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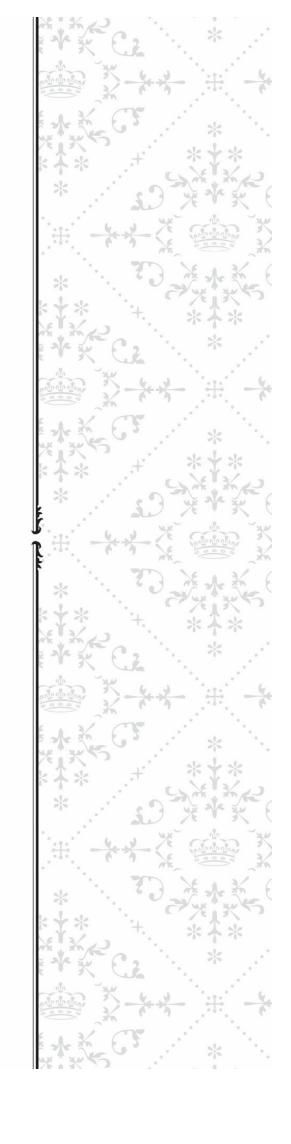
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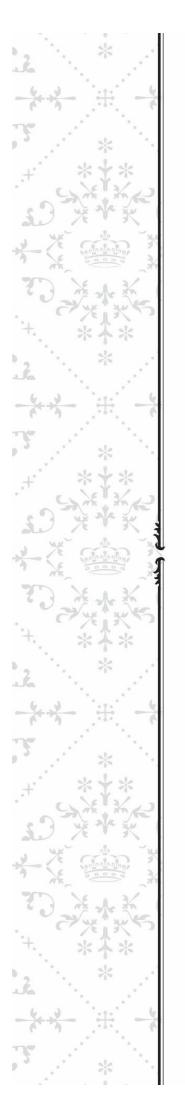




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Goes Back in Time and Aims to Become the

Altimate Villain



WRITTEN BY

Bakufu Narayama

Ebisushi



Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Alyssa Niioka ADAPTATION: Vida Cruz-Borja

cover design: H. Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Catherine Langford PROOFREADER: Mark DeJoy

EDITOR: T. Anne

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
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PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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Chapter 1:

The Villainess Is Condemned, Sent to a Brothel

The villainess claudia was proud and ignorant in equal measure. When she arrived at the royal palace, where the academy's graduation party was being held, she waltzed around with her shoulders rolled back and her head held high. It wasn't until her gaze landed on the crown prince that her sharp, intimidating eyes narrowed even further.

"Your Highness, I am your betrothed! Why did you not escort me in?!" she shrieked, feeling thoroughly dishonored by this discourtesy. Over the prince's shoulder, she caught a glimpse of Fermina—her half-sister. Her jaw tensed, teeth grinding. Why must you always get in my way?!

Claudia deeply detested her lowborn half-sister. The way Fermina shrank back in fear whenever their eyes met infuriated her. She also resented the prince for his perpetually detached demeanor.

"You are not my betrothed," he said firmly. "You are merely a candidate for future crown princess."

Claudia huffed at him. "Same thing!"

Even now, she never doubted for a moment that their engagement was assured. Her superior pedigree guaranteed it; the ducal house of Lindsay had a legacy dating back to the founding of the Harland Kingdom. There wasn't a man or woman in the realm who didn't know of their house. In fact, a previous royal marriage into their line made Crown Prince Sylvester her second cousin. Considering all the other hopefuls had less impressive backgrounds than hers, it was inconceivable that Claudia wouldn't be chosen.

She was about to point out as much out to the prince, but her older brother, Virgil, interrupted her. This very party was being held in his honor; his graduation from the academy was just on the horizon.

"It's not the same at all. Besides, you are no longer a candidate. Father has

disowned you completely and arranged for you to be sent to a nunnery."

Claudia struggled to process what her brother had said. Her eyes went as wide as dinner plates, and the world spun around her. Her throat was suddenly parched as she muttered to herself, "This cannot be."

A nunnery? Me? But I am a duke's daughter! I'm engaged to the crown prince! Claudia stared straight ahead, frozen and unable to comprehend.

"Our investigation uncovered how maliciously you've tormented Fermina," said Virgil. "I thought you were better than this. She may only be our half-sister, but she is still blood. I cannot believe you would sink to such sickening lows!"

The knight captain's son stood shoulder to shoulder with the prince, a sneer contorting his otherwise handsome face. Apparently he, too, had been apprised of the whole situation, for he was quick to join in and admonish her. "You even hired thugs to attack her! As a duke's daughter, have you no dignity? Where could you have learned such heinous behavior?!"

What in the world is going on here? Claudia wondered. She felt utterly lost.

The accusations against her were true, to be sure; she *had* sent thugs after Fermina to put her in her place. After all, Fermina was a product of her father's infidelity.

Above the vast hall hung a glimmering chandelier, and the orchestra's live performance echoed all around them. To celebrate their graduating students, the younger students had donned their finest gowns and suits with resplendent jewelry to match, making the whole party an ostentatious affair. Claudia wore a dress lavishly decorated with gemstones to celebrate her brother's upcoming graduation. Why was everyone ganging up on her here, at such an opulent party venue of all places?

"Please, enough of this!" The commotion drove even the detestable Fermina to speak up.

She had been hiding behind their brother until that moment, but it seemed she'd finally mustered up her courage. She emerged from Virgil's shadow and closed the gap between her and Claudia, her pink-tinted brown hair streaming behind her with every step. Then she threw her arms around Claudia, as though

offering her persecuted half-sister encouragement.

Claudia stiffened at the unwelcome contact.

"I'm certain we can settle this amicably if we just discuss things with my elder sister," Fermina went on. "So please, don't admonish her any further!"

Virgil shook his head. "Fermina, your compassion is lost on her."

"But, Elder Brother...!" As soon as she realized he wouldn't heed her protests, her adorable face flooded with sadness. When she hung her head, Claudia was the only one who glimpsed her hidden smirk.

"You little—" Claudia might have hurled insults at her half-sister had Fermina not quickly interjected.

"I believe in you, Elder Sister! I just know you'll see the error of your ways at the nunnery!" Fermina released her grip on Claudia's shoulders and let her arms fall limp at her sides. Her voice conveyed such grace and benevolence that those present were left in awe.

Claudia saw what lay beneath the good-girl facade—saw how Fermina's cheeks flushed with euphoria. It came as such a shock that she was struck speechless.

The edges of Fermina's lips curled, and her eyes narrowed into crescents. She was sneering at Claudia. And to make matters worse, she mouthed words only Claudia could read: *Serves you right*.

In a cruel twist of fate, more ill fortune befell Claudia as she was en route to the nunnery. Bandits descended on her carriage. They had specifically targeted her to sell to a high-class brothel frequented by the aristocracy. The one saving grace was that the brothel's older sex workers doted on Claudia.

Due to her virginity still being intact when she was sold off, her first night fetched the highest price ever recorded for any of the brothel's workers. That record did little to assuage the humiliation and bitterness that welled up inside of her. Whenever her emotions became too much to bear, and she dissolved into tears, the older women were always quick to comfort her. This was

markedly different from what she was used to; she'd always cried alone at her father's estate.



Claudia petulantly rejected their overtures at first, but it didn't take long for her to warm up to them once she realized how accepting and compassionate they were. She became especially attached to one woman in particular: Helen, a former earl's daughter who used her experience in high society to manipulate the hearts of her male clientele.

"You fool," Helen said. "I cannot believe you let yourself get lured into such a trap only to then land yourself here in a brothel!"

"Then you really believe everything I said?"

"Of course, Dee. You have the disposition of a child stuck in an adult's body. You aren't the type who can outwit others like that."

Claudia's cheeks flushed at the insinuation that she was simpleminded. Embarrassed, she opened her mouth to protest but could find no words to use in her defense. Helen was absolutely right and she knew it.

Helen gently stroked Claudia's cheek. "Fermina... Your half-sister through your father's side, yes? She really had you dancing in the palm of her hand, Dee. Piling on offense after offense. If we were to liken this situation to a novel, she basically made you out to be the antagonist. The villainess!"

In her attempts to rid her household of Fermina, Claudia had stooped to nefarious means. Helen insisted this was all part of a grander scheme. In hindsight, Claudia had always been accompanied by someone else whenever she drafted her plans. The ones who had suggested she hire thugs to attack Fermina were part of her own entourage—a collection of fellow female academy students whose families supported the aristocratic faction. None of them faced any consequences for the part they played, though. Only Claudia. It clicked for her that perhaps those girls were actually in cahoots with Fermina.

The political factions within the upper crust have nothing to do with me anymore, but before I was cast out, the aristocracy was split into two groups: the aristocratic faction and the royal faction.

Duke Lindsay, her father, maintained a neutral position, but Fermina in particular was popular among those in the aristocratic faction.

"Pretending to be a weak, fragile woman is a trick we use as well. I can see

how you and those around you were all fooled by her act. She's quite the shedevil."

"A she-devil, hmm?" Claudia echoed Helen's words absentmindedly.

"Worse yet, she stole your place and snagged the prince's hand in marriage."

The brothel Claudia had landed herself in was a treasure trove of information, thanks to its aristocratic customer base. Recent rumors suggested it was only a matter of time before Claudia's half-sister became the official crown princess. This came alongside the sneaking suspicion that Fermina had also orchestrated her capture and sale to the brothel.

Claudia sighed. "I can't believe a rotten snake like her will be the crown princess."

"This may sound odd, but perhaps that is just the kind of person best suited for such a role." Helen chuckled and added, "I mean, they couldn't very well give the position to someone extremely gullible."

That seemed to describe Claudia. She had definitely been ignorant and foolish in the past. Each time her mind wandered back to her school days, she felt like walloping her younger self.

Following that, the older sex workers took Claudia under their wing and taught her the basics of their trade. Claudia took to it like a fish to water, quickly joining their ranks and moving up until she secured the top sales spot at the brothel. But even with all her success, every night as she went to sleep, Claudia always saw the same thing: Fermina's mocking grin. It didn't matter that she'd managed to secure the most lavish lifestyle possible for a sex worker; it still didn't erase the cloud hanging heavy over her heart.

"It's supposed to be the Advent Festival today, but it may as well be a funeral! You look so gloomy!" Helen teased her.

"The last person I want to hear that from is someone as sick as you."

Their work put them at high risk of disease. Having contracted one such illness, Helen was nothing more than skin and bones now. It made Claudia's

heart ache just looking at her. She tried to mask her emotions with cutting words.

The oppressive atmosphere in the dim room became even more suffocating.

"I thought you came here to check on me and give me your well-wishes. Is that really an appropriate attitude to have toward someone with more experience? I showed you the ropes around here, lest you forget." Helen leaned up in her bed so she could peer directly into Claudia's face.

Claudia returned the gesture with a forced smile. While there was nothing but turmoil in her heart, the city outside had been alive with celebration since early morning. When she glanced out of the only window in the room, she caught a glimpse of displays and colorful banners. The sounds of an orchestra also trickled in from the streets.

Helen followed Claudia's gaze. "Religion aside, this celebration is one of the few forms of entertainment the common folk have. Some people even live solely for this day—that's how much they love this festival."

"I don't see myself finding any joy in it."

Festivals and the like were a prime opportunity for the citizens to find some reprieve from their normal, everyday lives. It was also a much-needed chance to recharge for those in positions of power.

Claudia had learned much since coming to the brothel. That included how to appeal to a man's emotions, of course, but she had also educated herself enough on politics to competently carry conversations on the topic with her clients—those who were themselves in positions of power.

The Advent Festival was a celebration of the prosperity brought by the capricious gods' descent from the heavens. And since they were so capricious, the Harland Kingdom maintained the belief that its people should always remain devout lest they provoke the gods' ire. The Advent Festival was a way of banding the people together so they might offer up their prayers.

"The reason you can't enjoy the festivities is because the crown princess will be introducing her firstborn soon, right?"

Claudia frowned. "Don't ask when you already know the answer."

Princess Fermina had given birth to her son last year. A parade was being held during the Advent Festival to officially introduce him to the public.

How pathetic must that wretched woman make me feel before she's finally satisfied? Claudia knew that whatever connection she had to Fermina ended long ago. No matter how much praise and influence she garnered for herself here at the brothel, she was still only a sex worker. Her family and house lived in an entirely different world now, far removed from where she was.

"I guess there's nothing for it," Helen said absently. "I will just have to pray to the capricious gods on your behalf, Dee."

"Oh? And what will you pray for, exactly?"

"For you to be able to smile." Helen punctuated her words with a wink. Though her face had grown gaunt from the sickness, her beauty remained undiminished.

Claudia studied her friend for a moment. The way the light spilled in through the window and across Helen's body made it seem as if the sun were celebrating her as much as the festivities outside. Claudia found herself captivated and smiled, thinking, I can never win against you, can I?

"As long as I have you, no such prayers are needed," she told Helen.

Helen sucked in breath, surprised. "Your skills at flattery sure have improved."

"I haven't earned top spot here for nothing. You should give me more credit."

If such capricious gods really did exist, however, Claudia had some prayers of her own.

I will gladly entertain you instead if you would only give mercy to Helen and let her live out her years comfortably. Please, just...don't take such an amazing person from me.

Three days after the bustling celebration, Claudia watched as Helen quietly drew her final breath.

Chapter 2:

The Villainess Goes Back in Time

"I KNEW IT. The gods don't exist."

"Lady Claudia, while I can imagine the grief you're going through, it is entirely inappropriate for a duke's daughter such as yourself to blaspheme the gods."

What a ridiculous thing to say! And I am no duke's daughter—not anymore.

Incensed, Claudia rounded on the woman who'd spoken with a glower, but her eyes went wide upon recognizing the familiar face. She gasped.

"What...what are you doing here?"

"The other maids came begging and pleading for me to see to you, claiming you refused to sleep even though you have an early morning tomorrow."

The head maid's ashen hair was pulled up in a tight bun, and she looked every bit the same as Claudia remembered despite the decade-long gap since their last meeting. It was as though the maid hadn't aged a day. But how could that be? What company's

cosmetics is she using to pull that off? No, no—that's not the point here.

"But you were fired when Father brought his mistress to live with us. I remember that," Claudia muttered as she stood by the window.

The head maid had kept a blank expression until that point, but her features abruptly hardened. "I do not know who you heard such nonsense from, but it is custom in aristocratic families to mourn for an entire year."

Exactly, yes. Father waited until precisely a year had passed since Mother's funeral before bringing his mistress and their daughter, Fermina, to live at our estate. Claudia had detested her father at the time. A mistress was bad enough, but his siring a daughter with her—who was the same age as Claudia!—was even more unforgivable. Then, as if to add even more fuel to the fire, he had poured all the love he had denied Claudia and Virgil into Fermina. The mere

memory made her stomach roil.

"Come now," the head maid insisted. "Tomorrow we will have a number of grieving guests here. I understand this must be terribly difficult for you, but you and your elder brother must be there to greet them together."

Claudia's chin jerked. It was only now that she realized how much she had to crane her neck to look up at the head maid. She found it odd, especially since they were of the same height when the woman was fired. Though she could hardly believe what this meant, she obediently crawled into her bed.

"Say, Martha... How old am I again?"

Martha shot her a dubious look and answered, "You are fourteen."

"Mother must have passed away, then."

"Yes, taken by a contagious disease, I'm afraid. Would you like me to bring you some warm milk to drink?"

"No, please leave me to my thoughts. I promise to wake up on time tomorrow morning."

Martha bowed her head and promptly left the room. Claudia watched her go before examining her room. Now that she got a better look, this was indeed her bedroom at her family's estate.

What's going on? I remember heading to Helen's funeral... It had been raining, and she'd clung to her best friend's headstone, weeping. I got terribly sick after that and...ah, now I see.

A sickness had crept into the chinks of her body's weakened immunity. It wasn't one of the typical diseases common to their trade, but since her work involved daily face-to-face contact with numerous clients, it left her and her peers easily exposed to all manner of illnesses.

So, I died from the same epidemic that claimed Mother, Claudia concluded.

No one had been with her to watch her breathe her last. She had been too wary of the others catching it and had refused to let anyone come close. Thus, she had passed away the same way her mother had when Claudia was just fourteen—quietly and alone. They had met the same fate.

That's right. Mother left us for the afterlife without anyone at her side. Oh, how lonely she must have felt.

At the very least, Claudia had felt that loneliness keenly when it was her time. She'd been surrounded by a collection of luxury furniture and glittering jewels, but none of that was enough to soothe her hurt.

Does that mean the capricious gods really do exist? Why had she died and come back to life, returning to her fourteen-year-old self? But if they were going to bring me back, I wish they had done it before Mother passed away. Though I know how much I hated her in the past.

Claudia's mother had been a strict disciplinarian, to the point that young Claudia assumed her mother and Martha both hated her. She was convinced of it. Only now, with maturity and experience under her belt, did she finally realize that it was just the opposite. After all, the antithesis of love is not hate, but apathy. If her mother had really loathed her, she would have left Claudia's education entirely to personal tutors and interacted with Claudia as little as possible. The reason she had been so demanding of perfection was because she didn't want any of Claudia's peers to look down on her—to make sure her father's lover and their illegitimate daughter didn't hamper her in the future.

Judging by the way Martha reacted, I bet she and Mother already knew about Father's lover.

It wasn't all that unusual for noble lords to have a mistress. Their harsh society made it difficult for women to make it through life on their own. It became a status symbol for men who had the financial ability to keep a mistress and act as her guardian of sorts. Most of these women were widows down on their luck after losing their husbands. But Claudia's father wasn't exhibiting charity or status; he had merely fallen in love with another woman.

Good etiquette and education were a woman's weapons. Claudia's mother and Martha had tried to teach her as much, as had Helen and the other more experienced sex workers when she first entered the brothel.

Mother, I promise you I won't make the same mistakes this time. I will answer the love you showed me by doing better now that I have a second chance.

Claudia closed her eyes and clasped her hands in front of her chest.

Helen shouldn't be working at the brothel yet. I need to do whatever it takes to prevent her from being sent there. As for Fermina...I won't let her have her way this time.

Perhaps she was still deathly sick and this was all merely a comforting dream, but even so, Claudia was determined.

The ignorant, foolish child-Claudia was no more. In her place stood adult-Claudia with all the life experience she'd accrued at that brothel. Yet, while her mind was years ahead of her body, she fell sound asleep the moment her emotions settled, just as she had as a short-tempered, petulant child.

The next morning, Claudia found herself standing beside her father and elder brother, dressed head-to-toe in mourning garb. Her father greeted each visitor while she and her brother gave only silent nods of appreciation for everyone's attendance.

When she first saw her father and brother, looking far younger than she last remembered them, she nearly broke into a smile. Thankfully, she had enough sense to suppress it.

During spare moments between greeting their guests, Claudia stole glances at Virgil. We really matured fast in the year after Mother passed away, she recalled. That was true physically, though Claudia reached her full height at the end of that year and grew no more. By the time the graduation party rolled around, Virgil was a whole twenty centimeters taller. The way he towered over her, glaring down his nose, made her stomach shrivel.

At the time, I was intimidated, but seeing him as young as he is now, he looks adorable.

Claudia and Virgil had inherited their father's raven hair and crystal-blue eyes, but their beautiful—albeit sharp—features came from their mother. In the future, Virgil's looks would leave many a woman swooning, but now, he looked more boy than man—thus triggering a woman's innate motherly instincts.

I used to envy my brother for his silky-straight hair, but knowing that my own

wavy locks are just like mother's makes me think maybe they aren't so bad after all. More than anything, she preferred to resemble her father as little as possible, given how detestable she found him. It's not as though I don't understand where he was coming from, but still.

Claudia's mother was rigid when it came to proper etiquette, on top of being very outspoken and opinionated. Even after her death, thick tension lingered over the estate. It had been so stifling when she was alive that perhaps it was inevitable Claudia's father had lost himself in a mistress. It wasn't unusual, really. She had encountered many such clients at the brothel as well. The men there sought comfort from sex workers rather than mistresses of their own.

What I cannot accept is how he has essentially abandoned me and Virgil by offering all his love to Fermina, Claudia thought. Perhaps it was because their faces so resembled their mother's that he wasn't as fond of them, but it didn't change the fact that they were his children too.

Unlike their father, who could flee and seek solace, his children were confined to their oppressive estate—a fact she wished he'd considered. If there was anything that greatly bothered her and Virgil about their mother, it was that she had never shown a modicum of compassion, even toward her own children.

It's like the carrot and stick without a carrot. It didn't help that, as Mother's milk-sister, Martha acted as Mother's puppet.

In part, Claudia couldn't help but lament that the situation would have been much improved if only Martha had been the one to provide the carrot, thus striking a better balance within the household. Though she was head maid at their ducal estate, her original employment had been with her mother's family estate. She was brought to her father's estate when Claudia's mother married into the family.

And that's also why she was fired the moment Father brought his mistress to live with us.

Her father had no attachments to anything his late wife left behind, not even the help. Claudia was glad of that at first, since it meant suffering less incessant nagging, but now she felt like Martha's departure had been a mistake.

First, I should start by keeping Martha at the estate. If I can prove how

necessary she is to the household, surely Father won't fire her, right?

Plus, growing closer to Martha would give Claudia another ally. Martha had worshipped Claudia's mother for years, after all. Claudia couldn't picture her being too pleased about the duke bringing a mistress into the household.

Most of all, I need to strengthen my own position in the house if I'm going to save Helen.

Claudia maintained a mournful expression on her face for the fresh loss of her mother, but at her sides, her tiny fists balled with renewed determination.

Once the ceremony wrapped up, the only people left in front of Claudia's mother's grave were her close family. Claudia's father was quick to turn on his heel and start toward his carriage, anxious to leave. Her heart hardened at that.

Claudia threw herself at her mother's headstone and wept, just as she had with Helen's grave before she went back in time—no, actually, she sobbed even harder this time.

"Mother, why have you left me behind? Don't...don't leave me all alone!" Claudia wailed at the top of her lungs.

Her father paused, bewildered by her sudden fit. Virgil was also speechless. Both men were accustomed to her short temper and subsequent outbursts, but never before had they seen her so vulnerable, with tears streaking down her cheeks as she openly shared her emotions.

Of course not. I only ever cried when I was alone.

Her mother was the one who'd taught her that. Aristocrats weren't allowed to cry in front of others. Claudia may have detested her studies, but she'd been thoroughly brainwashed by her mother's teachings.

"Claudia, you're embarrassing yourself." Virgil placed a hand on her shoulder. His words were harsh, but his voice was too weak for a proper scolding.

Though only older than Claudia by two years, Virgil had likely sensed the love hidden behind their mother's harsh discipline. As with Claudia, their father showed no interest whatsoever in him. The only love he'd ever known was his

mother's. His loss was just as great as hers. Despite her death, he was still trying to uphold the values she'd taught them.

Claudia continued weeping, throwing her arms around him. "Who cares?! Don't you feel lonely at all with her gone? I do! Now that Mother's passed, who am I supposed to rely on?"

Their father frequented his mistress's home and rarely returned to the family estate. Even Virgil was busy with his own studies and only ever saw her during mealtimes.

"Claudia..." Virgil's voice wavered, thick with emotion. He carried the same grief. Tears glistened in his eyes, finally spilling over as a sob racked his chest.

The sadness Claudia felt at her mother's death was genuine, but a part of her remained eerily calm through this.

Father and my elder brother claim to place great importance on proper etiquette, but both have a fondness for delicate girls who don't fit that rigid mold. Her father's mistress and Fermina were a prime example of that. But hell if I let myself lose to them.

This was more about her pride as a former sex worker than as a noble lady.

"I promise you I'll be better from now on, Elder Brother. I'll even take my studies seriously. So, please...don't leave me."

"Of course. I promise I won't. I'll be right here by your side. In Mother's place, I'll be the one to protect you," Virgil assured her.

The two made this vow in front of their mother's grave. Their father looked on awkwardly from afar. Mentally, Claudia stuck her tongue at him. *Hmph!*Serves you right to learn just how disgusted your own children are with you and your behavior. But I suppose I should extend something of an olive branch here.

It chafed her to give the man anything, but he was her father and the head of their house. She couldn't ignore his authority.

Claudia slipped out of Virgil's embrace and made an exaggerated show of wiping her tears as she faced the duke. "Father, I swear to you too that I will be a better daughter...in hopes that I might eventually earn more of your

approval." As she finished, she purposefully shed another tear, letting it carve a trail down her cheek. It was difficult for her to use all the same techniques when her body was so much smaller than she had grown accustomed to, but she somehow managed to time it perfectly.

"Uh, right." His eyes softened—a good indication her acting was effective.

Even though her father hated their mother, it didn't seem as though he harbored the same resentment for his children, at least. If her mother had only been a bit kinder, things between them might have been different.

Anyway, this is only the beginning. If Fermina is a she-devil, then I'll surpass her and become the most heinous, wicked she-devil who ever lived!

When Claudia returned to their estate, she made a promise to Martha as well.

"I will become the perfect noblewoman, just like Mother."

Martha's eyes misted over. She smiled in open delight, saying, "If anyone can manage that, it is most definitely you, Lady Claudia!"

"Yes. I am my mother's daughter, after all. I hope you will continue to guide me."

"Of course!"

As promised, Claudia dedicated herself to her studies. Her reputation steadily improved. Where once she had been petulant, she was now much calmer and down-to-earth. She quickly mastered aristocratic etiquette, which earned her tutor's complete seal of approval. Now no one could say a disparaging word about her. For Claudia, it was all a rehearsal of what she already learned at the brothel. She'd also become far more adept at reading people, which helped her foster a much closer relationship with Virgil.

"Won't you take a break soon, Elder Brother?" Claudia asked when she visited her brother's room. She'd timed her arrival exactly when he normally stopped studying, followed by a maid pushing along a serving cart with a tea set. The tea set rattled as they entered.

Virgil shot her a sunny smile, touched by her thoughtfulness. She never

remembered him beaming at her like this in her first life. It was proof she was making progress.

"How could I say no to you, Dee?"

He was also using her nickname now. It was plain to everyone how much he doted on her.

"I'll be the one to prepare our tea today," Claudia said.

Virgil's eyes widened. "You? Really?"

She giggled. "Yes. I have been practicing especially for this."

Claudia prepared their tea with such grace and finesse that it was hard to believe she was only fourteen. Still, her features remained somewhat girlish, which further endeared her to Virgil. In his eyes, she was adorable.

"You must be so busy with all your other studies. How did you ever find time to practice?" Virgil asked her.

"During breaks. My first attempt was bitter sludge you couldn't even force down your throat." Claudia let a tinkling laugh slip past her lips, careful not to sound too unladylike, as her maids smiled warmly from a respectable distance.

From time to time, Claudia would fall back into old habits from her previous life, but those minor gaffes did nothing to hinder the increasing fondness of those around her. The previously tense atmosphere that hung over their estate had begun to soften of late.

"Here you are. Take a sip." Sounding proud to the point of swagger, she slid one of the cups toward her brother. She loosed another peal of laughter as she settled in the seat across him.

Virgil's eyes flew wide open as he took a sip of her brew.

"How is it?"

"Delicious," he enthused. "This is incredible. I think this may be the most enjoyable tea I've ever tasted."

"Truly?! I'm overjoyed to hear it!" This time, Claudia took care that her reaction didn't sound *too* dramatic.

She knew all of Virgil's preferences, from the sort of tea he preferred to what reactions would please him. He was oblivious to all her precise calculations, his attention too focused on how adorable she was. His expression melted into one of genuine joy.

"I would like to drink this again."

"Of course! For you, Elder Brother, I'd be happy to brew and pour another cup anytime."

Virgil's good favor appeased her appetite for approval.

"I was only able to accomplish this thanks to everyone's support," she added.

"'Everyone' being...?"

"The maids, of course. In particular, the most veteran members of our staff. Their work is awe-inspiring. They taught by example, and every brew they produced was incredibly delicious. I was so moved by their skill."

Virgil furrowed his brow. "I would've thought you were keeping a respectable distance between yourself and the maids."

According to their mother's teachings, one wasn't to be overly familiar with the help. Claudia understood her rationale. Ladies were expected to maintain a line between themselves and those who served them. At the same time, Claudia thought it imperative to build a relationship of trust with the family maids.

