maids any reason to ogle her amorously.

Helen bit back a sigh, tilting her head back to stare up at the ceiling. “Why are you so oblivious at times like this when you are always so astute otherwise?”

“Hold on. Are you saying I did something?” Claudia had been careful to maintain a more appropriate distance with other women, ever since that incident when she’d tried to console Charlotte and failed to maintain proper distance.

Since Helen mentioned it, perhaps Claudia had failed to respect that distance this time by playing in the bath with the maids, but she hardly saw how it counted. These same women were always touching her naked body. It seemed a bit silly to draw a line with them at this point.

Before Helen could respond, one of the other maids clapped her on the shoulder and said, “It’s all right, Helen. We just need to steel ourselves and stay strong, then it will be fine.”

“Yes, absolutely. We know where we stand,” added another.

“We would rather die than do anything to trouble Lady Claudia.”

Helen’s face screwed up as she carefully contemplated their words. “All right,” she said at last. “But please make sure you’re prepared. Our ladyship has a bad habit of tempting people indiscriminately.”

“Of course we’re prepared. How many years do you think we’ve been working at this estate?”

“Besides, it would be too presumptuous for any of us to dare fall for the goddess sitting at the pinnacle, heads above all of the other aristocratic ladies

of the world."

"It's not like we aren't already used to her overpowering charm."

Claudia wondered if they had forgotten she was standing right there. Part of her felt the need to interject, but she waited patiently for them to finish instead. From the content of their conversation, she sensed she would stand little chance even if she tried to protest.

Once their conversation began to peter out, she looped her arm around Helen's. "So? Can we get back to playing?" she asked in a childish, imploring voice—one she often employed with Helen.

Helen stiffened for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, though let's switch to warm water so we don't get too chilly."

The other maids scrambled to do just that, even without an official order.

"I suppose we shouldn't be surprised that Helen has a heart of steel," muttered one of the maids. Normally they didn't whisper like this in front of Claudia, but perhaps the casual air of the room made them less inclined to refrain.

"My, Lady Claudia is so precious. *Too* precious. So precious, it might kill me."

"What happened to devoutly swearing you'd never be affected a moment ago?"

Claudia was hit with the overwhelming sense that she needed to be more careful, if her maids' words were anything to go by. Though she desperately needed to ask Helen what it was she had done that was so wrong in the first place.

Afterword

WE'RE AT VOLUME 3 NOW! Hello, it's me, Bakufu Narayama. This volume is much like the second one, introducing another new country! Claudia's influence continues to grow and spread. Even I'm anxious to see what happens next. I plan to follow Claudia's example—since she's always focusing on what's ahead—and do my best moving forward!

Complete change of topic, but I've started studying English. Problem is, I tend to get tired of things pretty fast, so who knows how long I'll stick with it. This has become a pattern for me. Every few years, I get a sudden burst of motivation to study English, but each time I end up giving up on it. I can only hope this time is an exception.

In my lifetime, the only thing I've never grown sick of and have actually stuck with is creating content. When I was younger, I wanted to be a mangaka. I even sent stuff in to a magazine when I was in junior high. Then I got hooked on fanfiction, though I've ultimately fallen into making original works now.

I realized at some point that I wouldn't be able to do manga, so I started making games as a hobby. I figured even someone like me could make visual novels. I made anything and everything I wanted, including all-ages games, BL games, otome games, and galgames (dating sims for guys). Looking back, I made so many mistakes, but they were valuable experiences that taught me the joy that comes with completing something. It became too difficult to balance life with making games, so I pivoted to posting webnovel chapters—which brings me to where I am today.

I guess you could say I'm still doing what I love. Even when I got tired of other things, I never got tired of creating. I think it's what I'm meant to do. And it's fun! I'm so happy I get to share my enjoyment with you. I'd love for my work to be an inspiration for others.

I know I say this every time, but thank you for picking up this book. My heart quivers when I think of how incredible it is that you, my reader, stopped and decided to pick up this book. I mean, think about it. There are so many forms of entertaining media out there, not just books! That makes it all the more precious to me that you would take an interest in my work and choose it out of all your options.

Like many of you, I am a reader, a gamer, and a listener. I've often lamented how few hours there are in a day, so becoming a creator myself, it makes me think about that. That's why I want to keep thanking you all, to really express my gratitude.

Thank you to my family and all of my readers for supporting me. Thank you to the publisher and all the people there who helped make this series possible. I hope you will continue to support me moving forward. I can only hope that we get to meet again.

Respectfully yours,

—BAKUFU NARAYAMA

FROM THE AUTHOR

Bakufu Narayama

I love novels, of course, but I adore manga and movies as well. I find that if I don't keep up with the latest works, all the inspiration inside of me dries right up. I would love to experience the ambience of a live stage performance someday.

FROM THE ILLUSTRATOR

Ebisushi

Claudia's new style and the new characters got me so excited about this volume! The sexual tension between Sylvester and Claudia had my heart racing as always. I love it!



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