It was the servants at the brothel who collected detailed information about each customer. They were often of great help to Claudia. In this second goaround, Claudia intended to elevate her mother's teachings and integrate them into her own style. After all, the majority of the maids working at the duke's estate were ladies from lower-ranking noble houses. Their jobs here were a sort of live-in apprenticeship for them to learn proper high society decorum and earn personal recommendations from the duke for future employment or marriage opportunities. Claudia would use every avenue available to get information on Helen.

"Martha isn't too keen on it," Claudia admitted, "but I spend more of my time with the maids than with anyone else." By implying that the maids were the

ones who kept her company in the long hours her brother was gone, she gave him no grounds to scold her.

At sixteen, Virgil was busy studying at the academy and didn't return home until the evening. He'd promised to stay at Claudia's side, but the time he spent with her scarcely changed. Her words must have made him feel guilty. As she anticipated, he made no attempts to criticize her behavior. That wasn't the important part, though.

It's quite obvious now that I think about it. Martha has a tenuous relationship with the senior maids here.

Claudia's mother brought Martha from her own family home, then appointed her as head maid. From the perspective of the senior staff, Martha was new blood who had suddenly waltzed in and become their boss. None of them were pleased.

At first, Claudia assumed it was her father's single-handed decision that resulted in Martha's firing. Now she realized it could have been the other staff pressuring her father from behind the scenes.

The best option is for Martha to conduct herself wisely so the other staff have no ammunition against her—but social shrewdness doesn't seem to be her forte.

Martha, like Claudia's mother, was a stern woman. Claudia could barely contain a sigh just thinking about it. At any rate, Claudia had no choice but to maneuver secretly on Martha's behalf. Part of the reason the atmosphere at the estate had changed was, in fact, because of Claudia's efforts to allay the other servants' dissatisfaction.

Having the duke's direct heir recognize their efforts should please them.

That was why, rather than express her gratitude to them directly, she was careful to convey it to her brother while they watched. She didn't forget to brighten his spirits either.

"Being alone at home has given me a lot of time to think. Part of the reason I've taken a renewed interest in embroidery is thanks to the maids' inspiration." Claudia clapped her hands together. "Oh, there's an idea! If I embroider a

handkerchief, would you do me the honor of carrying it with you?"

In truth, she'd practiced embroidery at the brothel. Her choice to pursue it now was because she already achieved some level of skill with it.

"For me? Of course, I would be delighted."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that! I'll put all my effort into making something that pleases you. I hope that if you carry it around, at the academy or otherwise, you'll remember me whenever you look at it."

Virgil shook his head. "Even without a handkerchief, you're always on my mind. I look forward to seeing what you make. I should get you a gift too."

He proceeded to ask her what she wanted. Claudia reassured him she would be happy with anything he chose while subtly hinting she'd prefer something practical. Virgil interpreted it as her wanting a token to symbolize their close relationship. He was in even higher spirits than before as he continued sipping his tea. That is, until the butler popped into the room. It was rare for him to interrupt them.

"What is it?" Virgil asked, bemused.

"The master is on his way."

There was only one person the servants here referred to as master.

What business does he have coming here? Claudia wondered. Normally, he keeps us at arm's length and receives reports about estate affairs from the butler.

Her father had remained distant with them ever since their mother's funeral. His sudden return had her and Virgil trading puzzled looks.

"For now, we should all go out to welcome him," the butler suggested.

Virgil nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose. How much longer until he arrives?"

Claudia listened to their exchange, cocking her head. Strange. The mourning period is still in progress, so surely he can't mean to bring Fermina and her mother here yet.

Virgil seemed no privier to the reason for their father's return than Claudia.

"Father, welcome home," Claudia said, joining her brother and the other servants outside to greet him.

Her father was temporarily dumbstruck. Although his daughter was still a child, she conducted herself like the duchess of the household. His gaze absently wandered to the other faces present, as if seeking affirmation.

Hah, look at him. He's so surprised. The same children he treated with such cold indifference came all the way out here to give him a warm welcome. Of course he was shocked. Virgil's expression betrayed no emotion at all, but the atmosphere around him was softened by Claudia's presence at his side.

Claudia had some none-too-flattering thoughts about her father and his neglect of their household, but all the same, she found this farce entertaining.

"Dinner has been prepared. Come," Claudia beckoned.

"R-right."

The butler had already informed her and Virgil that their father intended to eat with them, then rejoin his lover at a separate residence. His lack of luggage indicated he planned to stay no longer than absolutely necessary, which was why she ushered him into the dining hall.

Claudia's father obediently followed behind her. Once they were all seated at the table, the servants brought out the appetizers. The help were nervous at the master's long overdue return. Naturally, the air around the dining table was tense.

"How did I do?" Claudia asked, purposefully breaking the awkward silence with her cheerful voice. "Was my welcome adequate?"

"Oh, yes. I barely recognized you."

At least he answered when she asked him a question. She flashed a genuine smile, pleased her father wasn't entirely disinterested in her.

It's as I suspected, then. Father was merely running from Mother's severe and unforgiving nature.

He'd kept his distance from her and her brother, but he didn't hate them—though his behavior as a parent was still questionable. Nonetheless, Claudia saw some hope of yet bridging the chasm that divided them. She was far beyond thirsting for her father's love, but if she was going to go head-to-head with Fermina, her father's trust was indispensable.

"Thank goodness!" Claudia said. "That's such a relief to hear." She pressed a hand to her chest. She was cautious to keep her every gesture childlike, hoping to leave her father with the impression that her flawless manners were a result of strenuous effort. Mother never did learn how to separate business from private matters.

Etiquette was to be observed out in public, yes, but it was unnecessary in the privacy of one's own home. There was a saying that encapsulated men's desires perfectly: men want a lady during the day and a sex worker at night. Her mother failed to realize that. She took what she was told at face value and tried to brute force her way through her marriage.

Perhaps I inherited my mother's simplistic way of thinking. Even so, it was up to Claudia whether to let herself become a fool. She resolved once more not to tread that same path.

As Claudia nodded to herself with renewed determination, the men at the table watched her fondly. She appreciated that their misunderstandings were to her benefit. Still, as a duke's daughter, she couldn't help feeling a little apprehension. I know it only now that I can better read people, but my father and elder brother are far too gullible. I'm sure it's partly because I'm family that they let their guard down.

Recalling how easily Fermina pulled the wool over their eyes, she now found their gullibility painfully obvious. Alas, Claudia suspected their trusting natures had the unfortunate downside of making them susceptible to the machinations of other women. The issue with Fermina was a prime example. She wanted to warn them ahead of time, but it would defeat the purpose if they became suspicious of her. This precarious balance she had to maintain made her head ache.

"Dee really has been devoting herself to her lessons and studies," Virgil said.

"Surely you've heard the evaluations of her private tutor for yourself, haven't you, Father?"

"Indeed. I have received the reports. I decided to drop by today to see for myself."

Claudia studied her father. So *that* was the reason he'd returned. She decided it was prudent to proceed with her countermeasures against Fermina little by little. At present, my elder brother already treasures our relationship, so I should work on maintaining that.

In her previous life, Virgil had been wary of their father's mistress and their illegitimate daughter when they first arrived at the estate. Fermina had gradually won him over, but if Claudia could steer him to maintain his wariness, he wouldn't abandon her to become Fermina's staunch ally, at the very least.

The duke noticed her gaze. His lips thinned into a line. "Claudia, you are to attend a tea party with His Highness, the crown prince."

Wait, what?

"Given what a fine lady you're growing into, I have every bit of faith you'll be selected as one of his bridal candidates. I'll make sure you are briefed on the details later."

She hesitantly bobbed her head. "V-very well then."

This didn't happen last time! Beneath the table, she clasped her hands. This had to be the *real* reason her father returned.

Picking up on her anxiety, Virgil offered her a comforting smile. "With the way you are now, Dee, you'll be just fine. You may be a little nervous in front of His Highness, but he'll understand that and take it into consideration."

"Judging by the marks you've received in geography and history, you'll have no trouble finding common discussion topics," her father added. "His Highness is such a wise and benevolent young man that he even inspects the orphanages himself. Provided you don't do anything too careless, you'll have no issues."

It was rare for her father to reassure her like this. She had no choice but to agree to do her best, telling herself this was an opportunity. With her wealth of

experience this time around, she wouldn't be easily outdone by noble ladies of the same age.

"In the past, you could hardly sit still, remember?" her father went on.

She nodded. "Yes, I have only been able to move past that thanks to Martha's —ahem, that is, thanks to the head maid's help."

I think this may be the first time Father has spoken to me this way.

Claudia carefully schooled her expression, but on the inside, she was reeling. Maybe she was only being forgetful, but as far as she could remember, the only conversations she and her father shared were impersonal and businesslike.

"Isn't she strict with you?" her father asked, referring to Martha.

Claudia nodded vigorously. "Oh, she most definitely is. There were many times I thought I might completely lose heart...but that's also what makes it worth it."

There was no point in denying it. Her father knew that Martha equaled her mother in sternness. Still, she made a point of emphasizing the necessity of Martha's disposition. She couldn't risk her father firing her.

"You know I have a bad habit of being too self-indulgent, don't you, Father? Our head maid is the whole reason I've learned some self-discipline. And whenever I feel I'm at my wits' end, my elder brother is there to support me." She beamed at Virgil, and his gaze softened.

The atmosphere had grown warm and inviting by the time the two siblings displayed their affection for one another. Unfortunately, their father immediately returned to his mistress's abode once his business was finished—just as he'd originally planned—but she thought the chasm between them had shrunk a little, thanks to the smooth conversation they could enjoy as a family at last.

Chapter 3:

The Villainess Attends a Tea Party with His Royal Highness

The moment has arrived. It's time to face the crown prince.

Claudia was seated in front of a mirror as her maids attended to her. Her thoughts were preoccupied with the upcoming tea party. She had greeted the prince before at banquets and such, but this was her first time meeting with him privately, just the two of them.

I was shocked when the official invitation came. I was sure all the bridal candidates would be invited together. By this point, gossip was already spreading about the crown prince's potential partners. Besides Claudia, three other ladies had been selected. She assumed they each would be invited to private tea parties with His Highness, but from what she'd gathered, she was to be the first.

It makes perfect sense, given my status as a duke's daughter. But this didn't happen last time. Does that mean my future was already in question back then?

Prior to her disownment, Claudia had absolute confidence that she would be the prince's bride-to-be. Perhaps she'd merely been blind to the truth, and they had long since discounted her as a possibility well before that. Per aristocratic tradition, the crown prince wouldn't officially select his bride until after graduation.

I would hate to have Fermina steal him right under my nose without preventing it, so this works out perfectly. I wanted to remain a candidate.

As long as Claudia was in the running, Fermina wouldn't stand a chance. If the prince just so happened to fall for her, that was another story.

Gleaning Virgil's preferences was easy because they lived together. However, Claudia had to rack her brain when it came to the prince. At the very least, she knew he'd hated the old Claudia. Whether he had genuinely developed affections for Fermina was beyond her knowledge.

To maintain political balance, selecting his bride from a ducal house would be the most prudent choice.

In the political arena, it was only with the king's approval of parliamentary decisions that policies became enforceable law. Parliament itself was run by the aristocracy, which was further separated into two factions: the royal faction, consisting of the old guard—long-established aristocratic families—and the aristocratic faction, consisting of newly titled nobility.

The latter group was largely made up of merchant families who had risen to prominence and earned their titles through dedicated effort. More and more of these types were demanding less power for the royal family and more power for the aristocracy. Their aims ran contrary to the interests of the well-established nobles, who held vast regional territories, so they declared themselves the royal faction to oppose the new blood.

The Lindsays belonged to the royal faction, though Claudia's father expressed compassionate understanding for the plight of the new aristocrats—thus putting him in a neutral position. It was difficult for the aristocratic faction to go against him, making a marriage arrangement with his family all the more desirable. Claudia didn't discount the possibility that the prince had selected her as his crown princess purely for political reasons.

It will be difficult to ascertain either way until I meet him, she decided.

The maids finished their work. As they stepped back, Claudia surveyed herself. She'd donned a fancier gown than usual; it was a lovely violet color with a chaste design. Claudia had been careful to emphasize modesty over all else—even the frills on the skirt were kept to a minimum. Her maids recommended something more girlish and in keeping with what young ladies her age adored these days, but she knew what matched her best.

In the past, I wore whatever I wanted, but loving a design doesn't necessarily mean it will suit you. Claudia had inherited her mother's sharp, narrow eyes, which made her ill-suited to gowns adorned with copious frills and ribbons. Conversely, bold and mature designs didn't fit Fermina, proving that everyone had certain styles that did and did not flatter them.

Pleased with the final result, Claudia thanked her maids and set about her

final preparations for the tea party. She just had one more request.

"Would you mind doing me one more favor and rewrapping the bandages on my fingers?"

Their tea party was held indoors rather than in a garden. Fortunately, they were seated beside a large window. Bright rays of sunlight poured over them. If she gazed out, there was plenty of vivid greenery to please the eye.

"My deepest gratitude to you, Your Highness, for taking the time to meet with me today," Claudia said as she performed the perfect curtsy. She didn't settle on the sofa until the prince offered his permission.

There was a desk firmly positioned between them. On the other side, hovering just behind the prince, was a redheaded boy.

It's Tristan, the knight captain's son.

Claudia remembered seeing him on the day she was condemned to a nunnery. He bluntly chastised her for her actions too. She knew, in retrospect, that she completely deserved everyone's anger, so she held no grudge against him. Although she'd been tricked into committing much of what she'd done, there was no denying the maliciousness behind her actions.

She was the same age as both the crown prince and Tristan, so they looked more boyish than when she'd last seen them. It's the same as when I saw my elder brother. Maybe it's because I'm mentally older, but they just look so adorable!

Judging by how Tristan stood directly behind the prince, he was present as His Highness's personal bodyguard. It was a strange choice, since Tristan was still an inexperienced knight. On the other hand, the very occurrence of this whole tea party was pretty odd in Claudia's book. All she could do was pray that the reason he'd brought his bodyguard wasn't because he hated the idea of being alone in a room with her.

"As a symbol of our budding friendship, might I offer a small token?" Claudia asked, holding up a small bundle.

Tristan strode forward to receive it. He was still undergoing training to become a full-fledged knight, but he conducted himself with surprisingly perfect decorum as he accepted the bundle. His eyes briefly landed on her bandaged fingers, which Claudia knew because she'd watched his gaze closely.

When His Highness took the bundle from Tristan, he tilted his head to the side. His silver hair, cut short at his ears, shifted with the motion.

Ugh, he's so adorable! I might mistake him for a porcelain doll if he sits perfectly still and keeps his mouth shut.

His long lashes seemed to shimmer as though moistened by morning dew, framing glittering golden eyes that were emblematic of Harland's royal family. The prince also had a slender, regal nose and thin lips. With skin like alabaster, he was breathtakingly beautiful—agonizingly so, in Claudia's eyes.

"Mind if I open it now?" he said.

"Please, be my guest. Though, I will warn you that it's nothing special." Claudia forced a smile, inwardly berating herself for nearly being bewitched by his looks.

Nestled inside the bundle was a handkerchief embroidered with the emblem of the royal house—Claudia's handiwork.

"Huh, so the rumors are true. You're talented at embroidery." The prince lifted the handkerchief up and handed it to Tristan so he could inspect it as well. She assumed that he'd given her gift a passing grade.

"Rumors, you say?" Claudia furrowed her brows.

"You also sent a handkerchief to your father, the duke, didn't you? Even I've heard how incredible your needlework is."

It was true; she had given handkerchiefs to both her father and Virgil. There was no opportunity for her to hand it directly to the duke, however, so she'd enlisted a butler to deliver it to his office. She never dreamed rumors were circulating about it.



Fermina is also adept at embroidery, so I was certain he wouldn't even bat an eyelash at my work.

But the existence of rumors indicated her father had not only opened her package, but shown off the handkerchief to other people.

Claudia nodded inwardly to herself. Of course. That makes sense. He wouldn't be able to show off his illegitimate daughter's embroidery, after all.

Claudia's legitimacy had allowed him to freely brag. She was grateful now that she'd spent so much time practicing her needlework at the brothel.

"H-how embarrassing," she stammered. "What I sent my father had some rough patches on it, I'm afraid."

"This is a lovely gift. I assume those wounds on your hands are from your needlework?" The prince's gaze was focused on her bandages.

Claudia quickly hid her hands from view. This was precisely why she asked her maid to rebandage her hands before she left the estate. I hope this gives him the impression that I'm delicate but determined.

It wasn't entirely a sham; Claudia was still unaccustomed to her much younger body, so she'd pricked her fingers numerous times throughout the process. But she wouldn't deny that she'd exaggerated the amount of bandages necessary for her wounds.

"Yes, I'm afraid I'm not quite used to embroidering yet. I apologize that you saw something so unsightly." She lowered her gaze.

"How could it be unsightly when it's proof of your dedication? It's incredible you were able to accomplish this."

Tristan nodded solemnly. He had a strong sense of righteousness, and even he was acknowledging her efforts.

"It's heartening to hear you say that, Your Highness," said Claudia.

"This is a perfect opportunity, actually. You may call me Sylvester. I'll likewise refer to you simply as Claudia."

"Thank you, that is a great honor."

The tea party was proceeding smoothly. Claudia assumed things were headed in a positive direction since he'd permitted her to refer to him by his first name rather than his title. Still, there was something unsettlingly cold about Sylvester's responses.

The hands she hid from his view grew damp with sweat. *I can't read his emotions at all.* From the moment the tea party commenced, his expression had been frozen in a warm smile. It really did give the impression that she was communicating with a porcelain doll.

Is it just that I'm used to my elder brother being too transparent? No, that can't be it. I can read Tristan's emotions as well.

Tristan was trying to maintain a convincing poker face, but when he admired her embroidery, he looked genuinely impressed.

No, it wasn't a failing on her part—Sylvester was the abnormal one.

Are all the members of the royal family like this? That's a terrifying thought. Claudia had completely forgotten that she was much the same, having trained herself to only display the emotions she wanted others to see.

Claudia suddenly felt as though she was pitted against an enemy the likes of which she'd never faced before. At this rate, she was going to lose confidence in her ability to stick with this whole potential bride business. If he was going to be this utterly unreadable, she had half a mind to say Fermina could have him. But then...

"You could speak more openly with me." Sylvester shot her a mischievous look, eyes narrowed. It was the first sign of emotion she had seen from him.

Is he testing me? She got the impression he was scrutinizing her.

His golden eyes seemed to twinkle in the light, but perhaps that was just a figment of her imagination. Still, the instincts she'd cultivated at the brothel were never wrong. So, the correct answer to this must be...

"My apologies, Your Highness," she said with a sheepish smile. Her response was subdued. Bland. But now wasn't the time to be bold. Her father had assured her all would be fine provided she didn't do anything too careless.

"You're very reserved, I see."

His voice sounds so gentle, but my heart is thundering. I wonder why that is. It wasn't the sort of racing pulse a young maiden dreamed of experiencing with a handsome young man. Claudia felt more like a lamb locked in a wolf's gaze. She maintained a calm facade, but underneath it, her stomach was twisting in knots.

Ah, I know exactly what this is.

They were both wearing masks, each trying to deceive the other. It was only fortunate that their conversation thus far had lacked barbs from either side.

As soon as Claudia returned to her room, she released herself from her dress, donned something more comfortable, and collapsed on her bed. She loved the way her body sank into the plush mattress.

"I'm at my limit," she muttered under her breath. The whole tea party had really done a number on her nerves.

No one ever told me that Prince Sylvester was such a formidable fellow.

Claudia would have no time to come up with countermeasures for Fermina if she was too busy dealing with the prince.

Throughout the rest of their encounter, Sylvester had attempted to draw something out of her, though she wasn't sure what. Her stomach was wound so tight that she thought she'd be sick. Fortunately, Claudia was knowledgeable enough to avoid making a faux pas, but she would prefer to avoid ever doing a one-on-one tea party with the prince again.

I can't pretend to be stupid either, since we have the same personal tutor. Not only did he know about her exemplary needlework, but he was also informed about her grades.

Their conversation had been lively enough, at least on the surface, but the tea party hadn't even lasted an hour. Claudia's tension had stretched the event into an eternity.

He gave me the impression that if I let anything slip, he'd criticize me for it

without mercy. Maybe he really does hate me. Maybe it would be better if he just criticized me outright. Oh, confound it! I don't know what the right answer is!

Besides, she had her hands full with Fermina already. This arrangement with Sylvester was nothing but a burden. If it meant continuing this whole complicated charade with him, then she was tempted to shove him off on Fermina.

But I don't want that she-devil to hold that sort of power.

If Fermina did snag the prince, Claudia's first timeline would repeat. Fermina's first move would be to get rid of Claudia, after all. Claudia's only option in order to protect herself was to maintain the status quo. Though that did nothing to improve her dour mood, the softness of the mattress did soothe her exhaustion. Her eyelids drooped as sleep crept in.

Martha, the head maid, later roused her from sleep. "Look at you, Lady Claudia! Such an unbecoming way for a young lady to fall asleep! Please either crawl into your bed properly or grab a blanket to cover yourself. You'll catch a cold otherwise!"

Oh, please. I'm already on my bed, even if I'm not in it. How is that unbecoming? Claudia swallowed the urge to say as much. She understood that Martha's true concern was that she would fall ill, not the way she'd carelessly dived onto her mattress.

"If you're going to lie down, you should also rest your head on your pillow," Martha advised.

"My apologies. I'll be more careful from now on."

It was better for her to apologize, since it seemed as though Martha wouldn't stop nagging her otherwise.

Claudia mimicked her mother's posture, her back ramrod straight. Martha nodded, satisfied with this. It seemed to Claudia that Martha greatly admired how steadfast her mother had always been, down to the way she held herself.

If only Prince Sylvester were this easy to please.

"Now then, Lady Claudia, please tidy up your appearance. The master is due to come home."

"He will? But it hasn't even been that long since he was last here."

"Yes, well, he must be interested in hearing how your tea party with His Highness went. Moreover, there's nothing abnormal about him returning. This is his home."

"You have a point," Claudia admitted, nodding. What had been abnormal all along was how much he *hadn't* come home before now. Perhaps the tea party with Sylvester signaled a change in the winds.

I wonder if our capricious gods are enjoying themselves watching this. When Claudia prayed on Helen's behalf, she promised to keep them entertained. That was also why she believed firmly that the future would change. Because if it doesn't, there's no meaning in redoing this life.

She was still fed up with her father, though. He'd ignored her and Virgil up until this point, and he was only getting involved now that it was convenient for him. Claudia clenched her fist and told her this, too, was for Helen's sake. It behooved her to get her father's cooperation in preventing Helen from being sent off to the brothel.

Claudia already had her maids gathering intelligence on Helen's situation. Sadly, while she couldn't prevent the collapse of Helen's house, there was still a possibility she could save Helen herself.

If Father's in a good mood, then it's about time I consult him about Helen, Claudia decided.

From what Helen had told her, following the collapse of their house, she'd sold herself to the brothel to cover their financial crisis. She'd lost all other connections she might have used by that point, so it was her only choice. Helen had been an earl's daughter prior to her family's downfall, so she'd never been prepared to hold a job. Like Claudia, she'd learned much about the way of the world at the brothel.

If all Helen needed was enough money to live day-to-day, then Claudia could simply hire her as a maid. This time around, Helen *did* have connections—that

connection being Claudia—even if she didn't know it.

Claudia's tea party could be considered successful, provided she ignored the mental toll it took on her. She could use that as a bargaining chip when negotiating with her father.

Chapter 4:

The Villainess Piques the Prince's Interest

 $T_{\text{HERE WAS A NAME}}$ on many lips recently: Lady Claudia Lindsay. People whispered about how the young girl's personality had shifted dramatically following her mother's death.

"Personally, I don't believe for a second that such a selfish girl had such a change of heart," Tristan said.

Sylvester recalled what he'd seen of Claudia's behavior at a previous banquet. The manners she'd possessed were barely passing, and she'd been very selfcentered. That was his genuine impression—not much different from how Tristan viewed her.

"Don't you figure Duke Lindsay's the one behind those rumors? That he only spread them because he wants you to marry his daughter?" Tristan suggested.

The prince shook his head. "The duke isn't a politically ambitious man."

If he was, he wouldn't have taken a mistress of such low birth. It was one thing if he'd decided to become a guardian of a poor widow, but this woman had absolutely no political value. That reinforced Sylvester's assessment. Plus, it was because of the duke's character that he managed to maintain such a neutral position within parliament and get along well with those in the aristocratic faction.

Sylvester had spoken with Duke Lindsay before, and he came off as down-to-earth and relaxed—the exact opposite of his daughter. The prince would have an easier time overseeing parliament if he had Duke Lindsay as a father-in-law.

"Yeah, but he's so obsessed with his mistress that he just ignored his own house, right?"

Sylvester shrugged. "Not all that uncommon for those in political marriages, is it?"

He understood where Tristan was coming from, though. The duke could be

forgiven for having a mistress, but the prince didn't think too highly of him for neglecting his only children. Sylvester had even played with Virgil, the Lindsay heir, as a child, giving the prince a closer connection to him than Claudia.

Sylvester believed Claudia's foul temperament was likely a consequence of her father's disinterest in her. It wouldn't be surprising if her behavior had taken a downward spiral after her mother's demise, but he never dreamed it would actually improve—especially since he'd heard that Duke Lindsay was still returning to his mistress's residence just like when his wife had been alive.

Tristan's brows furrowed. "I still don't think highly of Lady Claudia, but even I feel bad for her."

Her older brother, Virgil, already had his societal debut and was attending the academy. Unlike Virgil, who could find an escape outside their home, Claudia had no opportunity to leave their oppressive estate. Sylvester could only imagine what she was going through. They were complete strangers, but his heart went out to her.

It was then that his parents arranged for him to have a tea party with her.

"I don't see why you have to do it one-on-one," grumbled Tristan.

"It's a good opportunity to confirm whether the rumors are true or not. If you like, you can attend as well. How about it?"

"Really? I can?!"

"Provided you stand behind me and act as my personal bodyguard, I see no issue with it."

Tristan was surprisingly interested in the veracity of these rumors, hence Sylvester's decision to let him tag along.

"My deepest gratitude to you, Your Highness, for taking the time to meet with me today."

Claudia appeared in a violet dress, exuding enough charm to convince one instantly that the rumors were true. Her gown was more modest than expected for a lady her age, but judging by the design and fabric, it was a refined, top-

quality ensemble. She conducted herself gracefully, and after she curtsied, Sylvester's gaze was drawn to the way her beautiful raven locks spilled down her shoulders. The shape of her eyes, narrow and tapered at the outer edges, gave the impression she was strong-willed, although that ran entirely contrary to her aura. She seemed much gentler than he remembered.

Behind him, Sylvester could sense that Tristan was completely entranced. He braced himself, not wanting to let her set the pace.

She's like an entirely different person.

As they conversed and he observed her reactions, Sylvester felt as though he were trapped in an illusion. It was adorable the way her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. The moment she started speaking, conversation flowed naturally.

Word had it that girls mentally developed faster than boys, but all the ladies Sylvester ever interacted with seemed immature and juvenile. Claudia was different. There were times when the way she spoke or acted felt contrived, but not in the manner of people trying to earn favor. She was noncommittal, reserving herself to the role of entertaining him the entire time. When she happened to give him a scrutinizing look, it didn't annoy him at all.

Interesting. Sylvester sensed she wasn't being forthright with him, so how could he get a peek behind her mask? Outwardly, she was being amicable enough, but she was cautious about bridging the distance between them.

From the royal family's standpoint, Claudia was an agreeable marriage partner, given her family and background. She had to be aware of that, yet she didn't try to use it to her advantage at all. It bewildered him. It wasn't that she was daft either; her intelligence shone through in their conversations.

What's going on in that head of hers as she sits here talking to me?

Sylvester wanted to know her better. Alas, he had a packed schedule, and their tea party ended all too quickly.

"Thank you kindly for your time today," Claudia said, not the least bit reluctant in bidding him farewell. She promptly left the room.

A wrinkle formed in Sylvester's brow.

"Lady Claudia was even better than the rumors made her out to be!" Tristan declared. He paused when he noticed the pinched expression on Sylvester's face. "Huh? What's the matter? The conversation between you really took off. Were you not enjoying yourself?"

"No, I was." Sylvester schooled his expression; he hadn't realized until Tristan mentioned it that he'd allowed himself to express any emotion.

He was telling the truth when he said the tea party had been enjoyable.

But I don't like how it seems I'm the only one who's interested.

Chapter 5: The Villainess Gets an Older Sister

 ${}^{\prime\prime}M_{\text{YNAME IS HELEN.}}$ It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Claudia's negotiations—or perhaps pleading, as it were—with her father had gone off without a hitch. It was almost anticlimactic how easily she managed to hire Helen as a personal maid. Part of the reason was that Helen's house had fallen because of her father's debts, which severely damaged her reputation. Claudia's father thought that by being benevolent and hiring her, Helen would be duty-bound to not exhibit any inappropriate behavior or betray her new employers, making her a loyal addition.

As for Claudia, she was going to execute her next plan if begging her father didn't work out, so she was pleased that—whatever his motivations—things worked out as intended. She was a bit nervous about meeting Helen again in this life, but a smile bloomed on her face when she saw Helen hale and hearty.

"I heard my employment here was thanks to your personal recommendation, Lady Claudia," said Helen. "I will dedicate myself wholeheartedly to serving you."

"I look forward to it, though I'm sure you may have a tough time until you get accustomed to things here."

In truth, she wanted them to speak as freely to one another as when they worked in the brothel together, but that was a tall order when they were master and servant now. Still, she hoped they could become friends.

"You're eighteen now, aren't you, Helen? You have more experience than I do in high society and the academy, then. I'd love to hear about it!"

Helen smiled softly. "I actually withdrew midway from the academy because of my family's circumstances, but I'm happy to share what I can." The way she looked at Claudia, as if she were a younger sister, brought back memories. Claudia's eyes shimmered.

Helen and I... We're alive, she thought. Seeing Helen like this made everything feel more real.

As the tears threatened to spill, she threw herself at Helen, trying to hide her face.

"Lady Claudia?!" Helen gasped.

"I'm so happy! It's been wonderful having an older brother, but I've always longed for an older sister!"

There was high turnover among the Lindsay estate maids around Claudia's age because they were only there to receive the duke's recommendation. At least Claudia could count on Helen staying by her side for a while, due to the circumstances of her employment.

I'll be sure to keep her safe until she can find a good marriage partner, Claudia swore to herself.



She would be happy if Helen stayed with her for life, just as Martha had stayed beside her mother, but Claudia knew better than anyone else how charming Helen was. Since she was working here now, it wouldn't take long for a man to recognize her good qualities and develop an interest. She'd likely been popular before her family's fall from grace, and it was only her family's situation that prevented a match.

In aristocratic marriages, the focus wasn't on the individuals involved so much as the two houses that would be linked as a result of their union. No one would go out of their way to marry a lady from a house with enormous debt unless they had a specific motivation for doing so.

A smile spread across Helen's face. "I'm equally delighted to have an adorable younger sister like you!"

Claudia giggled. "Then that means our feelings are mutual. Oh, I'm sure Martha will probably be stern with you about keeping an appropriate distance, but you can just let whatever she says go in one ear and out the other."

She knew Martha would be quick to enforce the social hierarchy, but this was one thing Claudia refused to budge on.

Helen took an immediate liking to Claudia's frankness, and the two became fast friends. Perhaps that wasn't all too surprising, considering how close they were when working at the brothel together.

"Seems like you're getting along pretty well with your new maid," said the duke.

Claudia nodded. "I have you to thank, Father, for listening to my request."

She had been in high spirits ever since Helen arrived at their estate. There were still many challenging hurdles on the horizon, but they were much less daunting now that she had Helen with her.

Following Claudia's tea party with Sylvester, her father frequented the house more often. He still wouldn't stay the night, but their relationship continued to be amicable.

Claudia tried to play up Martha's contributions to him when she could. She never neglected to give a positive mention of the efforts the other staff put in as well. Helen even commented that Claudia was like the duchess of the estate, with the way she involved herself in everything. Indeed, she'd been consulting with the butler increasingly of late, so Helen wasn't entirely wrong.

Claudia's endlessly smiling face also coaxed smiles from her father and brother.

"Are you still writing to His Highness?"

"I am. Prince Sylvester is even kind enough to include flowers with his letters. I enjoy our written exchanges, always wondering what flower he'll send me next." Her cheeks turned rosy.

Her father nodded, pleased.

You act so fatherly, but you have no idea what I'm feeling, Claudia thought bitterly. She also knew it was her own fault, always hiding her real emotions from him.

Meanwhile, though she couldn't read Sylvester at all, he must have enjoyed his tea party with her; he'd informed her that he wanted to set aside time for another. His busy schedule kept him preoccupied, however, so it was constantly pushed back. The duke insisted he had other potential brides vying for his attention, so he couldn't spend all his time on just Claudia. Personally, she was happy not to have to see him again, but he requested they correspond via letter in exchange.

"Why don't you try sending him something in exchange for the flowers, Dee?" Virgil suggested.

She nodded. "That's a fine idea. If it were you, what would you want to receive?"

"I'd be happy to receive anything from you," he said. "I can't think of something specific off the top of my head. Why not browse the shops this weekend for ideas?"

"I assume you'll be coming with me, yes?"

"I wouldn't miss it. Helen has been stealing my thunder lately."

Claudia giggled at that. "Helen's easy to confide in since we're both girls and close in age. But when it comes to the prince, you're the only person I can turn to, Elder Brother."

Out of the corner of her eye, Claudia noticed her father looking forlorn, having been left out of this merrymaking. She ignored him. As much as she wanted to maintain their amicable relationship, she also wanted him to feel some guilt for having neglected them all this time.

In fact, I would thank you to stop pretending you are our father while you're still returning to your mistress's home every night. Claudia was well aware her father wasn't plotting to use her for political gain. He was only encouraging her marriage to Sylvester because he thought it was best for her. Perhaps the reason he was so easygoing and conscious of her future was because of how terribly his own political marriage had worked out. I know he's not a bad person at heart, but he has no self-discipline.

In that regard, she feared she'd inherited the negative aspects of *both* of her parents. The truth was that her mother and Martha had been so suffocatingly strict with her that she'd been self-indulgent in her previous life.

Chapter 6:

The Lady Maid Gets a Younger Sister

The MAN TOOK ONE GLANCE at her and spat, "You're too old."

They were in a café at the edge of the high-end district full of nobles' estates. Anyone could enter regardless of their status, provided they had an invitation—but the place's main selling point was that it provided private rooms for its patrons. From the outside, it looked no different than any other café, but the customers who frequented it were anything but ordinary. Among them were those who used these private rooms to indulge in "work."

Helen brimmed with regret the moment she entered the café, but since she'd received an invitation and she needed the money for her family, she couldn't simply go home empty-handed. It was with a heavy heart that she'd made her way to the specified room, only to be immediately rebuffed with such curt words.

"I was told you'd be young and innocent," the man continued. "But look at you—you're fully mature. If only you were a decade younger, then it would've been worth breaking you in."

It was hard to comprehend what she was hearing. What little she was able to digest was that the transaction they'd agreed upon—her selling her body—wasn't going to work out after all.

Her mind went blank. The only thing her eyes perceived was the ostentatious jewel glimmering on the man's finger. It was enormous.

Couldn't I just have that? If she could take it from him and sell it, it would cover their living expenses. But her heart rejected the idea. I can't. Even assuming it would bring me any money, I don't want to touch anything worn by this pedophile!

As the weight of his words settled in, all her hair stood on end. She pictured herself ten years ago. Thinking about the man's sexual preferences made her

nauseous. He was disgusting. How could a man like this live freely in the world without being held accountable for his sins?

Helen dropped her gaze to the floor, fearing she might glower at him otherwise.

The man laughed derisively and said, "I'm sure you'll be able to find some demand for a woman your age if you go to a brothel or something. I'm outta here."

Helen didn't tell him that she wouldn't sleep with him for all the money in the world anyway, but a thought crossed her mind. Her house had fallen from grace, but the education she received as an earl's daughter hadn't left her completely.

She watched the man leave, then hurried toward the café's exit.

Helen's parents opposed her selling her body. They claimed there was no need for her to go so far. She wished now that she'd listened to them.

On her way out, she caught a whiff of an odor so foul, it made her stomach roil.

"Ugh..."

She grabbed her handkerchief and held it over her mouth. The fresh soapy smell of it was the only thing that saved her from emptying her stomach right then and there.

This is awful! It's...completely unbearable! Her body's response was so visceral, so emotional, that she struggled desperately to hold back her tears.

When she first entered the high-end district, the guard at the gate had been intent on confirming her identity and reason for coming. As she left, he didn't so much as glance her way. She was honestly thankful for that.

I don't want anyone to see me like this—not even a stranger.

Helen felt miserable. Even that complete degenerate hadn't wanted her.

All her emotions burst forth, splintering the dam that held them back. She didn't even have the headspace to relish what little time she'd spent in the high-end district. All she wanted was to get away from there as quickly as

possible.

Being an earl's daughter didn't mean much when your family was impoverished. Helen might have been able to enjoy relative luxury if she'd been born into a family that oversaw its own region. Alas, her father—Earl Hoskins—had no such lands. Their noble lineage stretched back for generations, but they lacked income. A rich merchant whose success earned them a barony would be able to provide more for their family than her father.

Despite their modest finances, Helen received a respectable education. She later found out that her father had gone into debt to provide it for her. He'd wanted to make a good impression on his daughter.

I never realized how dire our situation was.

Helen's father had done an impressive job hiding his debts until he was finally forced to relinquish his noble title altogether. His attempts to keep up the facade had deceived his family as well.

It never even crossed Helen's mind that she wouldn't be a noble lady forever, at least until her father informed her that she wouldn't be able to graduate from the academy.

This explains why I never received any marriage offers.

In aristocratic society, noble lords and ladies enrolled in the academy when they turned sixteen. This was also when their families began arranging engagements. Some of Helen's friends even dropped out of the academy midway to marry.

It wasn't as though Helen was unpopular with boys. The issue was that all the boys who invited her out were only interested in a casual fling. She understood now why that was. Who in their right mind would willingly get engaged to a girl from a family on the brink of losing everything?

She resented her younger self for living such a carefree existence, oblivious to all this.

No, in truth, Helen may have known this day would come eventually. She just loved learning. Everything her personal tutor taught her, she'd memorized almost perfectly. Her passion for academia was so great that she was well

known among her friends for her abundant curiosity. Maybe I was so eager to learn as much as I could because I realized, somewhere in the back of my mind, that I would lose those opportunities someday.

Regardless, there was nothing she could really do. The knowledge she'd gained as an earl's daughter would benefit her in high society, but it was meaningless among the regular populace. It was lucky that her mother had originally been a baron's daughter and loved doing housework. She imparted the same know-how to her daughter so that Helen could at least look after herself. Helen loved doing laundry together, the two of them covered in suds. She'd learned how enjoyable that could be only after they lost their estate.

Helen's family sold off every valuable thing they owned, but the profits weren't enough to keep them afloat for long. Their situation was visibly worsening day by day.

I need some way to make money, she thought.

Her father had incurred debts with their relatives and neglected to repay them, so they wanted no part in helping him or his family. Helen also had no way of contacting her old friends once her father lost his noble status.

It's painfully clear to me now just how stiflingly small the world is as an aristocrat.

Her friends had been able to accept her letters when they bore the emblem of her family's earldom. But now that all she had left was her own name, they couldn't receive them, no matter how clearly she wrote out who she was. Aristocrats only ever involved themselves with others of the same rank. That was the only way they knew how to live. They smugly thought they knew everything, even though their understanding was biased to begin with.

Helen was no exception. The first possibility that occurred to her when she contemplated a way to resolve her family's financial troubles was to marry into a wealthy household. While she wouldn't be able to snag an advantageous match with her circumstances, she was willing to compromise. She couldn't just stand by and watch as her father wasted away, as her mother grew more and more haggard.

It was in the midst of all this that an acquaintance of her father's had set up

the meeting with that pedophile at the café.

There are no gods in this world. If there were, that repulsive man would've already been swallowed in hellfire.

Helen wanted to forget all about him, but never before had she hated someone so strongly on first meeting. Much to her disgust, his words kept replaying in her mind: "I'm sure you'll be able to find some demand for a woman your age if you go to a brothel or something."

Their meeting itself had been an attempt for her to sell her body. Now that she'd lost that opportunity, she had no viable choice other than doing exactly as he suggested.

Is there really no other option but to go to a brothel?

Helen knew what brothels were. She'd never go to one willingly—but she was backed into a corner, unable to dredge up some other way to make money for her family.

When Helen scrambled shamefully back to their rented house, she found a well-dressed man in their sitting room. He didn't look nearly as dubious as her father's acquaintance, but after her experience with that creep earlier, she was still on guard. Especially since her parents looked nervous.

"I take it you are Lady Helen?" he said.

"Yes, um, and you are ...?"

"Apologies for not introducing myself sooner. I am a servant in the employ of Duke Lindsay. I came to visit your family today in hopes that I might speak with you."

Everything that happened afterward was so surreal, she wondered if she was caught in a dream. Things moved at a rapid pace. Before Helen knew it, she was standing in front of a vast estate that one might reasonably mistake for a palace.

I'm actually going to be a noble lady's maid. The moment that realization dawned on her, Helen wondered why she'd never thought of that route before.

She knew that low-ranking noble ladies often entered into the service of higher-ranking ones, yet it never occurred to her that she could do the same. *I'm no better than the rest. The world I've been living in was just as small as the other aristocrats'*.

If one wanted an income, one needed to work. There were other avenues for women to bring in money aside from joining a brothel. Helen may have been at her wits' end, but she was still disappointed in herself for forgetting something so simple.

I never dreamed Lady Claudia would recommend me for such a position, though.

She'd assumed that one of her personal tutors had recommended her. After all, she'd been an exemplary student—a fact she was rather proud of. It wasn't until she asked that she discovered the unexpected truth from the servant who visited her rented house.

Helen had no association with Claudia. She only heard the rumors about how Claudia's personality had taken a dramatic turn after her mother's death. It made for good gossip, which was why it spread like wildfire throughout high society. There were other, more unfavorable rumors about her house. Namely, how Claudia's father was obsessed with his mistress.

Such a vulgar thing for people to talk about. But I wonder who told them about me?

Though the details around her employment were a complete mystery, the plush carpets that sank beneath the weight of her shoes were definitely the real deal. *It's like I'm walking on clouds.*

Prior to arriving at the Lindsay estate, she underwent maid training. She also had to move into special servant lodgings, since her position necessitated she live with the family she served. This gave her plenty of time to pinch herself and confirm that this was actually happening—that it wasn't all a dream—but she still had difficulty believing it.

Her situation felt even more surreal the moment she met Claudia.

"I have never seen a lady more adorable than you, Lady Claudia," she said.

"What's this all of a sudden? Such exaggeration."

Helen shook her head. "I speak only the truth. If angels do exist, they must surely have your face." In fact, Helen would spurn their existence entirely if they didn't.

The radiant smile Claudia offered her when they first met was brighter and more beautiful than any gemstone. Her voice was like the tinkling of bells. It was so charming, Helen could listen to it forever. And when Claudia laughed? Oh, it was like Helen could picture flowers blossoming around her, rejoicing in the lovely sound.

"Since meeting you, Lady Claudia, I've begun to believe there really are capricious gods up there."

"Y-you have?" Claudia stammered.

How could someone so profoundly kind and beautiful exist otherwise? How could she overcome the complex circumstances of her family life and possess the strength to manage such a vast estate at such a young age? The only way Helen could believe it was if someone told her that it was the gods' own design.

Helen's father hadn't possessed a modicum of business acumen, but the love he had for his family was genuine. Claudia, who was even younger than her, had never known such love. That was probably why Claudia had moments where she seemed so mature for her age. It endeared her to Helen all the more.

"I am truly happy to be able to serve you, Lady Claudia."

All those years of dedicated study had been worth it. She was still an amateur maid, but thanks to her education, she was able to display proper decorum when interacting with Claudia. She could also keep up with Claudia in matters pertaining to high society.

"It's all thanks to you that the years I spent in school won't go to waste."

"Nonsense," Claudia insisted. "It was never a waste to begin with. Your reputation as a dedicated hard worker preceded you. My father wouldn't have approved of you otherwise, you know?"

As Lady Claudia told it, the other ladies in their service had spoken highly of

Helen. And no matter how insistent Claudia's own recommendation of Helen was, the duke was the one who made the final decisions regarding employment. They performed a thorough investigation into Helen's character and background prior to hiring her.

"Your friends and personal tutors highly recommended you. Father received copies of your academy grades too, I'm sure." She casually sipped some black tea Helen had poured for her. "Delicious," she murmured under her breath.

Helen was relieved.

After everything she'd learned about Claudia, Helen had resolved herself to become an expert at brewing tea. She wanted to do the best she possibly could for her mistress, in hopes of offering the lady even a little respite from her daily toils. Helen's ever-present thirst for knowledge was helping her accomplish just that.

Yes, Helen realized at last that her boundless curiosity never had anything to do with her family's circumstances. It was just part of who she was.

"Helen?! What's the matter? Are you not feeling well?" Claudia shot up straight in her chair, alarmed.

Helen finally noticed the tears streaking down her cheeks.

I really am a complete amateur, to worry my mistress so. She thumbed the droplets away and smiled. "I'm crying because I'm so happy."

Happy because everything she learned hadn't been in vain, because she remembered how much she loved learning, because she'd finally been able to reclaim who she was for the first time since her father lost his noble status.

"There isn't anything upsetting you, is there?" Claudia demanded, hands on her hips. She'd left her chair to stand in front of Helen, bending forward with her shoulders hunched in as she scrutinized her maid's face. "I won't let you off easy if you're lying to me."

Her blue eyes were filled with concern. Helen treasured that part of her mistress, just as she did everything else about her.

Chapter 7:

The Noble Lord Would Like His Sister to Rely on Him More

 $V_{\text{IRGIL HAD FORGOTTEN}}$ that his sister had actual emotions, just like himself, until he saw her weeping and clinging to their mother's gravestone. Prior to that, all Claudia did was complain, grumble, and throw tantrums. This was always followed by their mother's hysterical scolding. Such was the cycle he'd grown accustomed to.

If only she'd listen and do as she's told, Virgil would think each time.

He was constantly exasperated by her fits. If she knew she was going to be reproached for it, why did she throw tantrums? He couldn't comprehend it. Their mother was a stern woman, but she wasn't above complimenting a person if they met her expectations. She gave him the recognition he wanted, at least. That was more than he could say for his father, who rarely ever came home.

Claudia's like one of those monsters that appear in stories. After all, what did monsters do? Cause trouble and discontent for everyone whose lives they touched. Whenever Claudia kicked up a fuss, the atmosphere at the estate grew even more oppressive. She was no different than a beast going berserk. He had kept his distance from her for that reason.

Virgil's stance toward her didn't change, not even after he began visiting the royal palace to serve as a playmate for the crown prince and heard of his father's mistress from a resident gossipmonger. He was angry and disappointed at their father's betrayal, but some part of him was also relieved; finally, he knew *he* wasn't the reason his father didn't come home. It wasn't that he was a deficient or worthless son. A great weight was lifted off his shoulders.

Claudia was oblivious to the concerns that plagued his heart. She continued with her outbursts at home. Since all she ever did was cause trouble for others, Virgil was convinced she lacked the ability to be considerate.

He was wrong.

Claudia had cried about how lonely she was with their mother gone, giving voice to the very emotions Virgil felt. They were the same. Her heart bled just as his did.

Why did I never realize it before? He should have, especially because she was the only sibling he had.

As they clung to one another in front of their mother's grave, he realized how small she really was. Too small to be called a monster. It infuriated Virgil that he'd avoided her all this time because he thought she was a pain.

"In Mother's place, I'll be the one to protect you," he told her.

They made a promise to each other. Claudia upheld her end, changing her unseemly behavior. She learned to be more graceful and stopped acting out. Better yet, she became more considerate of everyone in their household.

Virgil worried at first how she would get along with the maids, but it didn't take long for him to realize his concerns were misplaced. The truth was plain as day; he could see it in the way Claudia smiled and in the gentle gazes of the maids. The very air at the estate had changed. He could practically feel it on his skin—anyone could, really. Gone was the oppressiveness that lingered when his mother was alive. Even his father noticed a difference. The amount of time he spent at home increased because of how comfortable it had become.

He's got some nerve, after how much he stayed away, Virgil thought. And yet, it wounded him to think that Claudia could say the very same thing to him.

Although he'd promised Claudia he would stay at her side, he hadn't been able to do anything for his little sister. The most he did was enjoy tea with her. She was delighted by the presents he brought home, but he wondered how meaningful his actions really were.

I haven't changed a bit. Meanwhile, Claudia had very noticeably changed.

Everything Virgil did was the same as it had been before; he moved between the academy and home and that was it. He was sick of it. Virgil wanted to do something for his sister, but he couldn't come up with anything. Time passed, and he'd accomplished nothing.

Then, out of nowhere, their father hired a personal maid for Claudia. From

what Virgil gathered, she hailed from a fallen earldom, but that wasn't even the most surprising part: he doubted his ears when another servant informed him that Claudia had recommended this girl.

How—and more importantly, when—did this woman manage to curry favor with his sister? There were no connections between the Hoskins and the Lindsays. Virgil could only guess that Claudia had heard the rumors of what happened to Helen's family and taken pity on her.

I must protect her. Virgil doubted his father had done due diligence. He'd probably read a report from the butler and nothing more. There likely hadn't been a proper interview, as there should have been when a maid was to become a personal servant to any of their family members. To some, it might look as though the duke simply placed great faith in their butler, but Virgil resented him for what he saw as a dereliction of duty. Their father was basically useless.

If she does anything even remotely suspicious, she's fired. Virgil also conducted his own personal investigation on Helen. He figured one of the upperclassmen at the academy would know of her, given she wasn't much older than him. Virgil was glad to have finally found something he could do. His heart was in the right place, at least.

But then the results of his investigation came back.

This woman doesn't have a single flaw or bad mark against her? How is this possible? Her one flaw, if it could be called a flaw, was perhaps her father's miserable business abilities. From what he observed of her at their estate, she had perfect etiquette—an unsurprising quality given her origins.

Virgil even happened to pass through the inner courtyard once while she and the other servants were doing the laundry—and she was actually laughing with them. Helen was supposed to be at his sister's side constantly during her work days, so he assumed she'd been dragged into helping with other chores on her days off because the other servants needed the extra hand. Helen had gotten suds in her hair in the process, but she didn't act the least bit displeased by it. In fact, she looked like she was enjoying herself.

As for the upperclassmen he'd approached with his inquiry, none of them had

a bad word to say about her. The male students dismissed her as bland, but that was because she'd refused their invitations. Her former teachers expressed great concern for her family's situation. They conveyed their gratitude when they heard Virgil's house had employed her.

If only her father hadn't shouldered so many debts, maybe she could have lived out a respectable life as a noblewoman.

The more Virgil heard about Helen, the more he understood why Claudia had recommended her. He had to give her credit for having such an amazing hidden talent. *Dee is a good judge of character.*

Claudia perfected everything she did, from brewing tea to her needlework—even her studies. There certainly had to be differences in their education, given their gender, but she could comfortably respond to any topic he brought up. Virgil would completely forget the time when he was talking with Claudia. And before he could grow exhausted of their chatter, she would excuse herself and let him rest.

As her older brother, can I really maintain my dignity at this rate? He didn't think he could. Claudia was even right about Helen. Isn't there anything? Anything at all that I can do?

"I can't think of something specific off the top of my head. Why not browse the shops this weekend for ideas?" Virgil suggested.

"I assume you'll be coming with me, yes?" Claudia asked.

"I wouldn't miss it. Helen has been stealing my thunder lately."

Accompanying her to pick out a present for Sylvester had been a last, desperate resort on Virgil's part. He'd been a playmate and conversation partner for the crown prince prior to Claudia's selection as a potential bride. In the interest of fairness and so as not to influence the choice of the bride selection process, the visits stopped. Now Virgil was maintaining a respectable distance from the crown prince. Nevertheless, he knew Sylvester's temperament, and he was confident that he could help his sister pick an appropriate gift.

"I should've known you'd tag along," Virgil muttered.

"Is something the matter?" Helen asked.

He shook his head. "No, don't worry about it."

Ordinarily, when they wanted to purchase something, they summoned merchants to their house. Virgil could count on one hand the number of opportunities he had to go out into the city with Claudia. It was only natural for them to be accompanied by personal bodyguards and Claudia's personal maid, Helen.

It's not like she's in the way or anything. Still, there was something that bothered him about the way Helen regarded Claudia with the profound affection of an older sister. I'm her blood relation here.

It left him a little depressed, but any dark feelings he had dissolved in the face of Claudia's infectious smile.

"What do you think of this, Elder Brother?"

"Hmm."

Claudia was peeking at a display case. Her wavy raven hair bounced against her back as she bent down. He loved the texture of her hair, which so reminded him of their mother. When Virgil squeezed in to peek beside her, the scent of roses tickled his nose. The sweet aroma distracted him.

I don't think I really care about Syl's present anymore. He just wanted to enjoy this shopping trip with Claudia. Not that he'd gotten his priorities backward; he knew what they were here for. Maybe I should just lie to her. Have her get Syl the exact opposite of what he wants.

A mischievous desire to prank Sylvester stirred within him. Virgil knew Sylvester well enough to offer proper advice, but it somehow rubbed him the wrong way to do the prince such a favor when there was nothing in it for him. But, he reminded himself, Claudia would think less of him if she found out.

I guess I have no choice, then. I'll take this seriously. For Claudia's sake. He most certainly wasn't doing this for Sylvester.

Once they finished their original errand, Virgil insisted on accompanying his sister for some shopping since they were already out. She tried to turn him down, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. Not when they so rarely had this opportunity. He wanted to bond with her a little more as her sibling.

Alas, Virgil knew nothing when it came to women's clothing, so he let Helen take over once they entered a boutique for young noble ladies. He watched them from behind, thinking they could be mistaken for real sisters. The atmosphere between them was a bit too casual for a mistress and her servant. Virgil wasn't entirely okay with that, but...

If it makes Claudia happy, I guess that's what matters.

The way she smiled as beautifully as a flower in bloom made all his brooding seem silly. Virgil's pride as an older brother was trivial in comparison.

If I can protect her smile, that's all that matters.

"I believe Lord Virgil would prefer this color," Helen said.

"Definitely!"

The mention of his name shook Virgil out of his reverie. He wondered if he'd merely imagined it, but when he glanced their way, his eyes met Helen's. She instinctively averted her gaze.

She knows what I like? Virgil thought all she cared about was Claudia. That was how it seemed to him, at least. He knew women found him handsome. He'd discovered that as soon as he started attending the academy. However, Helen had never looked at him the way other girls did. There was a noticeable difference in the warm way she looked at Claudia and the way she looked at him.

Maybe that's why she reminds me of a wary cat cautiously approaching.

It made him happy to the point that his eyes grew hot and moist. But the joy he felt lasted only until they got home. Then it evaporated.

"Thank you so much for accompanying me today, Elder Brother," Claudia told him, handing him a gift. She turned and passed over a similar one to her maid. "And thank you for coming, Helen, even though it was your day off."

Helen's eyes went wide as saucers and shimmered with tears.

Hold on. I'm on the same level as a maid?

Fine, so Claudia just happened to hand them their gifts at about the same time. Virgil still had his reservations.

Chapter 8:

The Villainess's Encounter with Her Half-Sister

As soon as the mourning period ended, Claudia's father brought his mistress and their illegitimate daughter to the estate.

"Starting today, Lilith and Fermina will be a part of the Lindsay household," the duke told them. "Claudia, Virgil—I know it may be difficult at first, but I hope you will eventually recognize them as family."

Claudia stood at the entrance to greet all three of them. Even though the relationships between the inhabitants of the estate had changed drastically since the first timeline, the scene evoked a sense of déja vu within her. Martha had been on the chopping block the last time, but for this second go-around, Claudia had successfully convinced her father that having one extremely stern person on the staff was advantageous for her education.

Even if Martha didn't have the best opinion of the duke, his recognition of her efforts had taken a load off of her shoulders. She'd become less of a curmudgeon than before, which had in turn dissolved the bitter feelings the veteran staff held toward her. It helped that the whole staff had united in a shared contempt for Claudia's father. Everyone here was on her side, with Virgil at the top of that list.

Helen, meanwhile, made no attempt to mask her hostility toward the duke's mistress and daughter as she stood behind Claudia.

I appreciate that she's glowering out of her loyalty to me, but I'd better caution her about it later. Claudia couldn't risk Helen drawing negative attention to herself. She didn't think her father would fire Helen without reason, but in her previous timeline, her father had been ridiculously indulgent with Fermina. There was no telling whose side he would take this time. She didn't want to take any chances.

"I'm Virgil," her elder brother said curtly. "I will respect my father's decision, but I have no intention of accepting either of you."

"And I'm Claudia. I admit, I feel a little conflicted, but this should make the estate livelier from now on. I think that's a good thing, at least."

Where Virgil regarded them with a gruff glare, Claudia offered a soft smile. The emotions they expressed were the complete opposite, but as members of the aristocracy, they bowed—or curtsied, in Claudia's case—and offered their greetings with all the elegant refinement one would expect of a duke's heirs.

Fermina's pink-brown hair bounced around her face as she eagerly replied, "I'm Fermina! It's great to meet you both!" As nervous as she was, she didn't let that stop her. Her adorably feminine appearance only amplified her earnestness.

Claudia, however, noticed how jerky and unpracticed her movements were as she curtsied. Fermina had likely practiced beforehand, but it was obvious she was unaccustomed to noble etiquette. It was impressive to think that she'd clawed her way to the position of crown princess in Claudia's previous life when this was her starting point.

After an innocuous exchange of greetings, the siblings took their leave. The duke was going to give his mistress and their child a grand tour of the estate.

How wonderful it is that you're all so close, Claudia thought bitterly.

She and Virgil promised to have tea later on, and she finally retreated to her room. The walk back had been a silent one. As soon as the door closed behind her, Helen erupted.

"I know I owe His Grace for employing me, but this is inexcusable! He's completely ignoring how you and Lord Virgil feel, my lady!"

Claudia nodded. "Yes, I couldn't agree more."

"Please be angrier with him," Helen said. "You have every right to!"

She giggled. "There's really no need when everyone else is so cross with him on my behalf."

Claudia's father informed her ahead of time that he would be bringing Lilith and Fermina. Martha and the butler had expressed their dismay before Claudia could respond. The more everyone around her grew heated about the situation,

the easier it was for her to remain calm.

She would be lying if she said she didn't feel anxious at all. Still, seeing how Helen and everyone else reacted to the situation was proof that things were different this time around—that her preparations had meant something. That gave her no small amount of courage.

All that's left is to wait and see, then react appropriately.

Perhaps Fermina wouldn't view her as an enemy this time. There was no way to know. All she could do was wait for Fermina to make a move.

"You're far too kind, Lady Claudia," said Helen.

"Oh? That's just the mask I wear. Don't let yourself be deceived."

Claudia had every intention of fighting back if Fermina showed herself to be the same she-devil she was last time. And when it came down to it, Claudia wasn't going to hold back either.

I'll become a villainess to end all villainesses. With that conviction in her heart, she stood up a little straighter. In the process, Claudia failed to realize two things: that she had saved other people by her own actions, and that her version of becoming a villainess was, therefore, hardly villainous at all.

All the while, Helen gazed at her mistress with profound affection.

When Claudia dropped by Virgil's room, he had only just set his pen aside and risen from his chair. The sunlight pouring in from the window spilled across his back. It dawned on her how tall and powerful he was, even as an adolescent. His silhouette emphasized the muscles of his toned body.

My elder brother has really grown over the last year... I never noticed how beautiful he is.

He turned around, the illumination from the window giving him a nearly divine glow. Claudia was awestruck. His normally chilly blue eyes looked warmer than usual, having taken on the hue of a clear blue sky.

As she loitered by the door, Virgil said, "Dee? What are you spacing out for?"

"Sorry, I was just so bewitched by the way you looked standing there."

"Wha...?!" Virgil gaped at her. "D-don't tease me like that." He pressed a hand over his mouth.

As adorable and as childlike as his reaction was, it was clear to her that he was growing into an adult. Claudia joined him at the table for tea, repeatedly assuring him that she wasn't simply teasing him. "Surely you agree with me as well, right, Helen?"

"Yes," Helen answered. "As one might expect, the Ice Scion's reputation holds true."

"Where in the world did you hear that nickname?" Virgil grumbled at them.

A grin formed on Claudia's face. She'd directed the conversation at Helen, hoping for her to say that very line, and she'd answered Claudia's expectations perfectly. "Ice Scion" was a moniker bestowed upon Virgil by others in high society. The reason for the "ice" part of the nickname was that his piercing eyes and cold expression made him seem aloof and unapproachable.

"I hear the ladies are quite obsessed with you, Elder Brother."

"So you were teasing me, huh?" Virgil shot her a look. "Those ladies simply want me for my title."

Claudia shook her head. "I'm sure there must be some whose interest is genuine."

"I'm not so sure." Virgil frowned and added, "They're like flies buzzing constantly around me. It's annoying."

He knew it was inevitable that ambitious young ladies would target him—it was part and parcel of being a duke's heir. But it didn't exempt him from the exhaustion that came with having young ladies crowd him, vying for his attention.

"In that case, perhaps I can be of some help when I make my societal debut," Claudia offered. She was a candidate for crown princess, but there were other women in the running. Generally, Virgil would be the one in charge of acting as her escort. Having Claudia at his side would make it impossible for other ladies

to approach, even if they knew she was only his younger sister.

"I have no intention of burdening you, Dee. Still, I can't believe next year you'll be a debutante."

In high society, women made their societal debuts at sixteen, and most of them went on to attend the academy in the capital. This academy education lasted only three years, spanning from the time the students were sixteen until they were eighteen. Its main purpose was to further the students' studies, but it also provided an opportunity for young lords and ladies of similar age to mix and mingle. For men, it was a place to practice before they took seats in parliament; for women, it was a place to hunt for a husband. Encouraging close ties between domestic members of the aristocracy also helped lay the groundwork for a tight-knit society that was impervious to outside influence.

"It worries me to think about other men laying eyes on you," said Virgil.

Claudia tittered. "Oh, Elder Brother! That's something you should be telling the girl you love, not me!"

"No, I'm seriously concerned. Even as your brother, I can tell how overwhelmingly attractive other men out there will find you."

Just as Virgil had grown over this past year, Claudia had developed a more mature figure and facial features. Her curves had become more noticeable as well. Many of the clothes she once wore no longer fit, and she'd needed a whole new wardrobe tailored.

Yet my butt is still tiny. Not to say that the bigger, the better, but still!

Claudia wasn't quite satisfied because she knew exactly how her body looked when she reached full maturity.

"Very well," she said. "I'll protect you from the ladies, so you must protect me from the lords."

"Of course. I will cut down anyone who tries to approach you before His Highness even has the chance." He glowered, perhaps imagining such an enemy right in front of him. His moniker of Ice Scion fit him perfectly in that moment.

His gaze was so piercing that Claudia dramatically shrank back. "How

terrifying!"

"Oh, um... I'm sorry, Dee. I didn't mean to frighten you." Virgil's eyes softened. The atmosphere around them soon regained the warmth from moments earlier—but that was also short-lived.

"I wonder what Miss Fermina will do about an escort."

Virgil's face hardened the second Claudia uttered their half-sister's name. "I'm sure Father will step in for her."

Claudia knitted her brows. "That would be straying quite far from what's popular at the moment, though."

It wasn't necessarily a bad thing for their father to escort Fermina, but most people their age would consider it embarrassing. This was because it gave the impression that the lady didn't have close ties with anyone else her age who could provide her an escort instead.

"I wonder if I should casually bring it up with Father," Claudia ventured.

"I don't know. It would be extremely difficult to find someone else to take her. Personally, I can't fathom why he would ever let her debut in the first place." He didn't say it directly, but Virgil seemed to have noticed how unrefined her greeting and mannerisms were at their first meeting.

"Oh, she's simply not accustomed to it yet," Claudia assured him. "I hear she's already got the basics down. In a year's time, I'm sure she'll be caught up."

In her last life, Claudia had treated Fermina as if she were a mere commoner, but in truth, her mother, Lilith, was a baron's daughter. Fermina's grandfather had such impressive accomplishments that he earned himself a temporary noble title—one that would only last for his generation, uninheritable by his children. It made Lilith, and by extension Fermina, practically commoners, but Lilith had at least learned the bare basics of aristocratic etiquette. After meeting Claudia's father and receiving his financial support, Lilith provided the same modest education for Fermina.

The reason they didn't give Fermina more was because Claudia's mother wouldn't permit it. Claudia's father couldn't have made either of them members of the household so long as her mother was alive. Besides, Fermina's

grandfather was a one-generation nobleman. She and her mother would eventually return to their place as commoners, so the only knowledge they needed (at least at the time) was how to get by as the low-ranking members of the aristocracy that they were.

Sadly, with Mother gone and Father welcoming them into our household, what little she acquired before coming here won't be enough to carry her through.

The same could be said for Lilith. If she was going to attend functions and events alongside their father, people would expect her to comport herself the way a duchess should. Granted, Claudia's father probably didn't want to expose her to prying eyes and wouldn't take her along anyway. Fermina could take her place at their father's side once her debut was over. Though, personally, Claudia would prefer the opposite.

"Are you all right, Dee?" Virgil studied her face, worried.

Claudia blinked. For a moment, she didn't understand his concern, but she soon realized he was probably thinking about the mental toll this was taking on her. Helen had expressed similar fears.

"The two of you are the same age, which means you'll have to attend a lot of events alongside her. If it gets to be too hard for you, tell me immediately."

"I will. If I'm being honest, the whole reason I haven't thought too deeply about it is because I know I have you on my side," Claudia said. She poked her tongue out at him teasingly. Virgil broke into laughter.

The expressions he showed her now were so different from when he condemned her in her old life. It secretly brought her great relief.

Two weeks had passed since Fermina became part of Claudia's family, and there had been no outward clashes. Claudia had instructed the staff to treat her like a member of the family, so there were no troubles on that front. The servants still regarded Fermina with cold looks on their faces, but they did the same with the duke himself. Claudia retained her usual calm demeanor as she passed her time, which in turn kept the atmosphere at the estate relatively

comfortable.

It's just a relief there's no open hostility in the air. There was some tension when their family came together, but she was able to eat at the table with the rest of them without her stomach twisting into impossible knots. Compared to spending time with Sylvester, this was a cakewalk.

It helped that Lilith was a decent person. She wasn't the sort who'd seduced Claudia's father with underhanded trickery; it was obvious watching the two that Claudia's father had fallen for her naturally.

The way Claudia made concessions to accept Lilith brought the woman to tears. She felt guilty about how Claudia's father neglected them to focus on her. As she told it, she was originally against becoming part of their house altogether, but the duke had submitted all the legal paperwork necessary to do so without even telling her. The butler corroborated her story, assuring Claudia that Lilith was being honest. As far as Claudia could tell, Lilith was an extremely earnest person.

Father likely just wanted to protect the women he loves.

It was easier to guarantee their safety if they lived here with him at the estate. The duke had his own private army, so his security was second only to the royal family. He may have secured their physical safety, but what of the mental burden this placed on Lilith?

In a way, Miss Lilith is Father's victim. Still, I have to wonder...where did Fermina's wretched personality come from?

Claudia wasn't about to defend her father, but at the very least, he was down-to-earth and levelheaded. Lilith, the woman he fell in love with, was much the same. She wasn't the least bit stern or severe. Claudia could understand, in fact, why her father had run away from her willful mother to be with someone like Lilith.

"Whatever the case, it's a good thing there hasn't been any trouble. Wouldn't you agree?" Claudia said as she and Helen strolled around the estate for a change of pace.

Helen indignantly countered, "I would argue the master is nothing but

trouble."

None of the staff would dare say as much in front of the duke, but they were all in agreement on that. To them, it seemed like Claudia's father was just making their workplace more tense and uncomfortable by bringing in Fermina and Lilith.

"Well, if it weren't for Father, I wouldn't even be considered for crown princess," Claudia reminded her.

The servants regarded her father as a manifestation of pure evil at the estate, but within parliament, he was carefully maintaining a neutral position even though he was aligned with the royal faction. The reason he was so compassionate about the plight of the aristocratic faction was because Lilith had informed him of the troubles the lower-ranking aristocracy faced.

"With how impressive you are, my lady, you would have been selected even without His Grace's influence."

"You flatter me, but even you know that marriages among the royalty and aristocracy are based on political gains and losses."

That was even truer for the very top of the aristocratic hierarchy. The higher one's status was, the more politics influenced who they married.

"I know that," said Helen. "Regardless, you are on an entirely different level from all the other noble ladies I've ever met. I believe His Highness would've picked you even if it hadn't been politically prudent for him to do so."

Even if her opinion was biased, Helen's praise brought Claudia joy.

Claudia knew how to read people—knew exactly what sort of response would please them—but she was always able to let that go and simply be herself when she was with Helen.

As the two continued their leisurely stroll, the breeze carried the tinkling of piano music their way. It was coming from the dance hall. Claudia decided to take a peek. Inside, Fermina was taking dance lessons from a tutor. Lilith sat on a sofa set up against the wall. Her eyes met Claudia's, and she motioned her stepdaughter over. Claudia intended to offer a brief greeting and then excuse herself, but the tutor soon noticed her as well and called out before she could

make her retreat.

"Lady Claudia! If you would be so kind, might I ask you to provide a demonstration for us?"

"You want *me* to demonstrate?" Claudia echoed in disbelief. The tutor explained that it would give Fermina more incentive if she could see the dance steps performed correctly by someone else.

"I would second that request," said Lilith. "I'm afraid I haven't the dancing skill to provide a proper demonstration myself."

Since she was outnumbered two to one, there was no real way for Claudia to refuse. Fermina's intense stare bothered her, but she resigned herself and took the tutor's proffered hand. Claudia had memorized all the steps to this dance perfectly. She had her teacher's expertise to thank in part, but her body moved automatically thanks to muscle memory.

Claudia finished the dance with ease. The reaction to her performance was astonishing. Those present immediately applauded, bedazzled by her graceful demonstration. Even the pianist stopped to clap. Claudia's cheeks grew rosy. There were only a few people in the room, but that didn't make it any less embarrassing. With nowhere else to go, she bashfully shuffled back to Helen's side.

"That was incredible, Lady Claudia! Though I would expect no less, of course!"

"It certainly was," Lilith agreed eagerly. "In fact, it was so impressive that I only wish I could have watched you perform it in a proper gown!"

Her effusive praise made Claudia feel like fleeing the dance hall completely. Fermina was supposed to be the center of attention here. She wouldn't appreciate someone else hogging all the praise.

Claudia opened her mouth to excuse herself, but she was cut off by a loud sniffle.

"That was so mean! Just because I'm still a novice doesn't mean you have to show off and make me feel bad!" Fermina cried, tears streaking down her face.

The air in the room froze over instantly.

"Um, Fer...?" Lilith interjected. "Lady Claudia was only dancing to give you a visual demonstration."

"Ugh, wah... I just know she's belittling me in her head!"

That was a groundless accusation. The only reason Claudia had danced in front of her at all was because of her tutor's request. Claudia was baffled. How could Fermina have twisted the situation so much in her head?

"What's all the fuss in here?"

A low voice boomed from behind her, and Claudia's shoulders leapt to her ears. When she glanced back, Virgil was standing in the threshold.

"Elder Brother!" Fermina sobbed. "Elder Sister was mean to me, and I..." Fat tears rolled down her cheeks. She crumpled to her knees.

Virgil strode toward Claudia, his expression hard. She remembered seeing that look on his face before. Her entire body went stiff with tension.

He only knows part of the full story. To him, it must look like I was bullying her.

Claudia cursed herself. She thought she was being cautious enough, but all too easily, Fermina had managed to turn the situation against her. It was almost terrifying how naturally such machinations came to Claudia's half-sister.

"Dee." His voice had an arctic chill.

Claudia's mouth suddenly felt dry as a desert. "Y-yes?"

What should I do? Will he even give me a chance to defend myself?

Before she could say anything at all, Virgil turned and started walking away. The sight of his large back receding made her feel as though he was rejecting her completely. Her vision darkened. Flashbacks filled her head with scenes of his condemnation from her past life.

Was this really it? Was what she'd spent all this time building going to crumble before her this easily? Claudia's fingertips went numb as she imagined her brother looking at her with the same scorn from before.

"What's the matter?" Virgil asked, interrupting her dark thoughts. "We're leaving." He'd paused to look back at her, urging her to come along. The

impenetrable cold she'd seen in his eyes moments earlier was gone.

In fact, as soon as they got out of the dance hall...

"What happened?" His eyes were filled with concern as he looked down at her. The two were walking side by side, distancing themselves from Fermina.

While Claudia debated how best to answer that question, Helen cut in, "Would it be all right if I explained instead?"

"Be my guest," Virgil said.

Claudia nodded. "Please, go ahead." She thought it might be better this way. A bystander could offer a more objective view of the situation. Alas, she'd forgotten that in this life, Helen doted upon her like a little sister.

"Of all the things that rotten girl could have done!" Helen practically shouted.

"Helen!" Claudia cried in surprise. "Calm down!"

"How can I possibly calm after the way she defamed you, my lady?!"

"I-I don't think it's quite as serious as you're making it seem!"

It was less defamation than a false accusation. That wasn't any better in Helen's eyes, though. Whatever the technical term, it did nothing to lessen the overpowering rage that overcame her. In the end, Claudia had to soothe Helen while explaining the situation herself. Once she was finished, Virgil flagged the nearest maid and had her fetch him some medicinal tea; apparently the whole situation had given him a headache.

"Does that girl have an overactive imagination or something?" Virgil said.

Claudia nodded solemnly. "She certainly seems to have a habit of thinking of herself as a victim."

Her brother's voice was cold and distant when he spoke about their halfsister. That was how Claudia realized that the curtness and rejection he'd shown at the dance hall wasn't meant for her—it was meant for Fermina.

"I can already tell this will complicate things." Virgil shook his head. "I'm going to report this to Father."

"Yes, I think that would be best. Perhaps this is just a consequence of the

mental toll moving in with us has taken on her."

Fermina's whole act was contrived. In the moment, Virgil's reaction had left Claudia too struck with terror to think clearly; but in hindsight, anyone could tell that Fermina was the one behaving erratically. Lilith had even jumped in to cover for Claudia. Fermina's act had been pretty poor. It was hard for Claudia to judge whether it was meant as an honest attack against her or if Fermina's judgment was merely clouded because the change in environment was mentally and emotionally taxing.

"Dee," Virgil said, interrupting her thoughts, "I think it'd be best for you to keep your distance from her. Nothing good will come from her using you as a role model, anyway. You set the bar too high. She'd never be able to live up to your example."

"Indeed. There is no lady out there as perfect as Lady Claudia!" Helen chimed in. "Even the strict head maid recognizes how flawless she is!"

Virgil nodded vigorously.

The primary reason Martha gave Claudia her approval was because Claudia put on the act of the perfect, regal noblewoman. Granted, she wouldn't be able to accomplish such a feat if she lacked the actual skills to pull it off. She was pleased they were praising all the hard work she'd put in.

Still...

"You two exaggerate." Her face flushed. It didn't help that she knew they were being so sincere. Claudia was accustomed to calculated flattery, but this was a different beast altogether.

At dinner, Lilith apologized profusely for the incident at the dance hall.

"I am so sorry about what happened. I have scolded Fer about it as well." Lilith frowned. Her daughter had holed up in her room and refused to come out.

"Let's allow Fermina to rest for a bit," Claudia's father suggested, having already heard about the situation from both Virgil and Lilith.

"You know, I'm beginning to think that maybe it wasn't such a good idea, us living here," Lilith murmured.

"But Fermina always dreamed about living at the mansion, didn't she?" the duke reminded her.

He called it a mansion, but it was more like a palace. In addition to the vast gardens on the property, the house had well over one hundred rooms. Its impressive size was why Claudia frequently took walks to clear her head. Fermina wasn't alone in her longing to live here; young ladies all over the world dreamed of living in a ducal household. Fermina's strong attachment was understandable, given the ducal blood running through her veins.

Even so, perhaps the gap between her fantasies and reality was a little too great.

Everything in the house boasted luxury, from the decorations to the furniture to even the food lining their dining table. Their lives weren't merely opulent, however. Since Claudia and Fermina were still too young to be considered full-fledged adults, there was much to learn—and, as a result, precious little time for leisure. Their privileged status equated greater expectations from everyone. Proper etiquette and dancing skills were a given; they also needed a wide breadth of knowledge. And the more they tried to further their education, the more they realized there weren't enough hours in the day to learn all there was to know. Claudia was fortunate that the knowledge and experience she gained at the brothel gave her an edge.

At any rate, the most important thing was that Fermina's current actions weren't harming Claudia. She reaffirmed her decision to be more cautious in the future while letting her father and Lilith judge Fermina's actions for themselves.

When Claudia returned to her bedroom with Helen, they began their workout. It was a simple routine meant to help them achieve more desirable figures. Claudia had discussed which exercises were most effective with the veteran sex workers in the past and spent a long time cultivating the perfect program.

"It's amazing that this will keep one's breasts from sagging," Helen commented.

"It won't completely prevent sagging, but it will delay it at least."

They lifted their elbows, palms pressed flat together in front of their chests. By tightening the muscles in their chests, they could keep their breasts perky for longer. Claudia had, through her own experience, come up with exercises to firm up the buttocks and make them more attractive to the opposite sex.

"I'm sure there's still room for improvement," Claudia said of her regimen.

"I think it's amazing you even thought of this all to begin with. People keep asking me what I'm doing to maintain such an incredible figure lately."

Perhaps someday it would be good to teach these exercises to the other maids as well, but Claudia wasn't too keen on passing around this knowledge for free. Although she made her own adjustments to her program, the exercises therein had come from veteran sex workers. They were originally supposed to help her achieve a more desirable figure so she could perform better at the brothel. But she was no longer a sex worker, and she hesitated to share their knowledge without permission.

Claudia and Helen continued their routine, at times taking poses that would be embarrassing if anyone happened upon them, and they would hold these forms for a while to train their bodies. The two chatted with each other the whole time, making the whole experience much more enjoyable.

When they finally finished, it was teatime. Claudia would be retiring soon enough, so Helen poured them each a cup of relaxing herbal tea. This was the only time Helen would sit across from her and enjoy a cup with her.

"I would also like to get my hands on some cosmetics best suited to my skin," Claudia said.

"You mean from the Evans Company? I looked into them for you, but they aren't selling any products on a large scale yet, so I think it'll be difficult to obtain anything from them."

When it came to cosmetics, not every brand was a match for all skin types. Claudia was a stickler when it came to cosmetics; she only ever used what was compatible with her skin. Unfortunately, the particular brand she favored in her time as a sex worker wasn't out on the market yet.

Claudia and Helen continued discussing all sorts of beauty products, and when their conversation finally began to die down, a subdued knock fell on the door.

"Do you have a moment, Lady Claudia?" It was the Lindsays' elderly butler.

Helen gripped the arms of her chair in a panic, ready to launch herself out of it. Claudia held up a hand to stop her. One glance at the two empty cups on the table and the butler would know instantly that the two had been sitting together. She ushered him in anyway.

"My deepest apologies for disturbing you at this hour," he said.

The elderly man's gaze briefly wandered to Helen, but he made no comment. It seemed he wasn't going to meddle in Claudia's personal affairs so long as she kept these teatimes with Helen out of sight. Besides, everyone already knew how much Claudia favored her.

The butler motioned with his eyes at Helen to dismiss her, but Claudia stopped him, assuring him Helen wouldn't gossip about anything he had to share.

"I have heard something about Lady Fermina," the butler informed her at long last. He relayed what happened when the duke dropped by Fermina's room while she was holed up there. Fermina apparently insisted that Claudia was threatening Lilith and forcing her to cover for Claudia, which was why she hadn't spoken up for her daughter during the dance hall fiasco.

Claudia's eyes widened, and Helen's face went red with unrestrained fury.

For his part, the butler looked pensive as he continued, "The master inquired as to whether there was any reason to suspect such an accusation was true, and I told him no."

"Did Father believe her?"

He shook his head. "No, he only asked for confirmation. Although he also made the same query with the mistress afterward, and she was livid."

"She was livid? Not Father?"

"No, it was most definitely the mistress. As soon as he finished speaking, the mistress laid into him, saying the question showed gross distrust of her and you as well, Lady Claudia."

That made sense. Her father only meant to confirm the truth, but in Lilith's eyes, it had seemed like an accusation. How foolish. He should've just let the matter drop after asking the butler.

"The master has no intention of bringing this up with you, which is why I decided to report the matter," the butler finished.

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

Does this mean she really is the same she-devil, then?

Claudia watched quietly as the butler left and gestured for Helen to pour her a fresh cup of tea.

"It seems that girl isn't simply suffering from an overactive imagination. She's a compulsive liar," said Helen.

"Yes. It does seem she desperately wants to make me out to be a villain."

Was Fermina really the exact same person she had been in Claudia's first life?

Claudia kept an eye on how her father would resolve the situation, but alas, it ended as quickly as it had begun.

Lilith was the one most shocked by the situation; her own daughter had doubted her loyalty, suspecting she would cave to threats and betray her own flesh and blood. Knowing that was how Fermina felt, Lilith resolved to drag her daughter out the door and leave. When she pleaded with the duke to at least let them recover in the countryside, Fermina immediately changed her tune and apologized to Claudia.

The whole matter was done and dusted as far as her father was concerned. Fermina stopped badmouthing Claudia, and peace once again returned to the Lindsay household.

But as far as Claudia was concerned, this was just the calm before the storm.

The scariest part of all this is that I can't predict what she will get up to next.

Claudia kept a close eye on her half-sister as she lost herself in her thoughts.

Fermina was clad in an adorable pink dress. Claudia, meanwhile, wore a dress with a hem that brushed her ankles, allowing the wind to catch it so it danced modestly around her legs. The collar was subdued, with a low neckline made entirely of lace, which made the dress seem light and airy. It was designed to hang just low enough that one could glimpse the smallest bit of cleavage through the lace. The muted dark-blue color enhanced her elegance.

The royal family was hosting a large-scale tea party in their gardens today. All ladies who had yet to make their debut were invited. The venue was alive with animated chatter well before the host, Sylvester, stepped onto the scene.

Although Claudia hadn't been able to attend another one-on-one tea party with the crown prince since their initial meeting, she had met him briefly at banquets since then. These short encounters made interacting with him far less burdensome, and having grown accustomed, she wasn't concerned about running into him here at this party. In fact, she intended to stick as close to Fermina as she possibly could, since there was no way of knowing what she might get up to otherwise.

Claudia began their outing by introducing Fermina to the other noble ladies she'd known since childhood and monitored her half-sister's reaction to them. Everyone's curious gazes focused on Fermina at first, but after Claudia politely announced her, they lost interest.

There were probably people whispering all sorts of unflattering things about Fermina behind her back, but no one openly attacked her. That was largely because Claudia stuck by Fermina's side with a gentle smile.

Claudia had a stellar reputation among the aristocracy even though she'd yet to make her debut. Hers was a moving story, after all: the girl who had a dramatic change of heart after her mother passed. Word of it spread everywhere.

When she tilted her head back, the clear blue sky hung far up above, and all

around her was greenery that took on a shade of jade in the sunlight. The way the wind swept through the open garden felt so good on Claudia's skin. But as she was savoring it, Sylvester finally made his grand appearance. Greetings were to be paid by order of one's status, so Claudia quickly retrieved Fermina and made her way over to the prince.

"Thank you kindly for inviting us to your tea party today, Prince Sylvester," she said with a curtsy.

He was more dazzling now than when she last saw him. The prince had been adorable to her eyes in the beginning, but he'd since matured into a young man. His doll-like appearance had become more sensual and seductive.

The man was already beautiful from the start, but he's somehow evolved.

Claudia questioned if they really were the same age. When she noticed his gaze dip to her breasts, however, she was a bit relieved. *He may look like a doll, but his male instincts get the better of him, I see.*

It was natural, really. Regardless of gender or sexual preference, when one was presented with an attractive body, their eyes tended to wander. Claudia was no exception. She knew that if she found someone appealing, she would ogle too—whether that be a man's muscled form or a woman's voluptuous shape.

Attracting Sylvester's interest was a good sign for her outlook as a bridal candidate. She was glad she'd chosen a design that enhanced her breasts.

"Allow me to introduce you," Claudia said, ushering her half-sister forward. "This is my younger sister, Fermina."

"Fermina Lindsay, Your Highness. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Since the dance hall incident, Fermina had taken her education more seriously. Her dedicated effort paid off; the curtsy she offered the prince was elegant and refined. Even to Claudia's eyes, it was an impressive improvement.

Sylvester's expression hasn't changed at all upon seeing her. Hmm...

That suggested their marriage in Claudia's last lifetime wasn't a consequence of a love at first sight.

She glanced behind her. Other noble ladies had already lined up for their turn to greet the prince.

"Excuse us, then. Perhaps we will see you later," Claudia said. Her eyes landed on the redheaded boy beside Sylvester. "You as well, Lord Tristan."

Tristan gazed back at her warmly, and she smiled. It was a relief knowing the person the prince kept closest to him had no ill will toward her this time around.

Once they finished with their greetings, all that was left was to leisurely pass the rest of the time at the party. Claudia kept Fermina in her line of sight while engaging in small talk with some other noble ladies. The most common topics were their upcoming debuts and the academy. Many of the girls pestered Claudia with questions about Virgil, to which she responded with innocuous tidbits of information about him. The girls were noticeably delighted when she informed them he had yet to be engaged.

Oh...? Claudia noticed that Fermina's eyes had been locked on something for quite a while. She followed her sister's gaze. At the end of it stood Sylvester, smiling warmly as he mingled with his guests. She looked back at Fermina. Her half-sister's eyes were filled with a feverish passion.

I see. So, although Sylvester showed no particular interest in her, it seems it was love at first sight for Fermina. Claudia couldn't blame her. Any young noble lady who witnessed his sensuous beauty for the first time would fall hard. The only reason Claudia was so unruffled was because she had a wealth of experience with all sorts of men at the brothel.

It was actually heartwarming to witness Fermina's expression as she experienced love for the first time. Unfortunately, Sylvester already had bridal candidates, and Claudia was one of them. Claudia couldn't rest on her laurels knowing her half-sister would use this newfound love for the prince as extra motivation to drive Claudia out.

There was just one problem: at present, there was nothing Claudia could do.

Fermina would have to answer for her crimes if she did anything. She might be condemned the same way Claudia was, in fact. But so long as she did nothing out of line, there wasn't anything Claudia could do to thwart her.

At present, there are no signs that she's trying to butter anyone up either.

Nor did she try to rally people against Claudia yet.

Last time, Claudia had fallen all too easily for Fermina's trap. Someone approached her under the guise of being her ally, though they were actually one of Fermina's minions. No wonder Fermina had managed to outwit her and provide proof of Claudia's schemes.

The best option was for things to remain as they were—for Claudia to not have to do anything.

I swear it seems like she's about to try something, but is that just me reading too much into things? Perhaps Claudia was traumatized still by the glimpse of Fermina's more dastardly side when her brother and the prince condemned her in her last life. Of course, it sticks out in my mind. She has such an adorable face, and to see it contort into something so ugly... Just how obsessed was she with—

Claudia's thoughts were interrupted when Fermina turned her head and their eyes met. Like Claudia, Fermina had kept a smile on her face the entire time, but the moment their gazes locked, all emotion drained from her face. It wasn't the expression of ecstasy that Claudia remembered from her previous life, yet seeing her standing there with a completely blank face sent a chill down Claudia's spine.

"Eek!" Fermina suddenly lost balance, collapsing onto the ground. The cup of tea she'd been carrying spilled all over her pink dress.

"Fermina?! Are you all right?!" Panicked, Claudia reached a hand out to help her, but Fermina refused to take it.

"That was so cruel, Elder Sister! I can't believe you would shove me like that!" Tears welled up in her eyes as she shrilled at Claudia. "Are you really that desperate to embarrass me?!"

"Where is this coming from?" Claudia demanded, hand still hovering uselessly in the air.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

She got me! I thought I was being cautious, but I still fell into her trap!

There was nothing Claudia could have done, though. Fermina fell on her own.

Desperate to turn the situation around, Claudia knelt, hoping to help her. Fermina realized instantly what she was doing and hopped to her feet. She ran off before Claudia could do anything.

"Wait, Miss Fermina!" Claudia was at a loss. "Where did she get such a strange idea in her head...?" Her shoulders quaked, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

If Martha had been here, she would've scolded Claudia for such an indecent display. This is no time to be concerned about appearances. She forced out her tears and sobbed the way she had when she clung to her mother's grave. While she was careful to make it more modest than the first time, she needed her crying to have sufficient impact on the crowd so they realized how hurt she was.

Claudia furtively surveyed her surroundings. Fortunately, there were no ladies nearby who opposed her or her family. All the ladies whom she'd known since childhood rushed to her side to console her.

That should be enough for now, she thought. The bigger issue is what happens next.

Namely, where had Fermina gone? Claudia didn't want to leave her untrustworthy half-sister off on her own. She was probably already spreading falsehoods about Claudia.

"Thank you all. Your comfort means the world to me. I'm still very concerned about Miss Fermina, however, so I would like to go search for her," Claudia announced.

She asked if any of them had seen where her half-sister had gone. Some young lord sympathetic to her plight was quick to point her in the right direction.

"She went that way," he said. "I think she was headed for where the carriages are parked."

"Yeah, I saw her too. If you'd like, I could go with you," offered another.

The palace had a special area for their aristocratic guests to park their carriages. If these young lords were to be believed, Fermina likely intended to head home ahead of Claudia. There were knights stationed along the way for security, so there was no need for her to worry about anyone accosting her. She turned down the offer of an escort and excused herself.

Claudia paused to scan the garden before she left, trying to locate Sylvester. When leaving a party early, it was custom to at least inform the host first. Fermina had ignored that tradition, but Claudia couldn't afford to do the same.

It didn't take long to spot Sylvester, primarily because he'd heard all the ruckus and made his way over.

"I heard what happened. I'll accompany you to the parking area," he said.

It was too much to make the crown prince do such a thing. Claudia shook her head. "I couldn't possibly trouble you like that."

"I wasn't able to be by your side when it happened. At least let me comfort you by coming along." His eyes softened as he pleaded with her. Squeals echoed in the background.

Claudia suppressed a sigh. She couldn't refuse him. *I just want to hurry and track Fermina down, yet now I have to entertain the prince?* With no other choice, she placed her hand on his proffered arm and let him escort her.

As she unfortunately anticipated, their pace was a leisurely one as they walked down a colonnaded corridor. Guards were stationed at regular intervals, but it was otherwise deserted. Only their footsteps echoed around them.

I doubt he's somehow in cahoots with Fermina.

It was their first time meeting, after all. Yet as certain as she was that such a thing was impossible, it was hard not to view his actions as impeding her speedy pursuit.

"It seemed to me that you and Lady Fermina were on good terms," said Sylvester casually.

"That was my intention at least, but it seems Miss Fermina feels differently," Claudia lamented. She was careful to make herself sound vulnerable, as though

she blamed herself for the situation and didn't know why it had come to this. She glanced tearfully up at him. "Prince Sylvester, what do you think I should have—"

She froze, her voice dying in her throat.

Although Sylvester had said all that about accompanying her to offer her comfort, he had the same relaxed smile on his face that he always wore. He didn't look the least bit concerned for her.

"What are you really thinking right now?" Sylvester asked.

"Pardon...?"

"You're lying when you say you want to be on good terms with her, right? Normally, one would resent the child of her father's mistress. That's especially true when she's been blessed with all his love while you haven't."

Claudia's jaw tightened. "That is not how I feel. I'll admit my father's actions were problematic, but his sins do not extend to Miss Fermina." Yes, she had her own complicated feelings about Fermina, but Claudia thought her father deserved most of the blame for the situation.

Children were innocent. That was true for Fermina, Claudia, and Virgil too.

That was also why Claudia held a deep grudge toward her father for neglecting her and her brother.

The words Claudia spoke were sincere, but Sylvester didn't seem convinced.

"Hmm."

"And what answer could I give that would satisfy you?" Claudia asked. If he would tell her, she would play the part he wanted. She'd been searching for a hint this entire time, but she'd yet to find a solid answer.

"You want to know what would satisfy me?"

"Huh?!"

They just happened to pass an enormous pillar when she posed the question. The prince cornered her against it, trapping her. Face-to-face with his overwhelming beauty, Claudia swallowed hard.

Sylvester seemed to enjoy her reaction. He twirled a strand of her raven hair around his finger and pressed it to his lips. "I want to know what you're *really* thinking. I want to see what's beneath that perfect mask you put on for everyone."



His golden eyes, filled with desire, narrowed. He was all predator, and she his prey.

He's finally shown some emotion. Although he'd driven her up against a pillar, he'd shed his own mask in the process. This gave her an advantage. She wanted to know this whole time what lay beneath his own mask—to see beyond the doll to the human aspects he kept hidden. All she needed was a starting point, then her experience as a sex worker took over.

"A woman must have her secrets, Prince Sylvester," Claudia replied with a sultry smile.

He stiffened. The next instant, he burst into laughter. "Ah ha ha! Yes, I was hoping you'd give me that kind of answer! I knew you were an interesting one. This is far more appealing than those tears you showed earlier!"

His reaction confirmed that she was on the right path. All those nerve-racking conversations she'd had with him before suddenly made perfect sense.

Prince Sylvester enjoys this tense push-and-pull.

It wasn't quite as sweet or romantic as love, to be sure, but he enjoyed Claudia because she didn't react as he anticipated. Claudia no doubt stood out from the rest of the young ladies her age. And why wouldn't she? Unlike them, she lived the last years of her first life as a sex worker, only to go back in time and have a second chance.

I bet he feels like he found a new toy to play with. I suppose it's not sadism but the joy of dominating someone. He enjoys claiming something, making it his. Handling such men was Claudia's specialty. She hadn't climbed her way to the number-one spot at the brothel for nothing.

"I'm pleased to be a source of entertainment for you. Would you please mind moving, though? I would like to chase after Miss Fermina."

"Is she more precious to you than me?" His tone was reprimanding, but she knew he was amused by her actions. Sylvester's fingers continued teasing her hair, conveying his eagerness to see what she would do next.

"Indeed," she answered. Not Fermina herself, but the matter at hand.

Claudia's entire life was riding on this.

Shedding tears in the garden had been a way to garner sympathy from those gathered, but it wasn't a foolproof countermeasure. There were other people who wanted to take Claudia down besides Fermina. They would use the fuss at the tea party as ammunition against her. Some of them might even use this opportunity to approach Fermina. There would be nothing more irksome than her enemies joining hands.

"You're making me jealous," Sylvester said as he leaned in, his shadow swallowing her up. Their lips met without any preamble.

Claudia was so shocked she could only blink. Once their mouths parted, she weakly protested, "Prince Sylvester! You've gone too far!"

Nevertheless, her thoughts couldn't catch up with the situation. Her heart was thundering so loudly, it echoed in her ears. In her surprise, she'd even let her usual smile slip.

"That sort of reaction wounds a man's pride, you know."

Claudia couldn't tell him the truth—that she was a total mess inside after their kiss. She forced her scrambled thoughts in order. Claudia was only *one* of several bridal candidates. It was against the established rules for him to broach this level of intimacy with her.

So, um, I should...

She still couldn't settle herself, not with those golden eyes gazing at her. It was only thanks to her experience as a sex worker that she managed to plaster a composed smile back on her face.

"My apologies, but I'm not a fan of this approach." Though she didn't say as much, she was indirectly chastising him for a lack of creativity. If he wanted to enjoy a push-and-pull relationship with her, he needed to entertain her too.

Sylvester wasn't the least bit bothered by her haughty display. In fact, he said, "Pardon me, then. I will do my utmost to make sure I don't bore you."

He pulled away and offered his arm again. Claudia took it.

Once they arrived at the parking area, Claudia was unsurprised to find

Fermina nowhere in sight.

"It seems she already returned home," said Claudia.

"What next, then? Shall we return to the garden?"

"Hmm." Claudia furrowed her brow. "I suppose that would be a good idea. I don't wish to leave Miss Fermina on her own, so I'll ask someone to lend me their carriage." If she asked her childhood friends, she knew one of them would happily lend her theirs.

Claudia turned on her heel, ready to head back. She was mentally going over the ladies she knew to figure out which one would give her the least trouble in the future if she needed a favor. It was best to pick someone she wouldn't regret owing a debt to.

Before she could get anywhere, Sylvester cut in front of her and blocked her path. "Have you forgotten me? I can have one of the royal carriages prepared for you."

I haven't forgotten you at all. You're just the last person I want to be indebted to!

"My family would be shocked if I were to return in a royal carriage," Claudia responded demurely.

"You are one of my bridal candidates. I see no issue with it." Sylvester obviously wanted her to owe him. Claudia could read as much in his words, which was precisely why she didn't want to give in. Regrettably, she had no way to dodge his offer.

After a long, reluctant pause, she acquiesced. "All right. If you would be so kind." She lowered her head.

Sylvester's eyebrows shot up. "I thought you would try to resist my offer more."

"I am most appreciative of your goodwill. However, my acceptance comes with the stipulation that I don't owe you for this favor."

"Come now," he said, subtly indicating he didn't find her terms fair at all. She could tell he wasn't going to budge.

Undaunted, Claudia smiled at him and said, "In exchange, I promise to entertain you."

"What?"

"Aren't you the least bit interested? In Miss Fermina's actions, I mean."

"Hmm." He stroked his chin. "If you really weren't the one who shoved her, then that means she's trying to drag your reputation down, correct?"

Claudia nodded. "Indeed. That's why I'll be facing off with Miss Fermina. This will be the grand beginning of our battle against one another."

Sylvester was like a bystander on the cliff opposite a raging fire. He could enjoy the show without worrying about the flames reaching him. Wasn't that the best form of entertainment? That was what Claudia was suggesting.

"I don't wish for anything dire to happen within the Lindsay household," he said.

"I have no intention of causing my elder brother any trouble either," Claudia assured him. "I assume Miss Fermina feels the same in that regard."

Fermina's goal was to get Claudia out of the picture. She didn't want to destroy their entire house. Just as she prevented her mother from dragging her off to the countryside during the last fiasco, Fermina wouldn't act in a way that would be disadvantageous to her in the long run.

"Regardless," Claudia went on, "I cannot avoid facing off with her. So why not enjoy the show from a first-class seat?" She'd promised the capricious gods, after all. It wouldn't be too burdensome to add another person to her audience.

"I see, so that's what you offer in exchange for my carriage." Sylvester nodded to himself. Claudia assumed that meant he'd accepted her offer, but in instead, his golden eyes bore down on her. "But that isn't enough. If I wanted to watch a show, I could simply go to the theater."

"Do you mean to insinuate you would rather participate?"

He shook his head. "I have no desire to get myself caught in the middle of your squabble."

"Then ...?"

Again she was reminded of how troublesome the prince was. He would never let her take the lead in conversations.

"I want you to try to fall in love with me. Not as an act—I mean genuinely."

She blinked at him. "That's really what you want?"

"Yes. I have no intention of being a member of your audience, nor do I have any interest in intervening in your issues. *You* need to make the effort to come to *me*."

He wants me to twirl off the stage and come within arm's length of the audience? Is that what he means?

Sylvester cocked his head to the side, smirking. "It's not a difficult request, is it? In a political marriage, couples normally try to meet each other halfway."

Claudia studied him, still puzzled as to his true intentions. Was this part of the whole push-and-pull dynamic he was thirsting for?

"You said each couple should have to meet halfway just now," she reminded him. It seemed pertinent given how he was acting like she needed to be the one to come to him.

"What, you mean you haven't noticed? I've been longing for you for a while now."

"Pardon?!" Claudia's voice hitched. She hadn't seen that response coming. The way she squeaked was very unbecoming of a lady, and Sylvester laughed. It wasn't the normal, restrained way he usually expressed his mirth; it was genuine and innocent, the kind of laughter one would expect to hear from a young man his age.

"Heh, looks like I was finally able to reply in kind to you. Wait here, I'll have your carriage prepared." Sylvester left a gawking Claudia behind as he left to flag a servant.

It took no time at all for a carriage with the royal house's emblem plastered on it to pull up.

"I wish you luck," said Sylvester before she climbed inside.

"Oh, um, yes. Thank you."

Claudia didn't snap back to reality until she was inside and the carriage finally pulled away from the palace.

"He was teasing me just now, wasn't he?"

Even then, she wasn't sure what his intentions were.

When Claudia returned home, she found that a bizarre atmosphere had settled across their estate. Helen came out to meet her and quickly described the situation.

"That girl is at it again with her compulsive lying."

"Father and Miss Lilith are home today, aren't they?"

Helen nodded. "Yes, and as soon as Miss Fermina returned home, she went sobbing to the master." She further explained that Virgil had joined them in the sitting room after hearing all the fuss. Claudia could already guess that Fermina had spun the tale in a way that would paint her as the victim.

Everyone's eyes turned to Claudia the moment she entered.

"No! Don't come any closer!" Fermina shrieked, trembling with fear as she pressed herself closer to their father. "Father, please protect me!"

Claudia's eyes filled with sadness as she regarded her half-sister. "It seems you're still misunderstanding the situation."

"Hardly! You're the one who shoved me! There are witnesses who can attest to that!" Fermina shot back.

"Claudia, is this true?" the duke asked.

Claudia shook her head. Everyone in the room seemed skeptical of Fermina's tale, but if there really were witnesses, it would be more difficult for them to judge the situation. That meant Claudia still held the advantage, though.

"No one was there to witness me shoving her," Claudia said, "because I did no such thing. The witnesses she refers to only heard her cry out. That's all."

She had confirmed as much with those present before she left. Every close bystander had been a noble lady with whom Claudia enjoyed a close

relationship. Hypothetically, even if there were some there who opposed Claudia and wanted to use the opportunity to side with Fermina, their lie would soon be exposed.

"The ladies I was standing with can verify that I didn't move at all," Claudia added. She had been at Fermina's side for practically the entire tea party, but she'd always been locked in one conversation or another. If she'd done anything remotely suspicious, someone would have noticed.

"I bet those girls are all on your side, that's why! This is so cruel of you, to pick on me and bully me just because my mother wasn't Father's legal wife when he had me!"

Lilith looked hurt by her daughter's words.

Claudia felt a headache coming on. Just how much was Fermina going to sacrifice her own mother for personal gain before she was satisfied? The way she changed the subject as soon as she knew she was at a disadvantage was cunning, to be sure. But in this situation, the more emotional one was also the least believable one. The one who remained composed gave a better impression to their audience. Hence Claudia decided not to return to the heart of the matter and instead addressed Fermina's new grievance.

"Miss Fermina, you are mistaken. You are a full-fledged member of this family, as much a duke's daughter as myself."

Fermina shook her head. "So what? That doesn't change the past! You hate me because I got all Father's love!"

"No."

"Don't lie! It's not possible for you not to hate me for that!"

Hard to believe this is the second time I'm having this same exact conversation today, Claudia thought, recalling the exchange with Sylvester. Then, as now, she answered her half-sister the same way.

"Father is the one in the wrong, not you. Let me ask you in turn, do you hate me?" She knew Fermina wouldn't answer that truthfully, even if she did hate Claudia.

After all, you want to be the victim in this situation and make yourself out as a saint.

Fermina was acting the same way now as she had in Claudia's previous lifetime. All she wanted was to be the heroine of a tragedy, with Claudia as the villainess.

"Y-you can say whatever you want about me, but don't talk bad about Father!" Fermina snapped at her.

Claudia folded her arms. "No, I will speak frankly on this matter. Why must you defend him?"

"Because all Father did was fall in love with Mother! That's it!"

"Yes, and in the process, he neglected my elder brother and me. All those things were *his* choices. So I ask again: what reason would I have to hate you, Miss Fermina?"

"I already told you—because Father gave all his love to me."

"But that was also his choice, no? The only person who can decide whether to offer that love is Father himself. Instead of hating you when you have no control over his decisions, I would rather do my utmost to receive Father's recognition. That's a much more constructive use of my time."

If the tables were turned, Fermina would have probably hated Claudia, the same way Claudia hated her in her first life. That was a natural reaction to have. Even Sylvester had insisted that she must hate her father's illegitimate child, as if there was no other option. Claudia didn't feel that way. Since returning to the age of fourteen, she had begun to see her life in a more objective way. It allowed her to state confidently that the sins of the father were not the responsibility of the child.

Having said all that, it was rather common for women to direct their hate not at their adulterous husbands but at their lovers instead.

I remember wives charging into the brothel to harass us. If your husband is being unfaithful, take it up with him, not us. Honestly!

At the time, she thought the women should be grateful that the men were

only cheating with sex workers. At least it wasn't emotional cheating; they were just using money to buy themselves pleasure.

A wrinkle formed in Fermina's brow. She couldn't fathom Claudia's mature, experienced way of thinking. And so, she reiterated what she'd already said. "Don't talk bad about Father!"

Unable to listen to Fermina's childish rebuttals any further, their father cut in this time. His expression had grown stern. "Enough. Fermina, return to your room and rest there for a while."

"Wait, Father! Didn't you hear? Elder Sister resents you!" She tried to plead her case, but the duke held up a hand to stop her.

"Take her to her room," he told Lilith.

Claudia's stepmother quickly retrieved her daughter and guided her from the room, leaving silence in their wake.

Does that mean I'm free to return to my room as well?

The argument had shifted from the incident at the tea party to Claudia's personal feelings toward her father. She was happy to share them, but she couldn't understand what Fermina had hoped to gain from all this.

She's quick-witted, but too preoccupied with her own ego to see the bigger picture. Fermina couldn't see things through other people's perspectives. Claudia had been the same once, but she was different now—and something about all this niggled at her. I haven't bullied her this time around, so why does she hold such a deep resentment toward me?

Far from spurning Fermina, Claudia even tried to close the gap between them. The two hadn't met before Fermina came to live with them. It would make sense if she were merely envious. Many women envied her for being one of Sylvester's potential brides and for standing at the top of aristocratic society as a duke's daughter. But Fermina's emotions were stronger, more bitter than that. Is it just that her envy is so deep it's turned into malice? But how warped must her feelings be for that to happen?

This incident revealed that Fermina was simply rotten to the core—and a real pain to deal with. If her emotions were distorted, then no matter how kindly

Claudia tried to treat her, Fermina wouldn't accept it at face value.

How did we refer to this sort of person back at the brothel? Hmm. Ah, yes, a pitfall. On the battlefield, a single pitfall could entrap and injure a great number of soldiers, which was why they took to referring to such volatile people as pitfalls. The best way to handle a pitfall was not to approach it. Things would be so much easier for Claudia if that were an option. She felt like cradling her head in her hands.

Frankly, if there's nothing else to discuss, I'd like to retreat to my room and dive into bed.

But no sooner had she thought that than her father finally said, "Do the two of you resent me? No, I suppose that's a given." He'd muttered in such a low voice and answered his own question, so it seemed he was talking to himself. Their father hung his head, looking dejected.

It was a bit late to discuss this matter, but Claudia and Virgil exchanged glances. Virgil then looked at his father with open exasperation. "Did you seriously think we loved you?"

"No..."

"Then you're self-aware, at least. We respect you as duke and head of this household, but not as a father. That said, I don't particularly resent you."

Their father lifted his head. He met Virgil's gaze for a moment before his eyes moved to Claudia.

"However," Virgil continued, "if you do anything to further hurt Dee, I will resent you."

"I see. Do you feel the same way, Claudia?" Her father's eyes were the exact same shade of blue as hers.

Claudia nodded. "I would resent you as well if you did anything to hurt my elder brother. Having said that, I'd like you to remember one thing: this is the first time either of us have ever spoken that word in the context of how we feel about you."

His eyes widened. Regardless of whatever emotional turmoil his actions

caused them, Claudia and Virgil had chosen to protect their father as head of their household rather than voice their complaints. Never had they blamed him to his face before, and they most certainly hadn't opposed any of the decisions he'd made. The duke realized, at long last, how magnanimous his children really were.

"Just how shortsighted have I been...?" the duke muttered, stricken.

Virgil shrugged.

Claudia forced a smile, paused for a breath, and said, "I already stated my feelings to Fermina. That was genuine. When I swore to you that I would do my best to earn your recognition, I meant it. I will hold to that promise even more in the future. Also, I'll admit that if I stop to look back, it was lonely without you all those years."

It wasn't that Claudia wanted him to dote on her now. She wasn't a child anymore; she didn't need her parents to fuss over her. Still, when she was that age and needed love, her mother had been harsh and her father absent. There was some truth to what Fermina said. The past couldn't be erased. No matter what she or anyone else said, people would always view Fermina as an illegitimate child. Claudia wasn't about to sugarcoat that.

"Sorry, I... No, anything I say will just be an excuse," said the duke.

"There is no need to apologize. If you feel badly for what you've done, then consider what you can do differently in the future." With a cheerful disposition, Claudia rose from her seat. "Let's end this discussion here."

Virgil mimicked her, leaving his chair. He invited her to have some tea with him.

The tea party ended with everyone dismissing the incident as Fermina's paranoia. When the duke heard that Sylvester had comforted Claudia at the party—even though the truth was hardly so rosy—he took the matter seriously and sent Fermina away to the countryside until her debut. The only reason he punished her so lightly was because he assumed it was only a little quarrel with Claudia. He wanted to give her another chance.

There were some at the tea party who stepped in to defend Fermina's actions. But with Fermina off in the countryside, there was no opportunity for ill rumors about Claudia to take root. The whole thing was soon forgotten.

As a result of her misdeeds, Fermina debuted without the opportunity to make friends beforehand.

Chapter 9:

The Younger Half-Sister Hates the Villainess

 $E_{\text{VERY TIME FERMINA}}$ gazed past the fence toward the vast ducal estate tucked within, she was overcome with indignation.

If things were the way they should be, I would be living there!

Her father loved her and her mother, not his legal wife and her spawn. It was only because of her mother's low social status that he had to keep them hidden from the outside.

Fermina and her mother never wanted for money, but there was still a world of difference between the life she led and the lives those at her father's estate enjoyed. She understood that even from a young age.

Every time she heard the words "mistress" and "one-generation nobility," she gritted her teeth in frustration. It's only like this because Mother refuses to dream of better!

That was why her father had never tried to break things off with his legal wife. Since Lilith had already stolen the duke from his wife, the next step was to take her place as duchess. Divorce was a scandal among the aristocracy, but Fermina saw no issue with it. He'd already hurt his reputation by virtue of having a mistress. As a duke, if he truly wanted to, he could make them official members of the family whenever he wanted. Such was Fermina's opinion.

"If you keep resting on your laurels as his mistress, who knows when Father might abandon you! Are you okay with that?!" she demanded.

Her mother only smiled bitterly and said, "It's not that simple, Fer."

"But why not? Aren't you just making it more complicated than it needs to be?"

"He has other children, with his wife. Try to be a little understanding."

When Fermina heard that, it was like a bolt of lightning tore through her. She

was shocked. Not only did her father have a son and daughter besides her, but that daughter was the same age as her. She could understand the son, since that was before her father met her mother. Besides, aristocrats needed male heirs to inherit their houses. That was important.

But did he really need to have another daughter? Oh, could it be a plot to use her as a political tool? Yes, that must be it. There could be no other reason. Fermina further reasoned that Claudia's mother must have pleaded with the duke to have a second child, with the excuse that they would need another son if anything were to happen to their eldest. Claudia was an unfortunate accident.

Unbeknownst to Fermina, the duke had no intention of using Claudia as a political tool. He was only interested in maintaining his house.

I can accept an older brother, but that girl is an eyesore. Political tool or not—and Fermina was still firmly convinced that Claudia was—she still couldn't stand that there was a girl her age enjoying a life of luxury in that enormous mansion. Fermina was the duke's daughter too. Why did she have to live with her head down?

The only daughter he needs is me. The only one he loves is me. The only daughter who should live there is me!

Thus, Claudia was unnecessary.

Fermina's convictions grew even stronger when her father slipped and mentioned how hot-tempered Claudia was. But then...

Why does everyone only ever compliment Claudia?!

When at long last she came to live at the duke's estate, the servants were cold to her. No matter how much she tried to sidle up to Virgil, playing up the cute little sister act, he didn't even bat an eye at her. The icing on an already unpleasant cake was that her mother, who should have been her ally, showered Claudia with praise.

I'm the one the head of this household truly loves! I'm the one everyone should adore and cherish! Those lowly servants sure have some gall. And Claudia has no business having such a big head on her shoulders, the hottempered wench. If you guys don't understand how things should work, then I'll

just have to make you! Elder Brother should love me. His Highness should love me!

When she discovered Claudia had been selected as a potential bride for the prince, she could hardly believe it. Her distorted mind couldn't accept it. She was convinced it was some kind of mistake—one that *needed* to be corrected by none other than herself.

Next time, I swear...I won't mess up!

No matter how many times her schemes backfired on her, Fermina was convinced she was the righteous one.

Her parents' hopes that she would reflect and adjust her behavior while she was confined to the countryside were all in vain.

Chapter 10:

The Villainess Begins Attending the Academy

At the GIRLS' SOCIETAL DEBUT, Virgil escorted Claudia while their father did so for Fermina. The venue became more animated when Claudia and Sylvester danced together, but otherwise, their first time out ended uneventfully, without Fermina causing any issues. She moved back into the mansion since she would be attending the academy.

"Lord Virgil will be there as a third-year, but you know how that girl is by now. Please be careful," Helen said as she tended to Claudia's hair. "Everyone here at the mansion is on your side, Lady Claudia!"

"Thank you, Helen." Claudia smiled. Today was to be her first day at the academy.

In reality, Fermina was not without sympathizers among the staff when she first arrived. Everyone agreed that any fault lay with the duke and not his child. Regrettably, her repeated lies convinced them that she didn't deserve an ounce of empathy anymore.

"I went for a half-up, half-down hairstyle today," Helen explained. "I left a few strands loose to amplify your sex appeal. His Highness will fall head over heels!"

There's no need for that, Claudia thought immediately, but then she paused. I did say I would entertain him, though. So I suppose this is necessary. She turned her head, observing the loose strands Helen mentioned through her reflection in the mirror. As her maid had indicated, the wavy black locks that fell against her cheeks gave her a sensual look. She was sixteen now, her figure more filled out than before. This hairstyle would make her an even bigger knockout.

"You know exactly what looks best on me," Claudia said proudly. "It's incredible."

"It wouldn't be possible if you weren't naturally charming to begin with, my lady."

If Claudia puffed out her chest, it made her look even more voluptuous than she already was. Even though she couldn't wear a corset beneath her uniform, her cinched waist created flattering contrast all on its own. Her behind was still modest in size, but it was slowly gaining the shape she desired.

Helen surveyed her mistress. Her cheeks flushed, and she let out a breath. "When you make your address as the representative for the incoming students, you will capture everyone's attention."

Claudia's results on the entrance exams impressed the school staff enough that they had selected her as the representative for new students. That was why Helen was peppering her with so many compliments.

"Not just the students," Helen added. "The teachers will be staring too."

If Claudia didn't do something, Helen was likely to continue forever, so she ended their conversation there.

Claudia rode in their family's carriage to get to the academy. For the first day, she joined Virgil in leaving early. Fermina would take a separate carriage later.

"I look forward to our attending the academy together," Claudia told her older brother.

"As do I. I can hold my head high because you're the new student rep."

"I'm no less proud because you're the student council president."

At eighteen years old, Virgil was in his final year at the academy. He'd won the election for student council president the previous year; the welcoming ceremony for the new students was also his inauguration. The academy staff had summoned the siblings early this morning to better coordinate.

Last time, Fermina was the representative for the incoming students. It seems hitting the books was worth it.

Fermina had studied hard in the countryside, but Claudia still beat her by a narrow margin.

"Starting tomorrow, the three of us will be commuting together. Are you going to be all right?" Virgil asked.

"Nothing happened during our societal debut, so I'm perfectly fine."

Virgil's vigilance lightened her load as well. The tea party incident was the final nail in the coffin, so to speak. Much like the servants, Virgil loathed Fermina. Even if she tried to get in his good graces now, she would only provoke his ire.

"She'll be able to move around freely at the academy, unlike our estate. If you notice anything amiss—anything at all—let me know."

Claudia nodded. "Of course. I'm counting on you."

The academy was a microcosm of aristocratic society. Some attending considered Claudia and Virgil their enemies, which was why Virgil was wary of Fermina joining hands with them.

"How much trouble does that girl intend to cause our entire house before she's satisfied?" He shook his head.

"For the moment, she hasn't caused any real harm. Surely Father will act if she creates another mess, right?"

"Worst-case scenario, he will entirely disown her and send her off to a nunnery."

That had been Claudia's previous fate. If she was going to send Fermina down the same road, she needed some hard evidence to prove her malice. It's unfortunate for me that she's so quick-witted.

Fermina seemed to have an acute sense for danger. No matter what trouble she caused, she avoided going too far over the line. She wasn't hot-tempered and impulsive like Claudia had been in her last life. Even if Claudia were to send a spy into Fermina's midst, she'd likely be found out. It reaffirmed her determination to be cautious.

The students would rally to her as the new student representative, but it would also make Fermina even more envious. One might argue that was a natural consequence of popularity, but with Fermina, Claudia couldn't be too careful. For her, the academy was less of a learning institution and more of a battlefield.

The entrance ceremony took place in the academy's ceremonial hall. This space was normally unused throughout the school year, but with a member of the royal family in attendance for this year's ceremony, the school staff had gone all out with it. The hall was lavishly decorated, with a special seating arrangement prepared for those addressing the student body. There was an overwhelming number of chairs prepared for the rest of the incoming students.

When Claudia thought about standing at the podium and addressing this many people, her stomach cramped. It was a bit late to have second thoughts, but she couldn't help it.

"Weren't you the student representative in your day, Elder Brother? Did it make you nervous?"

Virgil nodded. "Yeah, it sure did. It took everything I had just to avoid stumbling over my words."

She let out a shaky breath. Though it relieved her to know she wasn't the only one who'd felt this way, she still had some misgivings over whether she could safely see her speech through. Claudia had never spoken in front of so many people before. At the brothel, her work had always been a one-on-one affair. This was her first time standing at a podium.

Her face clouded over.

"Don't worry," Virgil assured her. "If your mind goes blank midway, just make up something on the spot and wrap it up. It's fine if your speech ends early. Remember, you'll have me and the crown prince at your side." He smiled warmly at her.

Sylvester was also a new student this year. As a member of the royal family, it was his duty to offer the congratulatory address, so he would be sitting nearby with Virgil.

Although being a duke's daughter demanded carrying out duties to perfection, Virgil prioritized Claudia's well-being over such expectations. Claudia could slip up and it would be insignificant in the face of all the effort she'd put in over these past two years, as far as he was concerned.

"Personally, I think it's enough that you secured the position of representative for yourself."

He made a fair point. By virtue of this accomplishment, she upheld the honor of her house. It was also a point in her favor as a potential bride of the crown prince. Virgil patted her back, trying to reassure her that shouldering any more responsibility than she had was unnecessary. His support gave her courage.

"What's the matter? Has something happened?" someone interjected from behind.

When she turned to glance back, Claudia was met with a head of dazzling silver hair. "Good morning, Prince Sylvester."

"Morning. How impressive to see brother and sister together on this stage," Sylvester said smoothly. Virgil politely dipped his head, but Sylvester dismissed the gesture with a wave. "You're an upperclassman here. There's no need for formalities."

Virgil's shoulders visibly relaxed. Although he wasn't as close to the prince as Tristan, he'd spent a significant amount of time with Sylvester in the past. Being a second cousin of close age had been more than enough qualification to serve as the prince's companion. Even though he was forced to keep his distance to maintain fairness now that Claudia was a bridal candidate, he was familiar enough with the prince's disposition.

"In that case, Syl, would you help me out by reassuring Dee?" Virgil said.

Claudia was flabbergasted by her brother's sudden casual attitude toward the prince; she didn't realize how close they really were. "E-Elder Brother, what are you...?!"

"Oh? Claudia's nervous, hmm?" Sylvester eyed her with amusement.

Her temper flared. Excuse you! I am prone to nervousness like anyone else!

Claudia's brow furrowed for a moment, but she quickly schooled her features. She brought a hand up to her cheek and averted her gaze, breathing a wistful sigh. The motion made her loose locks cast shadows across her cheeks.

"I'm afraid so, since this is my first time doing something like this," she

murmured.

Sylvester narrowed his golden eyes. In a voice that sounded entirely too serious, he offered an unthinkable suggestion: "In that case, let's call off the speech she's supposed to give. I would prefer your beauty to not be on display for the entire school anyway."

"Syl?" Virgil blurted in disbelief.

Claudia's jaw fell slack. "Prince Sylvester...?"

They were petrified. Sylvester cocked his head at them, the perfectly straight strands of his silver hair gliding across his forehead. "What, is that out of the question?"

"Of course it is!" Virgil snapped.

"It most certainly is!" Claudia replied, her voice overlapping with Virgil's.

Again, their reactions were practically identical.

The prince calling off a school tradition like that speech would come across as tyrannical. Claudia couldn't tell whether the suggestion was meant sincerely or in jest. It made Sylvester that much more of a challenge for her, not being able to read him easily; but after a moment of silence, they broke into laughter.

Claudia and Virgil's unintentionally synchronized response elicited laughter from all three. They chuckled hard enough that tears beaded at the edges of Claudia's eyes. Any anxiety she felt was long gone.

"I just realized something," she said. Sylvester gave her a look, urging her to continue, and she smiled. "Speaking in front of a crowd like this is far less mentally taxing than speaking to you one-on-one, Prince Sylvester." She genuinely meant that.

Virgil snickered.

Sylver looked dejected, his arms crossed over his chest. "That doesn't sound like a good thing to me."

"That would be because it's not a good thing," Claudia said honestly. "Perhaps you should take a hard look at yourself and think about why I would say that." She put a hand on her hip, puffing out her chest.

Sylvester was about as troublesome to deal with as Fermina. She was pleased he was starting to show more emotion in front of her, however. For example, his gaze wandered briefly to her chest just now—Claudia found that endearing. Knowing she was desirable gave her confidence.

"Still, you helped me overcome my anxiety," she said. "Thank you." Sylvester smiled.

At the entrance ceremony, Claudia thankfully avoided stumbling over her words or ending her speech early.



"Elder Sister! The speech you gave as the incoming students' representative was absolutely incredible!"

"Thank you, I'm happy to hear it."

As soon as Claudia entered the classroom, Fermina rushed to her side. Her shoulder-length hair bounced around her shoulders, and her smile was as innocent and beautiful as a flower in bloom. Her rosy cheeks and the way she clasped her hands in front of her chest as she spoke enhanced how adorable she was. Her actions garnered the attention of the young lords in the room. Their gazes soon moved to Claudia and then to the prince beside her. The latter's presence created a nervous tension among the other students.

After leaving the ceremonial hall, Sylvester escorted Claudia the rest of the way to the classroom, Tristan following close behind them.

Fermina shrank back, eyes drifting upward as if she'd only just noticed the prince beside Claudia. "Your Highness! My apologies. I wasn't being too noisy, was I?"

Aha. The whole reason she came over was to strike up a conversation with the prince. Claudia was impressed with how calculating her half-sister was, inching closer to the prince and peering up at him with those dewy doe eyes.

Claudia's gaze likewise traveled to Sylvester. She was curious about his response. Other women would see Fermina's actions for what they were: devious. But the opposite sex might instead find it endearing. In fact, the noble ladies with whom Claudia was well acquainted were shooting Fermina cold looks. The noble lords, who were none the wiser to her schemes, watched warmly.

Sylvester kept his usual impenetrable smile on and simply replied, "No."

But of course. Other people are watching. Sylvester might let down his guard with certain people in private, but in public, he kept his mask fixed in place. Claudia was impressed by his unshakable facade. Then she tore her gaze from him. It was clear that observing him any further would be pointless.

The seats in the classroom were arranged by the students' status. Claudia and Sylvester were seated together in the last row, with the seat in the middle

reserved for the prince. From left to right, it's Lord Tristan, Prince Sylvester, me, and then Fermina. I can already tell my poor stomach will be knotted up tight while I'm here.

Claudia had grown more accustomed to Sylvester of late, but that didn't mean she could ease up around him. It went without saying that she would need to be vigilant with Fermina. The only saving grace was that the desks were separated by an adequate enough gap that Claudia could enjoy some personal space.

Sylvester was kind enough to escort Claudia all the way to her seat. It was a narrow walk between the desks, which fortunately meant that Fermina couldn't cling to the prince along the way.

Their seating arrangement may have been determined by their status, but their classes were determined by their grades. In her previous timeline, Claudia's grades had been so abysmal that she hadn't been able to enter the advanced class with Sylvester. Being in the same classroom allowed her to curb Fermina's advances toward the prince—but at the same time, Claudia wasn't the only bridal candidate in the classroom.

There's one other girl in my grade, another in the same grade as my elder brother, and then one more who will enter the academy next year. The final selection process was to occur at the same time as their graduation. Until then, there was no knowing who would come out on top. The only thing Claudia knew for certain was that the real battle for the prince's affections would start in their third year. Personally, she didn't mind who claimed the seat of crown princess, so long as it wasn't Fermina.

Claudia stole a glance at Sylvester.

"I've been longing for you for a while now." His words echoed in her head. He was only teasing me when he said that, right?

Sylvester enjoyed paying her suggestive compliments whenever she had her guard down. That was why it was so difficult for her to suss out whether he *actually* desired her; she couldn't shake the feeling that she was just his plaything. Their relationship had developed enough for her to be franker with him, but he was still a challenging adversary. If Fermina somehow managed to

ruffle Sylvester, Claudia would love to be there to see it.

When the teacher finally arrived, the students were instructed to introduce themselves and offer their greetings to the rest of the class.

Outwardly, the Lindsays claimed Fermina was sent off to the countryside to recuperate. No one knew the real reason. That didn't help the rumors that it was because of her terrible relationship with Claudia. And since she was the source of so much gossip, murmurs erupted the moment Fermina introduced herself.

Fermina's brow wrinkled, her lips quivering with sadness. Claudia softly encouraged her by saying, "It's all right. Stand tall."

"I will, thank you." Fermina sounded distant when she responded, but she didn't ignore Claudia completely.

The way she'd acted so hurt, like a wounded deer, confirmed that her disposition hadn't changed at all. Even after their father sent her away, she was still trying to play the role of the tragic heroine and frame Claudia as the villain. That was fine. If Fermina was going to try to be a saint, then Claudia would likewise play the role of the doting older sister, thereby nullifying anything Fermina tried to do.

But sadly, this means nothing has changed since the tea party. Or rather, Fermina hadn't matured at all from the experience. Had Claudia really danced to the tune of someone so callow in her previous lifetime? No, she couldn't have been that foolish and ignorant. Fermina must have something bigger up her sleeve.

Claudia knew if she showed any vulnerability, Fermina would swoop in. She tightened her guard and pushed away the doubts buzzing around in her head.

The school day ended as soon as their initial greetings were over. Claudia couldn't leave yet, though; Virgil, the student council president, had summoned everyone from the back row of her classroom, including her. As they were leaving for the student council room, Sylvester offered her his hand. He was accustomed to escorting women, so there was nothing unusual about it, but

Claudia didn't instantly accept this time.

"There will be more opportunities here at the academy for you to spend with your other bridal candidates, Prince Sylvester. Don't you think you might offend them by focusing all your attention on escorting me?"

"And shouldn't you be capitalizing on this opportunity by taking my arm so you can ward off any other women?" Sylvester shot back. "You needn't worry. Even if there are such opportunities for me to spend with the other candidates, I will not offer them my arm as I do with you."

Claudia stared up at the prince and tilted her head. Did he really mean to escort her every time they went anywhere?

He seemed to sense her reservations. "What, aren't you happy about that?"

"I am, certainly, but..." Claudia hesitated. He was only doing this to get a reaction out of her, and that was hardly amusing. She cast her gaze down and reached up to tug on his sleeve. Fermina wasn't the only one who knew how to be sly and calculating. "Knowing the way you are, you probably will offer your arm and escort all the girls equally, won't you? That's why I think it's better for me to refuse." Her voice was sugary sweet, suggesting she was jealous of him and the other candidates.

Sylvester smiled warmly. "You're the only one I want to touch."

"Yet you'll touch the other girls too, won't you?"

"The way you phrase that invites misunderstanding." He shook his head reluctantly. "Very well, I will let you have this one."

Yes! Victory! Claudia was delighted at getting her way—until she got a better look at his expression. A chill ran down her spine.

Is...is this really something for him to be angry over?

Oh, Sylvester was still smiling, to be sure, but there was no emotion in it. At least, there shouldn't have been. Even though his expression was normally unreadable, she sensed a silent fury in it. Claudia shuddered.

Sylvester leaned closer and whispered in her ear. "I wonder, did your sister learn her manipulation techniques from you?"

Eek! He'd seen right through her...and through Fermina.

Claudia had used the same shrewd means to entertain dozens of customers at the brothel, but it had never backfired on her quite so badly. Sylvester's soured mood left her with beads of cold sweat running down her back.

But how can this be? Hold on just a moment here!

There was something about the situation that didn't sit right with her. She'd thought he was cross with her for using underhanded means to get her way, but she suspected that wasn't what had upset him. Sylvester asked her if Fermina had learned this from her, as if she was always using these techniques on other men. That wasn't the case. Claudia's knowledge came from her past life, from her time as a sex worker. She certainly hadn't used those skills enough at the estate for Fermina to learn by example. Was he getting the wrong impression of her? Did he think she had cultivated these abilities through experience with other men? If the answer to those two questions was yes, then that made her wonder: could Sylvester simply be jealous?

Am I reading too much into this? Frankly, she would understand if he simply didn't like it when women were deceitful. The problem was that he didn't outright state what was bothering him, which made it impossible for her to know the answer. Part of her was happy to think he might be jealous. It would be proof of how much closer they had gotten.

Sylvester brushed past her, walking away as if nothing had happened. Claudia watched him go. His back was significantly larger now than when they first met. He no longer looked like an adorable porcelain doll. Their school uniforms had the same formal design for both genders, but somehow, even from behind, Sylvester's personality still shone through his attire. There was something aloof about him, and it wasn't because she'd ruined his mood.

Claudia belatedly stepped forward to follow him. As she walked down the corridors of the school, she absently glanced into the other classrooms. Her heart jumped into her throat when she spotted a familiar face from her time in the brothel. So he's here at the academy as well.

This particular individual's ability to adapt and deal with others was so impressive, she would've expected to see him in her class rather than one of

the lower ones. Her mind raced, trying to figure out why he hadn't scored higher. And while she was lost in thought, a carefree voice cut through her reverie.

"It's an honor to be chosen to serve in the student council alongside you, Elder Sister," said Fermina with a big grin on her face. That was why the four of them—Claudia, Sylvester, Fermina, and Tristan—were headed to the student council room, in fact.

Claudia sighed with relief at Fermina's demeanor. The girl had interrupted Claudia's thoughts, but at least she'd managed to soften the tense atmosphere. This was one instance where Claudia was actually grateful to her half-sister.

"Of course you were chosen, Miss Fermina. You worked very hard."

"Hee hee, thank you for saying that." Her cheeks colored. Fermina was obviously trying to make it seem like she respected and adored Claudia.

But if you're trying to convince people, stop looking at me so coldly, Claudia thought.

Though Fermina was smiling, it didn't reach her eyes. She didn't bother to point that out, though.

I wonder if it was my elder brother's idea to select her for the student council. Fermina had achieved high scores on the entrance exams. It was possible that she was chosen for that reason, but Claudia couldn't help thinking Virgil was up to something.

The student council room had a completely different feel than their regular classroom. Whereas the classroom had an open and breathable atmosphere, the one in here was oppressive. It was the same as Claudia's father's study back at the mansion.

The desks and chairs were much larger than the ones in the classroom, and the lustrous sheen of the wood spoke to its impressive quality. Everything in the room was grade A, from the curtains on the windows to the carpet on the floor.

"Whoa..." Fermina blurted as she took a sweeping glance around the room.

Claudia could understand why she was so overwhelmed by the sight; all the other members besides them were already gathered. Four students were chosen from each school year to serve. Including the president and vice president, there were eleven pairs of eyes focused on Claudia and the others who just entered. The other officers were already seated at tables that formed a box around the center of the room. The person seated at the back, in the most extravagant of all the chairs in the room, was Virgil.

"Welcome to the student council," Virgil said, standing up to greet them. He handed each of them a badge to signify their positions as officers of the student council. "Tristan, you were only summoned here to act as Syl's bodyguard, so don't get the wrong idea and think you're a member of the staff here."

"Yeah, I figured as much." Tristan shrugged, hardly seeming torn up about it.

Virgil furrowed his brow. "You shouldn't accept it so easily. Learn from Dee's example and study a little harder. At the end of each term, the exam results will be posted for everyone to see."

"Oh, come on, you can't expect me to live up to her example! That's impossible! Take her debut for example. Here I thought she had a nice, pleasant conversation with Syl when she was dancing with him, and it turns out she was discussing sewer system management to prevent the spread of disease and stuff!"

This time, it was Virgil's turn to shrug. "If you're going to be part of Syl's inner circle, you should be able to grasp those sorts of topics as well." His words were harsh, yet the atmosphere between him and Tristan remained light.

Claudia glanced at Virgil. "Are you certain it was wise to make us officers, Elder Brother?"

Her scores hadn't been good enough for her to become one in her last life. Being the representative for the incoming students was likely what secured her appointment as an officer this time around, but she wondered if it was prudent to have three members of the Lindsay household in the student council.

"Oh, don't worry about it. Officers are normally chosen based on academic performance, much like how we're divvied up by our test scores into different classes. But the student council president has the final say on appointments.

Incidentally, it's customary for the incoming student rep to be selected, so you'd better give up on trying to wriggle out of this."

In other words, it wasn't unusual for siblings to be officers of the student council. He was also inadvertently saying he had no plans to turn Fermina away either, which confirmed what she suspected: Virgil had a reason for wanting her here.

Claudia scanned the room. She recognized most of the faces present. Just as the academy mirrored aristocratic society, the student council was the same, with all its members of the same political faction. *Meaning everyone here is part of the royal faction.*

Since Sylvester was going to participate, Virgil chose members whose houses made up the central backbone of the royal faction. Today's meeting was a simple affair that ended quickly. After handing the new members their badges, he introduced them to anyone they weren't already familiar with, then called it for the day.

On the way home, the three siblings rode together. It was quiet in the rumbling carriage until Fermina spoke up, tears in her eyes as she stared down at her lap.

"Do you think I'm not suited to the student council, Elder Sister?"

"How could you think that?! Of course not! I only meant that I thought maybe I should step down," said Claudia. She was genuinely concerned that having all three of them in the student council would pose problems.

As always, Fermina's thoughts turned self-abasing. Claudia was sick of how she always tried to paint the narrative in a way that made Claudia out to be the bad one, but she didn't let her annoyance show on her face. Virgil, on the other hand, didn't hide his disgust. Fermina glanced up, saw the look on his face, and shut her mouth.

He pinned her in place with his stare. "I believe I already made it clear that there's no issue with both of you being part of the student council. Correct?"

If Claudia had agreed and said she didn't think Fermina was suited, her brother surely would have scolded her. But since she hadn't, it was Fermina who'd incurred his ire.

Fermina said nothing further. She probably sensed it wouldn't do her any good.

After returning to the mansion, Claudia changed out of her uniform in her room before making her way to Virgil's quarters. He'd given her a look as they clambered out of the carriage earlier, indicating he wanted to speak more with her later.

The two were soon enjoying cups of tea courtesy of Helen. The warm steam and pleasant aroma were so soothing to the soul that all her tension melted away.

"Is that girl always like that?" Virgil grumbled.

Claudia shook her head. "Not too much today. Just in the carriage home."

"It seems Father sending her off to the countryside did nothing to reform that twisted personality." Even Virgil sensed she was up to her old tricks again.

"Yes," Claudia said thoughtfully, "but I do get the feeling she's gotten better at reading people."

He grunted. "She would have to be an idiot to keep going after I called her out."

The way he regarded Fermina earlier had been arctic levels of cold. Virgil was normally so gentle and affectionate around Claudia that she often forgot how different he could be around other people. Like her, he had the same jet-black hair, sapphire eyes, and stern features, which was what earned him the moniker of Ice Scion. There wasn't a person out there who could retain their composure when Virgil was glowering at them with those piercing eyes.

"I made that girl an officer because I figured it would be easier to keep tabs on her by keeping her close than if left to her own devices... Was that a bad call?"

"No, I think it was the correct choice. It's probably best that we limit what she can do to some degree."

"Still, it seems like she's going to find whatever excuse she can to go at you."

Claudia grinned. "I'm accustomed to it by this point."

Plus, she could easily retort when Fermina addressed her directly with her grievances. Her words and actions were transparent.

"It would cause a scandal, so I haven't said anything publicly about her compulsive lying, but everyone on the student council knows I don't approve of her," Virgil said.

"I didn't realize."

"I ought to tell them about how quick she is to play the victim. I can already tell she'll pipe back up at some point about you bullying her."

Claudia's smile strained this time. She, too, could easily imagine Fermina pulling that trick again. The bigger issue was that she would find people who would believe and even support her at the academy.

"Father should have left her out in the countryside. He's too soft on her."

"It's parental love," she told him. "And Fermina has yet to make any fatal mistakes."

"Parental love? Hmph. You mean the kind of love he's never shown us?" Virgil sniffed in disdain.

"That's not as true lately," Claudia assured him, trying to give her father some credit. The duke respected the sentiments they aired on the day of the disastrous tea party. It was a little bit late by this point, Claudia couldn't deny that, but it was better than nothing.

"Well, there's nothing that can be done about it. She hasn't committed anything atrocious enough to be sent back to the countryside. The best option would be for her to slip up and get things over with. Speaking of, have you spoken with His Highness about her?"

"Oh, I think he's already figured her out." Sylvester had seen through her sly attempt to wiggle into his good graces, after all. He also probably remembered what she'd said to him at the tea party.

Virgil smiled bitterly. "He's got a bad habit of enjoying people's more

unbecoming aspects."

"You make it sound like he's got a terrible personality," Claudia remarked.

"I wouldn't put it like that. It's more or less his secret way of handling things. Being the crown prince puts him in a vulnerable position—he's easily exposed to the malice of others."

The crown prince was one of the most protected people in the kingdom, but that was because his position exposed him to great danger. Claudia couldn't begin to fathom the enormous pressure he faced as a consequence of his responsibilities. Not only did he have to deal with all sorts of people domestically, but internationally as well. He had to face harsh realities far before his enrollment in the academy.

Her mind wandered back to the moment when she'd found herself staring at his back as he walked down the corridor. Their uniforms were the same, but something about his silhouette was markedly different from everyone else's. He was already involved in political administration. Claudia and her coquetry probably seemed juvenile in comparison to the forced maturity he'd undergone.

Just as Claudia became lost in her thoughts, Virgil spoke up again. "As long as he has you by his side, Dee, I am sure it'll give him courage and confidence."

"I'm not so sure about that. He seems much closer to you than he is to me," said Claudia. It wasn't just Sylvester; Virgil seemed to be on good terms with Tristan as well. She had to wonder when they had all become so chummy.

"Sorry for keeping quiet about it, but I felt guilty."

"Guilty?" she echoed, confused.

"Mother was still alive when I was first summoned to the palace to spend time with the prince. Can you see where I'm going with this?"

While their stern and unforgiving mother still lived, the atmosphere at their estate had been suffocatingly oppressive. Virgil had probably seen his time with Sylvester as a breath of fresh air—a time to relax.

"You thought I was busy the entire time, right? I couldn't tell you the truth—

that I was actually just having fun and playing around at the palace." He paused, then added, "I was no different from Father. I ran off and left you behind."

Claudia shook her head and said firmly, "It wasn't the same at all! In fact, I'm relieved to hear you had somewhere you could get away."

She knew that the mansion was no place for a child back then, not with how miserable it had been. If Virgil hadn't found some escape, his personality might well have ended up as twisted as Claudia's previous one.

"You forgive me? Even though I left you here all by yourself?"

Claudia nodded. "You were the only one summoned to serve as Prince Sylvester's playmate. It wasn't your fault. Besides, since Mother's passing, you've always been by my side." To be precise, their time together increased only slightly after that, but he had grown much more considerate of her feelings. He still was, even now.

"It's not that I meant to blame you by bringing it up," Claudia said. "I was just envious of how much fun you two seemed to have when you were conversing."

"Tristan probably just thinks of me as a nag," Virgil said wryly.

She couldn't deny that. He had heckled Tristan, after all. Remembering their exchange in the student council room made her laugh.

"Is Lord Tristan really that terrible at studying?"

"He uses training as a pretext to escape it. As a knight, though, it's not enough for him to just be skilled at the military arts."

Tristan had apparently skated into the advanced class by the skin of his teeth.

"So he has a strong sense of righteousness, but he still flees from his studies, hmm?"

"Exactly! Tell him that for me, please. If he really wants to walk the path of righteousness, he needs to take his academics as seriously as his martial training."

Claudia suspected Tristan would only run away if both siblings started ganging up on him. "Prince Sylvester hasn't said anything to him?"

"His Highness merely enjoys watching me pester him."

"It really does sound like you're saying the prince has a terrible personality."

Virgil hesitated before saying, "Well, he normally does butt in by the end of our conversation, so I wouldn't go that far. Probably." His half-hearted denial suggested he didn't entirely disagree with her.

Chapter 11:

The Villainess Participates in the School Council

 $T_{\text{HE OFFICIAL BEGINNING}}$ of their lessons coincided with their official work as student council members. On meeting days, Claudia and the others would make their way to the student council room together.

"I'm the only one who doesn't get a chair to sit in," Tristan grumbled, head drooping. Since he was only present in his capacity as Sylvester's bodyguard, he was forced to stand the entire time.

Fermina empathized. "That must be so difficult. Why don't I speak with my elder brother on your behalf?"

"No need. You'll just increase how much he nags me." Tristan knew where he stood with Virgil. He just wanted to vent. "Back home, is Virgil always—no, I guess that's a silly question. Both you and Lady Claudia are outstanding students." Tristan was going to ask them if Virgil was always this much of a nag, but he realized just as quickly that they weren't like him. He'd answered his own question.

"My elder sister is definitely brilliant, but I still have a long way to go. Elder Brother often gives me stern looks."

"You too, huh?" Tristan sighed with relief. "It's comforting to know it's not just me."

The only reason Virgil gave Fermina such stern looks was because of her malicious behavior, but Tristan—an innocent smile now plastered on his face—had no way of knowing that. Claudia had no intention of intruding on their peaceful conversation either. Others still gossiped about bad blood between her and Fermina, but on the surface, the two seemed close enough. There was no need to absolve people of that illusion. That was Claudia's stance, at least, but Fermina seemed intent on testing that.

"I'm a little surprised, Elder Sister. You don't speak to His Highness very

much."

Fermina was back to playing the poor little sister at the first opportunity, always the victim of her older sister's criticism.

"I cannot monopolize all his time."

"Still, don't you think you're being a bit too cold to him, even now?" Fermina obviously disapproved of how little they conversed.

Claudia assumed it came down to Sylvester's preference. There were those who wanted someone to talk to them constantly, and then there were those who preferred silence. Sylvester struck her as the latter. Since Fermina was pressing the issue, however, she glanced at him and asked, "What do you think, Prince Sylvester? Would you prefer I speak to you more?"

"I welcome any conversation you want to have with me, but it's not as though I want you to fawn over me constantly."

Her intuition was correct, then. Sylvester was unbothered by her silence.

"You're such a kind person, Your Highness," said Fermina. She offered him a sympathetic smile, having interpreted Sylvester's response as an attempt to respect Claudia's wishes rather than an honest statement of his feelings. Her chocolate-brown eyes spoke the sentiments that her mouth wouldn't: *Oh, you poor thing, having to put up with my temperamental elder sister.*

Claudia massaged her temples. Fermina couldn't have been more off the mark if she tried. Really, must you spin everything in a way that's most convenient for you?

If Fermina wasn't careful, she risked offending the prince. Fortunately, Sylvester kept his usual gentle smile on his face, giving no glimpse into whatever emotions stirred beneath the surface.

Virgil's words from before played in Claudia's mind: "He's got a bad habit of enjoying people's more unbecoming aspects." Maybe experiencing Fermina's bad—or rather, twisted—personality traits was keeping him entertained. That was the feeling Claudia got, which was unfortunate for Fermina.

They took their seats after entering the student council room, with Tristan

standing behind Sylvester. Since the group was now complete, their meeting commenced, with Virgil acting as the chairperson.

"Every year, the student council plans an elaborate event. By ensuring its success, we establish the strength and capability of the current council and its members."

The academy was as much a place of learning as it was a social hub. Virgil was correct in saying the success of the event would assert their influence over the student body, but it was also a necessary part of proving to their parents that they were capable successors.

"I would like everyone to share their ideas for this year's event. The documents you see before you are materials pertaining to all previous events."

The sound of rustling paper filled the room. Claudia mimicked the other officers, thumbing through the packet, but she'd already decided on her suggestion. After all, she knew what event they were going to hold this year. I do feel a bit guilty since this is basically cheating, but oh well. There was no point in quibbling about what was fair and what wasn't when she had a distinct advantage by virtue of this being her second lifetime. This, too, was part of the capricious gods' design.

There was just one reason why, despite all that, she still had her reservations: Fermina was the one who originally pitched the idea she had in mind. Claudia and the rest of the old blood had opposed Fermina's plan at the time. The student council managed to placate them, and Fermina rallied all the new blood to make the event a success.

If Claudia was the one proposing the idea this time around, that should avoid any resistance from the old blood. The plan favored the new blood more, but with Virgil at the helm, she didn't think there would be any issues. He was part of the royal faction himself, but their family maintained a neutral enough stance to avoid too much opposition.

After thoroughly contemplating the matter, Claudia decided to stick with this idea rather than coming up with something new on her own. I'm sure Fermina won't be too pleased if she has the same idea this time around. But there are some things I'll be able to do that she can't.

Claudia didn't immediately raise her hand. She let the upperclassmen go first. As her attention wandered, her gaze met Sylvester's. His golden eyes seemed to see right through her.

As a political administrator, what would he do? she wondered, but her mind was made up.

She raised her hand for permission to speak. When Virgil granted it to her, she said, "What about holding a festival?"

This was no time for her to hesitate over moral quandaries. Claudia needed to do whatever it took to succeed. Her whole purpose for being here was to create the kind of future she hadn't been blessed with before. There were people she wanted to protect, including herself. That was why she'd sworn to become the biggest villainess of all. Being considerate of Fermina's feelings was a luxury she couldn't afford.

Everyone's attention turned to Claudia.

"It'd be something like the Advent Festival, but much more modest in size. I think holding and operating such an event would be an optimal and straightforward way to display our power as the student council, both to the students and the rest of the kingdom."

Virgil nodded thoughtfully. "I see. Many aristocrats contribute financially to the Advent Festival. This would be a prime opportunity for us to learn how those investments are used."

She was relieved to have Virgil's approval so quickly, but all she'd done so far was list the benefits to the student council. There was more to this idea that needed expounding on.

"Since we won't be celebrating the advent of the gods, I think it would be more convenient to simply call it a 'school festival,'" she said. It wasn't the most inventive name, but it clarified the nature of the event. Claudia thought it was more important to make sure all the members could easily picture what she described. A more fitting label for the festival could be discussed later. "I'd like to see each class decide for themselves what they want to do—to give them the freedom to hold their own mini event as a class within the festival."

Not everyone was convinced.

"There will be some classes whose students aren't skilled enough to accomplish that, though," someone said.

It was obvious whom they were alluding to: *some classes* meant the ones with the lowest-scoring students. Claudia had already anticipated this point of contention.

She tilted her head. "What is being demanded of the students in this festival isn't something that can be measured by test scores alone. Don't you think it's a bit hasty to dismiss those students without giving them a chance?"

After all, many in the less advanced classes hailed from the nascent nobility who'd won their titles after establishing vast mercantile empires. These students were skilled when it came to business but struggled to achieve top test scores because the academy covered such a wide range of subjects. This had created an unbalanced situation where the old blood wound up in the advanced classes and the new blood was stuck in the lower levels.

Claudia was surprised to find that the heir to the cosmetic company she so favored in her brothel days was in the lower-level classes. It seemed a waste of his talents. The festival was an opportunity for individuals to demonstrate skills that couldn't be measured by regular exams.

"Of course, I'm sure many will be confused if given too much freedom. I suggest we create a model and allow them to work within the confines," Claudia continued.

She further counseled that this would align with the school's philosophy. By having the students move as a group within their individual classes, it would create stronger bonds between them.

Claudia politely answered and addressed each detailed question that arose. When there were none left, she scanned the faces of those present and found herself met with genuine smiles.

"Most importantly," she said, "I'm sure all you know how enjoyable a festival is, don't you?"

The annual Advent Festival was as much a reprieve for the average citizen as

it was a period of rest and relaxation for the powerful. That didn't mean commoners were the only ones who found true enjoyment in it; aristocrats would often start drinking in the early afternoon hours and dance along to music. No one could hate such enjoyable festivities, which was why Claudia made her proposal with a confident smile. Her radiant figure made the rest of the officers sigh in appreciation.

Even Sylvester's normally piercing golden eyes softened. "It's good to know there will be enjoyment waiting after all the work we'll put in," he said.

"Yes!" Claudia eagerly agreed. "I'm sure it will be difficult getting everything set up, but we can shed our inhibitions and party!"

Virgil's eyes widened with surprise. "Shed our inhibitions and party'...? I never dreamed I'd hear those words coming from your mouth, Dee." It wasn't the kind of language he expected from the little sister who'd always proven herself a shining example of dignified nobility.

She grinned. "Oh? Even I know how to let loose—like diving into my bed when I get home." That also flew in the face of the archetypal young lady, but the other members of the student council looked on warmly, finding it endearing.

Claudia soaked up the atmosphere, giggling and pretending that she didn't feel Fermina's hard gaze boring into her. The idea itself originally belonged to Fermina, but Claudia didn't know the intricacies of Fermina's proposal from her first lifetime. Everything else she'd added were original concepts. Presenting those ideas after her initial hesitation gave Claudia confidence, partly because she was able to answer all the questions lobbed her way.

She wondered if perhaps Fermina would have more insightful suggestions, but considering she kept her mouth firmly shut the entire time, it was safe to assume she had nothing to offer.

Afterward, the members unanimously agreed on Claudia's proposal. They decided to stick with the name "school festival" to make the aim of the event more transparent to the other students.

Sylvester approached Claudia afterward as she prepared to leave. "Would you mind letting me take you back home today?"

"What?" Claudia blurted. She shot a questioning glance at her brother. Was it really permissible to take the prince up on his offer?

Virgil forced a smile and nodded. "I see no issue with something as simple as him taking you home. I have other things to do, so I'll go ahead of you and return home with Fermina." He gave Sylvester a pointed look. "But don't get carried away just because it'll only be the two of you in a carriage."

Claudia flinched. She glanced at Tristan, wondering why Virgil acted like he wouldn't be joining them.

Tristan vigorously shook his head. "No way. I value my life too much to intrude like that!"

That's odd. Aren't they always together? How would that be intruding?

Sylvester assured her that his carriage was always accompanied by accomplished, full-fledged bodyguards, so there really was no need for Tristan to come along. Since Virgil had been kind enough to bow out and give her the opportunity, Claudia decided to take the prince up on his offer and go home with him.

Chapter 12:

The Villainess Is Entranced by the Sunset

Claudia's Gaze wandered to the sky as soon as she left the main school building. The blend of crimson and gold seemed to beckon forth the night's lustrous darkness. She found herself momentarily entranced. While she longed to appreciate the sunset longer, she climbed into the royal carriage at Sylvester's urging.

The prince sensed her reluctance and asked, "Did I trouble you by making this request?"

"No. The sunset was just so beautiful that I had a difficult time pulling myself away." As she spoke, Claudia peeked out the window to relish the orange hues on the horizon. The sky was already making its transformation. Darkness would be upon them soon.

Sylvester quietly studied her profile. The silence continued even after the carriage lurched into motion. "You're beautiful today."

"Oh, I'm beautiful every day."

He chuckled at that. "Hah, you aren't wrong there. You're always bewitching me—whether you're presenting in the student council room, gazing up at the sky, or just going about your day."

"You flatter me too much." Claudia sounded casual in her response, but his effusive praise embarrassed her. The prince's voice sounded uncharacteristically tender. She turned her gaze toward him, wondering why, and sucked in a breath.

In the orange light filtering through the carriage window, Sylvester looked more stunning than ever. His silver hair reflected the sunset, and his eyes took on a more dazzling hue. Claudia found herself just as, if not more, entranced by him than the sunset. His beauty was so divine that she forgot how long she'd been staring.

I thought I'd gotten used to handsome men thanks to my elder brother, but I was mistaken.

Virgil and Tristan were both attractive men. There were times when Virgil nearly took her breath away, but Sylvester exceeded even that. Claudia inwardly berated herself for being so engrossed and tore her gaze from him.

"Why did you invite me today?" she asked.

"I wanted to speak to you. Even though we spend so much time together at the academy, we never get to speak frankly while we're there, do we?"

He had a point. Claudia had her image to uphold as a duke's daughter and as the prince's potential bride. As crown prince, Sylvester bore an even heavier responsibility than she did. She had long since given up glimpsing what lay beneath his mask while they were at school.

"I appreciate the sentiment, but this will only make others jealous," said Claudia.

"A bit late to be worrying about that, isn't it? It would be stranger if we weren't the target of envy, you and I."

The higher one's status, the more jealousy and envy they attracted. No matter how much Claudia portrayed herself as the perfect noble lady, she would always face opposition.

"We'll fall to pieces if we let bad faith and ill rumors get to us." Those were convincing words coming from Sylvester; he'd been exposed to such nefariousness more than anyone else.

"And that's why you take enjoyment in these things?"

"Yes," he answered without missing a beat. "It's better for one's mental health to find enjoyment than to let such things wear them down."

It was just as Virgil said: this was Sylvester's way of handling his lot in life. Granted, for the person on the receiving end of his unwelcome amusement, it just seemed like he possessed a rotten personality.

"I caution you to sleep with one eye open if you keep that up, lest you find yourself on the wrong end of an assassin's blade," said Claudia.

He snorted. "Have you forgotten who you're talking to? I'm not so foolish as to approach those who might come after my life."

Apparently even Sylvester had some discretion about whom he involved himself with. Given his status as a member of the royal family, that wasn't so surprising.

Claudia lowered her gaze. Perhaps her concern had been misplaced. Sylvester reached forward, his fingers brushing the corner of her eye. She stiffened. His fingers continued, trailing down to her chin, which he lifted so that she might in turn lift her eyes.

"Don't look down," he said. "I want you to look at me."

"If I stare up at you the entire time, it will hurt my neck."

"Want me to lend you my shoulder, then?"

"You jest."

Sylvester rose from his seat and slipped in beside her.

A small squeak escaped Claudia's lips. "Please at least wait until the carriage has stopped to do that!"

"All I did was slide over. Here, I'll let you use my shoulder like I promised."

She shot him a look. "Didn't my elder brother warn you not to get carried away?"

"He won't know as long as you keep it a secret. Besides, I'd like to see you up close once in a while."

This was the part where she was supposed to fret over his sincerity, but their proximity kept her mind elsewhere. She couldn't look him in the eyes. They were so close that their arms and legs brushed against each other. She could feel the firmness of his muscles through the thin fabric of their uniforms, and it sent her heart into a gallop.

Claudia didn't understand why she was so flustered. She'd explored men's bodies more times than she cared to count. "Prince Sylvester, this makes it that much more difficult for me to meet your eyes."

"Am I finally getting under your skin, then?"

Maybe he resented the way she'd treated their kiss before. She dug through her memories of the event and recalled how Sylvester mentioned it hurting his pride as a man.

"The last time we were this close, I was just surprised, so I wasn't able to react properly. That's all!" The words rushed out of her mouth.

"You sounded pretty composed to me when you pointed out how inappropriate it was."

"That's because my heart felt like it was going to explode!" Claudia still wasn't looking at him, but she could sense him nodding, like he'd finally accepted her reasoning.

"Does it feel that way now?"

"Yes, it does." She wanted to believe that her cheeks flushed solely because of the warm sunlight.

Sylvester chuckled, amused by how rattled she was. "Discussing social systems with you is entertaining, but I enjoy this just as well."

"Oh, I'm sure. It must be so fun for you to tease me!"

"Don't be fooled. My heart is on the verge of exploding too." Sylvester took her dainty hand in his and pressed it to his chest. He wasn't lying; his pulse raced against her palm.

Claudia glanced up at him without thinking and only realized afterward the enormity of her mistake. There was something feverish in those golden eyes that was decidedly not a result of the reflected sunset. Drawn in by his passion, her own eyes fluttered shut. Although the curtains of darkness had yet to fall outside, a shadow nonetheless fell over her. Claudia knew she shouldn't do this, but it was too late. Their lips met, and when they parted, a pleasant tingling sensation remained.

As before, Claudia dove into her bed as soon as she got home, not even bothering to change out of her uniform. She thrashed about, kicking wildly.

Helen watched on with concern.

What's wrong with me? Is my libido that unsatisfied? Is that it?!



She groaned. The heat that spread throughout her body still hadn't cooled.

Their lips barely touched—all right, so the kiss lasted longer this time than the first, but still, they didn't go any further than that! There was such an awkwardness in the atmosphere afterward that they exchanged no further conversation before arriving at the estate.

Claudia figured Sylvester felt the same as she did. When she snuck a glance at his face, his cheeks had been red too. With a little time, she thought she would cool off, but the heat had infiltrated her blood and spread throughout her entire body. It was physically painful. As she reached her limit and considered stripping completely in hopes the night air might wash away the unwelcome sensations, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

I'm young... That's right! It's because I'm so young!

Her youth was amplified by her school uniform. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes dewy in a sensual way, but it was nothing compared to how titillating she'd been in her prime as a sex worker. Her body was still immature.

But that wasn't the point—right now, she was young and inexperienced. *It makes sense. That's why my body responds so easily to things I'd been desensitized to in my brothel days.* And unbeknownst to her, her body had begun to overflow with libido.

This explained everything. Puberty and youth were to blame for her reaction to that second kiss. It was natural for a man and a woman to charge the air with desire and yearning for one another when locked in such close quarters together. Logic had no bearing on it. In fact, she should be praising Sylvester for stopping at a kiss.

That's it. That has to be it, Claudia told herself, exhaling slowly in an attempt to soothe her feverish body.

Helen's cheeks heated as she watched her mistress exuding such raw sensual energy. "Um, Lady Claudia, did something happen?"

"No, it's all right." Claudia shook her head. "Youth is a terrifying thing."

"That certainly doesn't sound all right to me! Did His Highness...?" Helen's

voice trailed off. Virgil had returned home ahead of Claudia, as promised, and informed Helen of the arrangement, so she knew Claudia had been with the prince.

Claudia couldn't afford to invite misunderstanding here—although it wasn't really a misunderstanding since she and Sylvester *did* kiss—but she still rushed to say, "Nothing happened. My heart just has a mind of its own and started racing."

"Very well. I take it that His Highness managed to restrain himself, even with you looking like this." Helen nodded, faithfully accepting her mistress's story, but her words made Claudia reconsider the carnal desires that accompanied puberty.

I should avoid being alone with the prince from now on.

Her body still hadn't fully grown, but compared to other ladies her age, her curves were showing in all the right places. Thanks to the routine aromatherapy massages from her maids, her skin was silky soft. She knew she was attractive enough to arouse the opposite sex. It was an advantage to have such an alluring effect on people, but she didn't want to seduce anyone so much that they crossed her boundaries.

Claudia sighed again and turned to Helen. "Would you mind pouring me some tea? I'd like to compose myself."

"Shall I prepare herbal tea, then?"

"The usual is fine. The tea you brew is always delicious. That will be more than enough to help me relax."

Claudia's compliments sent a surge of joy through Helen. "Yes, my lady. I'll prepare your tea promptly!" She hurried off.

Their relationship was different in this life than Claudia's last, but seeing Helen's smile was enough to satisfy her. Each time her mind conjured the image of Helen's gaunt face when she was wasting away, it made Claudia appreciate what she had now. It would be greedy to ask for more.

When Claudia arrived at the academy the following day, Sylvester greeted her at the entrance. Tristan stood behind him, a gentle smile on his face.

"Morning, Claudia," said the prince.

"Good morning."

They barely finished this short exchange before Fermina interrupted. "I have a friend waiting for me in the classroom. If you will all excuse me."

Claudia quirked a brow. What friend?

"See you all later!" Fermina sped off.

It wasn't like Fermina to pass up an opportunity to sidle up to the prince. Claudia narrowed her eyes. More suspicious was that she was fairly certain Fermina wasn't close enough to anyone to refer to them as a friend. She spent all her time in the countryside until her debut, giving her no chance to forge close friendships with anyone. For better or for worse, she'd stuck to Sylvester like glue since the term started. Her dogged pursuit of him ruffled feathers—especially their female classmates. Claudia had a hard time believing she could make any friends after that.

Did she manage to win over some poor young lord? Much like Tristan, the other boys in their class knew nothing but the innocent and adorable mask Fermina wore. Perhaps one of them was taken in by her wiles. Though she was the child of a former mistress, she was still a duke's daughter. Any young lord who wanted to cultivate strong ties with the Lindsays might find the opportunity too tempting to resist.

"You're in my company, but all your attention is focused on your younger sister, it seems." Sylvester's hot breath tickled her ear. He'd approached her while her mind was elsewhere.

"I-I'd thank you *not* to whisper directly into my ear like that!" When she moved to retreat a step, she caught a glimpse of his pale lips. Her breath hitched. Images of their intimate moment in the carriage flooded her head. As blood rushed to her cheeks, Claudia flipped her hair to hide the one side, pressing a hand over the opposite cheek in hopes of keeping the prince from noticing. It was probably too late; she could already sense he was enjoying her

reaction.

Oh, honestly! It's pathetic having such an exaggerated response to something so trivial. My body is far too innocent right now! Claudia continued trying to convince herself this was all puberty.

"Surely you must know as well as I do that there aren't many people she can call a friend," Claudia said, returning to the topic at hand.

"Tristan, do you know who this friend might be?" Sylvester asked.

"Me?"

The prince nodded. "You speak to her often enough." Being at the prince's side all the time, he had plenty of opportunities to chat with Fermina. Perhaps that was part of her plan. People often said that to take down a general, one must first unhorse them.

Tristan shook his head. "We talk, sure, but I've never heard anything about her supposed friend."

Claudia kept close tabs on Fermina and knew of no such friends, so of course Tristan would be equally clueless—unless the topic had just come up. What was Fermina up to, then? Whatever it was, for her to leave Sylvester behind and run off, it obviously required haste. I can already foresee something unpleasant happening as soon as we enter the classroom.

"Tristan, why don't we hang back and take our time getting to the classroom?" Sylvester suggested. It seemed he'd hit upon the same realization as Claudia.

"Huh? Why?"

He slowed his pace. "Because it may be more entertaining that way."

It would give Claudia an opportunity to see what Fermina was up to if she went ahead, so she decided to go with the prince's plan. She parted ways with them and headed straight for the classroom. Contrary to what she expected, it was not Fermina who stepped up to greet her when she arrived, nor was it a noble lady with whom she was well acquainted. Instead, there stood the other bridal candidate from her class.

Louise Savile was a marquess's daughter. She had silky blonde hair and emerald-green eyes. She normally never approached Claudia beyond offering the bare minimum pleasantries, but when she spotted her this time, she strolled up with a folding fan in hand, covering her mouth. The atmosphere around her was tense enough to suggest this wasn't going to end with a simple hello.

"Good morning. Lady Claudia, I'm afraid I heard the news. Word is that you stole your younger half-sister's idea."

"A good morning to you as well, Lady Louise. That is a grave accusation you seem to be making." Claudia tilted her head to demonstrate her confusion, as though she had no idea where this was coming from. Her eyes secretly searched behind Louise. When she spotted a familiar head of pink-brown hair, she realized Fermina's attention was directed toward the girl sitting directly in front of her desk.

So that's it. You found someone to meekly listen to your nonsense.

The girl in question—a friend, as Fermina had called her—was a timid young lady. She was probably too shy to stand up against Fermina and was instead sitting quietly while Fermina chattered away to her heart's content. Claudia could already guess that she'd purposefully spoken loud enough for the entire classroom to hear. Louise had sadly fallen for her ploy.

You have some nerve, provoking others to fight your battles for you.

If she disliked Fermina before, Claudia was now outright repulsed by the way the girl refused to take her head-on. It was a sloppy plan, anyway. It was all too easy to tell whom this "rumor" had originated from.

"A festival, was it?" Louise went on. "Presenting someone else's idea as your own to pad your popularity will only get you so far."

Claudia gasped. "Goodness, you mean Miss Fermina had the same idea as me?"

So, Fermina did come up with the same plan this time around. She had no clue how similar Fermina's was to hers, however.

She sped over to Fermina's side and gently clasped her hands. "We should

speak with Elder Brother so you can share the credit with me! Oh, it makes me so happy to think we both came up with the same thing!"

Fermina was visibly shaken, but Claudia didn't let that stop her.

"Why didn't you say something during the meeting yesterday? I hope I didn't make you feel like you couldn't join in. I'm such a terrible older sister!" Claudia's shoulders sank, and her eyes shimmered. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize you were having such a tough time." Her voice trembled with emotion.

Soon, everyone in the classroom was sympathetic toward Claudia. Everyone knew how wise she was. She was the incoming students' representative. While Fermina was off in the countryside, far from the capital, Claudia had busied herself making connections with the other noble ladies her age. She was sensitive to other people's feelings and made a reputation for herself as an affable, outgoing individual. This instilled within them a natural skepticism toward Fermina's claim: why would someone so intelligent steal her younger sister's idea?

"No, I..." Fermina dropped her gaze and pursed her lips. Her chocolate-brown eyes darted back and forth, indicating how flustered she was as she grasped for some way to weasel out of this mess. She erupted in tears, sobbing. "I-I was just so heartbroken!"

"You don't have to feel bad. I'm the one who wronged you. I should have been more considerate!" Claudia wrapped her arms around Fermina's shoulders, trying to console her—at least on the surface. This quelled people's doubts that there was bad blood between them.

"I'm not finished speaking with you, Lady Claudia!" Louise huffed. Claudia had all but forgotten about her while she was dealing with Fermina. "Allow me to address one thing. Is it true that the prince delivered you to your residence by his personal carriage yesterday? Is it not enough that you two are in the student council together? This seems to me like a gross breach of the fairness we should all observe as bridal candidates!"

Claudia produced a handkerchief to mop up Fermina's tears, all the while thinking, Aha, so she spilled that bit of information as well.

Incidentally, Louise always stayed close to Sylvester and catered to him. If she

was going to complain about the student council being an unfair advantage, then by virtue of being in the same year and class as him, Louise also had a leg up over the other candidates when it came to the amount of time she spent with the prince. Anything was fair game at the academy, technically. But the time they spent one-on-one with him was another matter.

"Your audacity knows no bounds. You should feel ashamed!" Louise snapped her fan shut and thrust it in Claudia's direction.

Claudia pulled away from Fermina, who had finally stopped crying. She pressed a hand to her cheek, brow furrowed in dismay. "I must ask, then, in the interest of fairness: would *you* refuse His Highness if he were to invite you out alone? Surely the answer must be yes. To accept would be brazen and shameless, as you say. Right?"

"Th-that's not the same thing!" Louise stammered.

"Why not? Did it not occur to you that the prince intends to invite all his potential brides out for some alone time?"

Claudia didn't think that was true for a moment, but if Louise had pride in her position as his potential bride, then this was the prime opportunity for her to elbow her way in next. She probably thought protesting favoritism would land her the chance to be alone with Sylvester.

I'll bet Lady Louise is a very straightforward individual. That was plain to see in the way she addressed her grievances with Claudia directly. It was a marked difference from a certain *someone* who hid in the shadows and had others take up the cause for them. It took bravery as a noble lady to stand up and make complaints to someone whose status was higher than their own. That was why Claudia thought they could find some common ground.

But of course, Fermina couldn't leave well enough alone. "Lady Louise hasn't done anything wrong, Elder Sister!"

Claudia almost glared at her half-sister for the unnecessary interruption. What, do you think you've made yourself out to be her ally by doing this?

Regardless, this was a conversation between fellow bridal candidates. Fermina had no business intervening. Even Louise's expression pinched.

"Miss Fermina," Claudia said politely, "I'm sorry, but I'm speaking to Lady Louise right now."

"You were criticizing her!" Fermina argued.

This girl... Did she not see how beautiful and courageous Miss Louise looked, pointing her fan at me? Besides, it was clear who was criticizing whom here. It was Fermina's gossip that had caused this situation. Everyone knew it; these were lords and ladies who'd put in long hours to study and achieve optimal grades so they could attend the same class as the prince. They were already well versed in proper etiquette and the delicate power balance of their society. All of this primed them to regard Fermina with distrust.

Is this really the girl who pulled the wool over my eyes? Claudia didn't want to believe it. Her fingers were itching to massage her temples, but before she got the chance, a head of silver hair appeared inside the classroom.

Sylvester surveyed the three of them in turn: Claudia, Fermina, and Louise. He kept an easy smile on his face, as he always did. But the gleam in his golden eyes didn't escape Claudia's notice.

Go ahead, she thought. Enjoy this as much as you want. Claudia was the one who'd told him to watch from the audience as she took Fermina on directly. That promise had been on hold since her father sent Fermina off to the countryside.

The moment Sylvester appeared, the other students were quick to greet him in unison. That cleared the tense air, at least—but thanks to Fermina's intrusion, Claudia and Louise still hadn't finished their conversation.

I hope I'll be able to wrap this up now that everyone's hackles are down.

Claudia moved away from Fermina, and Louise followed suit. Neither wanted any more interruptions. If Sylvester moved at all, Fermina would follow him with her eyes. This was a perfect time to speak to Louise.

"Lady Claudia, do you really think I'll have a chance to ride home in a carriage with His Highness?"

"Prince Sylvester is well aware of how important it is to maintain fairness among his bridal candidates. If he sees the opportunity, don't you think he'll

invite you along?"

That would be more difficult for Louise since she wasn't part of the student council, but her emerald eyes lit up with renewed hope anyway. "The student council isn't in session every single day, after all," she reasoned, nodding to herself.

"That's true. I only caution you not to let Prince Sylvester's beauty overwhelm you." It was none of her business, but a sort of motherly concern compelled Claudia to warn Louise all the same. If they were going to be alone together, there was no harm in Louise being cautious. She trusted the prince wouldn't go too far, of course. Not when he'd managed to stop himself at a kiss with her.

"Overwhelm me? Is...is it really that overpowering?"

Claudia nodded gravely. "It is, especially since you are in such close quarters in a carriage."

"In close quarters..." Louise hid her mouth with her folding fan against. Blood rushed to her cheeks.

Her reaction was so adorable that Claudia was tempted to pounce on her. *No, I can't do that. Honestly, what's wrong with me? My libido is out of control!*

Teenage lust was a terrifying thing. She wanted to berate herself for having too much of it yet again. Or had that kiss left her hungry for more? Whatever the case, this solved the issue between her and Louise. Fermina had no opportunity to intervene while they were whispering among themselves.

"It seems my actions caused more trouble for you," Sylvester said to her when she took her seat. He gave no outward indication as such, but she took that to mean he'd enjoyed the show. Claudia had gotten better at guessing what he was feeling, even though it was still difficult to read his emotions. The more comfortable their relationship became, like the one the prince already enjoyed with Virgil and Tristan, the easier it would be to predict his mood.

"If you feel guilty, then by all means, ask Lady Louise out for a carriage ride," Claudia said curtly.

"If I have the chance."

Good. I have your word, then. Good luck, Lady Louise! Claudia couldn't actively support Louise, but she offered her rival some silent encouragement.

Louise had looked like a lovestruck maiden earlier, and Claudia couldn't help but want to look after her, like one might a younger cousin. Given that Claudia's mind was years older than the rest, she couldn't help regarding them as though they were much younger than her.

After all that, Claudia approached Virgil about adding Fermina as a cocreator of the festival plan, but he immediately turned her down. The academy operated much the same way aristocratic society did. The person who opened their mouth first was the one who earned the achievements. He drove this point home to both her and Fermina. His reasoning was sound; they would have to become accustomed to such rules once they graduated. Claudia couldn't argue with him.

Fermina wasn't pleased about the end result, although she didn't openly throw a tantrum about it. However, that didn't stop the rumors from spreading and accelerating in a malicious direction.

"Claudia only pretends to be a refined lady. Behind closed doors, she bullies her younger sister."

"She's a she-devil who's taken credit for all her little sister's accomplishments."

Oddly, the word she-devil almost made Claudia burst into laughter. *That's* right. She-devil fits. I do plan to become an even greater villainess than Fermina ever was.

What Claudia really needed to take heed of was how the rumors were spreading. It didn't seem like Fermina was the one behind it. Her past misdeeds resulted in their father restricting her actions at home. When she was at the academy, she was always at Sylvester's side and therefore within range for Claudia to keep tabs on her. Louise didn't strike her as the type to resort to underhanded methods.

No, there had to be someone else—a third party who continued to propagate the baseless rumors Fermina had started. There were a number of people who might want to gossip about her: enemies of her father and brother, the other

bridal candidates... There were too many to count.

Baseless slander was inconsequential. She couldn't bother to concern herself with every little malicious whisper. But it would be disadvantageous if Fermina were to gain momentum from it.

After all, the rumor mill was validating the false narrative Fermina was so anxious to spin: that she was the tragic heroine whose older sister bullied her. No one who knew Claudia would buy it, but being a duke's daughter put her on a pedestal in the eyes of the lower nobility. She might as well have been the moon to them—distant and out of reach. The number of people she wasn't familiar with vastly outnumbered the ones she was. The unsavory rumors, it seemed, wouldn't be going away any time soon.

"Are you all right, Dee?" The gossip had reached even Virgil's ears, so when he returned home, he'd summoned her for some tea.

Claudia smiled at her brother, genuinely unaffected. "What, the rumors? They're of no concern."

"That girl is up to no good again, isn't she?"

She shook her head. "I don't think she's involved with these rumors, actually."

"But that incident she caused in the classroom was the catalyst, right? Even if she isn't the one spreading the rumors, it's still her fault they exist."

"Will you be reporting this to Father?"

"I already have." Virgil was more concerned about her attitude in the classroom than the rumors themselves, though. "Father warned her, and she at least *appeared* to be repentant."

"She puts on a good show."

There were only a few people who knew Fermina's true nature. The old blood avoided her because of her illegitimacy, but her grades were impressive and she was sociable enough. It wouldn't be all that surprising if those who didn't know her well found her pleasant to be around. Her flaws only stood out because Claudia knew her better than everyone else, but her two-faced nature made

her difficult to deal with.

Virgil sighed. "We still don't have enough against her to bring her to justice, do we?"

"What she does at the academy stays at the academy after all."

Even if her scheming harmed her reputation, it wouldn't spread to society at large. The adults treated her with kid gloves because, in their eyes, it was just childish mischief. As long as there was nothing concrete to bring against her, none of them would be motivated to act. Their father especially wouldn't make a move without solid proof.

"Yeah. That's supposed to be the one good thing about it—that even if you mess up, there's still an opportunity to begin anew."

Yes, for better or worse, the academy was a place of learning in more ways than one. People would readily dismiss Fermina's wrongdoings so long as she gave the impression she'd had a change of heart.

"Your feelings are my first priority, Dee. If things ever become too much for you, you can always turn to me." The look in his eyes was completely sincere.

Claudia nodded. "Of course. If there's anything I can ever do for you, I hope you'll turn to me as well."

She had people to look after her this time. Knowing that gave her strength.

Chapter 13: The Villainess Gets to Work

Preparations for the school festival proceeded smoothly. With each day that went by, boxes of festival supplies scattered and piled up. It was a difficult task, creating the basic operating framework for all the classes and assembling all the basics needed to launch their plan. Still, the student council faced hurdles like this every year. The specifics of the event changed each time, but it was still always a large-scale affair—of course it wasn't going to be easy.

The student council put in a request with the school orchestra for a performance on the day of the festival, one that would help liven up the mood. They were happy to accept; they often performed during the Advent Festival as well.

Unfortunately, minor problems still cropped up in the meantime. No one had put up any meaningful resistance to the festival itself, but that didn't stop the two factions—royal and aristocratic—from butting heads at every opportunity.

To ensure there was no lingering unpleasantness between the students, Virgil had delegated the duty of handling these issues to Claudia and the other new student council officers, save for Sylvester. He was the only one who didn't leave the office at all.

"You just want to make me help with the office work, don't you?" Sylvester said.

Virgil shrugged. "You're used to doing paperwork."

"At least try to deny it."

They had fallen behind on paperwork because all the other members were busy dealing with the other students and their squabbles. Sylvester disliked the idea that he'd been left behind simply because the stacks on Virgil's desk had piled up into a veritable mountain.

"The worst part of this is shuffling through documents outside of my

administrative work," said Sylvester.

"Um, in case you've both forgotten, I'm not even an officer. I'm here as a bodyguard," Tristan piped up. He'd been roped into helping tackle the mounting paperwork even though he lacked the officer badge the others possessed. Virgil was taking advantage of Tristan's presence and working him to the bone. He trusted the knight captain's son wouldn't let any confidential information leak to the student body.

Their busy schedule was compounded by the dozens upon dozens of presents that arrived at the office, all addressed to Sylvester. These gifts couldn't simply be left lying around, so they were instead stacked by the entrance to the student council room, making the space incredibly cramped. Sylvester wouldn't be able to open them all until the festival was over. Tristan's job was to catalog each one, then move it to the wall to join the others.

Claudia was tempted to jump in and assist poor Tristan when she was on break, but she didn't really have much free time herself.

As if on cue, a student burst into the room and said, "Excuse me, a dispute has broken out in one of the classrooms!"

"I'll go." Having volunteered, Claudia quickly left the office.

She was the one to mitigate these quarrels the most often. There were no boundaries between students at the academy. At tea parties and other events, guest lists were normally reserved for people the host already had ties with, which meant gatherings tended to be full of one faction or the other. The academy was different; in a way, that meant it was an opportunity to interact with people she'd normally never have the chance to meet. That made Claudia's job as an intermediary enjoyable. She liked socializing with other people, provided they were friendly enough to engage her, and she could enjoy some interesting conversations.

Claudia's soft way of dealing with people earned her praise from the old blood and new blood alike. Day by day, people's impressions of her improved.

"It's not like I'm asking you to do anything too complicated, right?! All I said was that if you can do it by yourself, then just do it!" A male voice rang through the air. Claudia assumed he was part of the dispute.

A softer, feminine voice snapped back, "This is precisely the problem with the newer nobility! Do you not even understand the basics of delegating tasks?" Her words were prickly and condescending, and the lady's high-handed attitude nearly made Claudia drag her own palm down her face.

Lording your house's power over others is asking for trouble. As anticipated, the female student's words provoked the boy further.

"This is why you old nobles have hit a plateau! You think that everything can be resolved by dumping the responsibility on other people! Try doing something yourself for once."

"We have a long history and our honor as paragons of the realm! If you're going to be part of the aristocracy, then you should have some pride in what your status means as well!"

"What good is pride? Is it going to put food on the table?!"

As always, this disagreement was split between factions. The surrounding crowd split when Claudia appeared, allowing her to see right to the center where the two debaters were clashing. Beside them was an unattended, half-opened box.

Claudia recognized both parties. The boy from the aristocratic faction didn't know her; she'd only shared an acquaintance with him in her previous lifetime. The girl, on the other hand, was an earl's daughter with whom Claudia recalled exchanging greetings at tea parties and other events.

Before the girl could form her rebuttal, Claudia interjected, "Yes, in fact. Aristocrats are the only ones who can keep food on the table through pride alone." She stepped forward confidently.

The girl's eyes went round with surprise. Sensing he was at a disadvantage now, the boy's lips twisted into a bitter frown. He had golden-brown hair that curled inward at the tips, just near the base of his eyes. It brought back fond memories. He was the same in this life as he'd been in Claudia's last. His sour expression stood out since she remembered him as a cheerful, animated individual.

Claudia had taken the girl's side thus far, but she understood both their points

of view. The source of this discord was trivial, as was often the case, leading to an argument in which both voiced their individual faction's stances.

The newly established nobles are just as foolish. Why go out of your way to fight in the opposition's court?

The long-established nobility had cultivated their pride as aristocrats over long years of moral (and admittedly, sometimes immoral) acts. They wouldn't dare lend an ear to someone whose own history was only a decade or two in the making, especially if the latter spoke of honor. And anyway, an aristocrat without pride was no aristocrat at all.

They lived by the words "noblesse oblige." By virtue of their title, they were duty-bound to fulfill certain social obligations, and provided they did so, their reward was their honor—their *pride*. Since the old blood upheld this tenet for generations upon generations, it was their right to expect others to serve them.

I'm sure he's trying to say that's no excuse for us to rest on our laurels, Claudia thought. That was precisely what the aristocratic faction protested as an issue of public interest. It would take a revolution to break tradition, and a revolution required enormous manpower and time. Right now, they were busy preparing for the school festival. What these two were really debating wasn't something that could be solved overnight. She wanted to tell them as much.

Claudia strode toward the young noble lord with her head held high, making her even more intimidating. She leaned toward him and whispered, "You cannot tell me your house doesn't engage in flattery. Think of this as a business deal rather than an argument."

Her advice, in other words, was to bring the fight to his own court. In truth, she'd bought her cosmetics from this boy in her brothel days.

A look of realization dawned on his face. His eyes darted back and forth as he deliberated how to proceed. After a moment, he turned toward the young lady and his eyes softened. "My apologies. I let my pride as a man get ahead of me."

"Pardon?" She gaped at him, caught off guard by his suddenly charming attitude, especially since it didn't seem as though he'd merely been coerced by Claudia's superior rank.

"My lady, your father is the great and noble earl Lord Scott, no? I was desperate for your recognition, and I came off as harsher than intended. Faced with your beauty and charm, I'm afraid I got too excited and let myself get carried away. The way I handled this was wrong."

"Oh, um, well..." His subservient response had the girl suppressing a smile.

The edges of Claudia's lips twitched, but she resisted grinning.

That's it exactly, she thought. Butter up the customer, and when they're vulnerable enough, hop in with your sales pitch. That's how you end up selling people more than they really wanted to buy in the first place.

It brought back her past-life memories of him. Everything he'd sold her was top quality, which made it much harder to resist.

The way things looked now, their disagreement was as good as settled. As Claudia turned to leave, the young lady stopped her to inquire about what she'd said to the boy. Claudia told her she'd merely advised him to speak from the heart.

Chapter 14:

The Young Noble Lord Meets His Goddess

"Y_{ES, IN FACT}. Aristocrats are the only ones who can keep food on the table through pride alone."

When Claudia's dignified voice echoed through the room, Brian knew instantly that he'd lost the argument. It was even more apparent when she emerged through the crowd and gallantly strode between them, her back turned toward the young lady of the Scott family as if protecting her from Brian.

If Lady Fermina were here, she might take my side, but I have no chance with Lady Claudia, he thought.

Fermina was the granddaughter of a single-generation baron, and although she was now a full-fledged duke's daughter, her values lined up more with the newly established nobility. In turn, she'd earned the ire of the old blood.

Claudia was widely regarded as the perfect role model of what a young noble lady should be, but rumor had it that she bullied her younger sister relentlessly behind closed doors. Brian wasn't one to take gossip as gospel, but seeing how confidently Claudia projected

herself left him no room to protest. His only option was to raise the flag of surrender.

Claudia jutted her chin in the air and stepped toward him. Cold beads of sweat trickled down Brian's back. *Dad, I'm sorry. I think I may have screwed up big-time.*

His family was a humble barony. A ducal household was no different than royalty when it came to the astronomical difference between their houses' influence and power. He knew what would happen if he got on the wrong side of someone with that power—he didn't have to imagine it.

And yet, as he shrank and cowered in place, she whispered to him, "You cannot tell me your house doesn't engage in flattery. Think of this as a business

deal rather than an argument."

Her words were like a divine revelation. And he was shocked that she knew his family was in the merchant business.

With her advice, Brian smoothly wrapped up his disagreement with the young lady of the Scott family in the precise way he'd wanted. Claudia had already excused herself by the time he was finished. He scrambled after her.

"Lady Claudia, I beg you to forgive me for my impudence and allow me to speak with you!"

In aristocratic society, it was highly impolite for someone of a lower rank to strike up conversation with their betters. However, the academy prioritized socialization over observing such unspoken rules, so there was no real need for him to adhere to this form of etiquette. Brian didn't care, anyway; he did it as a show of respect.

"Goodness. What's the matter?" She glanced back at him. Thankfully for him, her expression was inquisitive rather than offended. Her naturally sharp eyes made her look strong-willed and intimidating, but the atmosphere around her was soft and welcoming. Her smile assured him the rumors really were just that —rumors. As a baron's son, he was insignificant in comparison, and she still responded kindly to him.

Brian's nervousness dried his tongue to sandpaper. It took all he had to force out the words, "Please let me introduce myself."

"Very well, then I should do the same. My name is Claudia Lindsay, and you are?"

"Brian Evans. I would like to express my deep appreciation for your words of wisdom back there. I never dreamed you knew about our family business. I-I'm honored." He bowed his head. A heat filled his chest, making him stammer near the end.

Their difference in status meant that they would never meet at societal events, so Brian couldn't let this opportunity pass him by. But more than capitalizing on the situation, he wanted to convey his gratitude for her role in helping solve a conflict in a way that left no bad blood between him and the

young lady.

"I did only what I could in that situation. Please, lift your head," she said.

Brian did as she asked. When his eyes met hers, he realized she was wearing a mischievous grin. His cheeks heated.

"Incidentally, I heard something that caught my attention."

"What would that be, my lady?"

"I like all sorts of cosmetics, but I am particularly interested in moisturizers."

The Evans Company hadn't yet begun to sell moisturizer on a large scale. They were confident in their brand, but their emphasis on quality made it difficult to produce enough of the product and secure a trade route. Unfortunately, development was not moving the way they wanted.

"Where did you hear that?! We still have so many hurdles to overcome before it's even ready to enter the market."

There was already a moisturizer in circulation that the royal family favored. Brian assumed Claudia—a duke's daughter—would prefer that product. He was shocked that her information network extended all the way to his own family's company, especially since they were newly established nobility.

"It's a delicate process," Claudia agreed. "But that is precisely why I think your family's company can handle those challenges."

It was impressive enough that she was familiar with the handling process, but hearing one of the most elite members of the aristocracy express such eager anticipation for his family's product lit a raging fire inside of him.

"Um, once we're able to produce a high-quality finished product, would you mind if I sent you a sample?!" His voice nearly cracked as he rushed to make the offer.

"Oh my, really? I would be delighted."

Watching Claudia smile was like watching a rose bloom. It was so enchanting. Brian felt as though he'd glimpsed a side of her he wasn't supposed to see. Any guilt he felt was outweighed by the exaltation of sharing such a precious moment with her.

Her captivating beauty entranced him so much, he forgot to blink for a while. Even after he'd regained his composure, he was still too stunned to move.

Meanwhile, without intending to, Claudia had managed to secure the same brand of moisturizer she had so loved during her brothel days.

Chapter 15:

The Villainess and the Prince Who Desires Her

After Handling the earlier disagreement, Claudia wrote up a report before she headed home for the day. She summarized the situation, reducing it to only the essential details. As she did so, her mind wandered to Fermina. She knew that while they were all busy dealing with these little conflicts, Fermina was steadily gaining more support among the newly established nobility. Whenever Claudia wasn't around, she would play up the rumors and portray herself as the tragic heroine.

It's the same pattern as before.

Well, maybe not the *exact* same pattern. Claudia had been visiting the other classes to resolve issues and thereby gained a positive reputation among the lower-ranking nobility as well. A rift had split them, with a faction that supported Claudia and one that supported Fermina.

That said, Fermina had taken to favoring the new blood any time she mediated disagreements, which came at the cost of instilling animosity toward her among the old blood. They already looked upon her unfavorably for being the child of a mistress; this only made it worse. The outcome was that more people supported Claudia. Nevertheless, Claudia was impressed by how undaunted her half-sister was.

Does her scheming feel childish because I'm mentally more mature? She was surprised that such amateur tactics managed to bring her down in her first life. Now, Claudia could more or less predict Fermina's intentions.

Fermina had enjoyed the backing of the aristocratic faction in Claudia's past life. She was the perfect figurehead—if they used her effectively, they could win over the Lindsay dukedom. On top of that, with Fermina as Sylvester's betrothed, they might even been able to get their sticky fingers into the royal family. It was a favorable gamble to make.

The only other possibility Claudia could think of was that someone in the royal

faction wanted to take her down. It wasn't inconceivable to think someone incited Fermina to do their dirty work in the hopes that they could steal Claudia's position. Perhaps they naively assumed that even if Fermina was made a bridal candidate, her background as a mistress's daughter would prevent her from making the final cut. To their chagrin, that was a miscalculation.

Regardless, either possibility—or perhaps both—would explain how Fermina ended up being the crown princess. If the Lindsay dukedom wound up being part of the aristocratic faction, it would remove the advantages of such a union for the royal family. But her father and brother could have maintained the facade of being in the royal faction. After all, they were currently a neutral party. It was reasonable to think they had connections to the aristocratic faction.

Everything lines up if all that is true, but at the same time, it makes Fermina seem that much more insignificant on her own.

Having finished writing the report, Claudia took a break and stretched. She finally realized that the only people left in the student council room by this point were her, Sylvester, and Tristan.

"Oh? Where is everyone?" she asked.

"Those who could go home already have," said Sylvester. "Virgil took Lady Fermina with him to the faculty office."

Evidently, she'd been so lost in thought she hadn't noticed.

As if prompted by her stretching, Sylvester paused in the middle of his paperwork to roll his shoulders. "Even though you're keeping busy, you seem to enjoy it," he said.

"You can tell?" she asked.

"Your exhaustion shows, but you're still in a good mood, so yes."

"Your smile gives me the energy I need to keep going, Lady Claudia," Tristan chimed in. He paused and then reiterated, "Even though I'm *not* part of the student council." He was visibly fatigued.

"Thank you for working so hard," Claudia told him, unsure of what else to say. She almost wanted to offer him a shoulder massage, but that wouldn't be at all appropriate for a duke's daughter.

"I think it's about time you showed *me* the same sincerity, don't you?" said the prince.

Claudia tilted her head, puzzled. "I beg your pardon? Sincerity?"

"I told you to fall in love with me, remember?"

"Oh!" Her mouth dropped open and closed just as quickly. "I do remember, but why are you bringing that up out of the blue?" Claudia couldn't help but think the timing was odd.

"I need something to help me relax and recover."

"I-I see..."

If he really was as exhausted as he said, then Virgil had been working Sylvester harder than she realized. She didn't think Sylvester would have the audacity to voice such complaints in front of the already haggard-looking Tristan otherwise. He had to be worn out. But how, exactly, was she supposed to show her sincerity?

While Claudia was preoccupied with engineering a solution, Sylvester proposed one himself. "Come up with a way for the two of us to meet that doesn't infringe upon the fairness I'm supposed to observe with all bridal candidates."

"The two of us as in just the two of us, I assume?"

He nodded. "Precisely."

"Ack! Uh, I didn't hear anything!" cried Tristan. He clamped his hands over both of his ears.

Claudia smiled wryly at him. She promised Sylvester she would think of some way and send her idea in a letter.

Much to Claudia's surprise, she quickly thought up a way for them to meet.

Sylvester requested for them to be alone, but she didn't count bodyguards as being part of that stipulation. Moreover, she didn't want to be in an enclosed space with him again. She dubbed it the "I-accidentally-ran-into-the-prince-while-I-was-out-on-the-town" plan. It was a low-effort name.

Claudia came up with it when Sylvester mentioned how he was saddled with work both at the palace and in the student council room. The royals often dropped in to visit orphanages and the like to take a break from their regular duties. Even she knew that Sylvester frequented the capital's orphanages. Sylvester's family encouraged these visits to listen to the people's voices in a safe and secure way.

She was going to take advantage of that. While Sylvester was visiting the orphanages, she would sneak out and *coincidentally* bump into him, or so would be their cover story.

It took no time at all for Sylvester to send a reply to her letter. His schedule was packed full of plans to visit the orphanage. She assumed, once again, that he was even more drained than she'd expected.

Before she knew it, the day of their "accidental" encounter was upon her.

So, Prince Sylvester's idea of rest and recovery is relentlessly teasing me. Perhaps I should say something to my elder brother and have him scold the prince? Still, his exhaustion made sense, given his duties at home and at the academy.

Claudia's face was pensive as she got ready.

Helen squeezed her hand and said, "Let's go all out for today!"

"There's no need to do anything special," Claudia insisted. "If I look any different than usual, people will know immediately that we planned this in advance."

Since Helen was going to accompany her in addition to her bodyguard, Claudia informed her about her planned meeting with Sylvester. They wouldn't be entirely alone at least, so she didn't think she needed to worry about Sylvester's and her libido spinning out of control.

Claudia donned a sky-blue dress with a wide-brimmed white hat. The colors were unusually bright compared to her regular attire. She preferred this dress because it contrasted well with the darkness of her hair, which in turn emphasized her body's curves. The maids began to understand her preferences by this point, so she'd been leaving everything to them.

I wonder how Prince Sylvester will dress.

He was supposed to blend in with the citizenry, so surely not his usual attire. Claudia doubted any disguise would be able to hide his captivating beauty, though. A mask would make him stand out too much in the city, wouldn't it?

Granted, they would still be within the bounds of the high-end district. Soldiers were stationed throughout the area, and if anyone suspicious tried to pass, they would be stopped for questioning. Because the area was so secure, even a duke's daughter such as herself could confidently leave home accompanied by only one bodyguard and personal servant.

As soon as she finished getting ready, they set out. The carriage trundled down the main street until at last they arrived at their destination: a women's clothing store. An employee guided Claudia straight to one of their back rooms.

Many of the retail shops in the high-end district were equipped with private rooms for the upper echelons of society. This was convenient for those who wanted to meet in secret or otherwise simply wished to take their time browsing the wares.

"Hey there. I've been waiting."

"Prince Sylvester," she murmured, too bewildered to offer a proper greeting in return.

Claudia had visited this shop before, so she was already familiar with the interior. This is the interior of a women's clothing and accessory shop, right?

The room was furnished with a long marble table covered with sweets and other light snacks. There were even three-tiered cakes. When she glanced to either side, she noticed display cases lined up with a wide assortment of cakes in every color of the rainbow. This place looked more like a café than anything else.

But above all the desserts, Claudia's interest was drawn to the prince. He sat leisurely on a loveseat. A sword hung at his hip, presumably for protection. The hilt was embossed with the royal family's emblem. It shone when the light caught it.

"It seems the concept of meeting covertly flew right out the window."

Sylvester grinned at her. He was as stunning as ever, and he hadn't bothered at all with a disguise.

"The dark hues you wore before really made an impression, but these paler colors suit you too," said Sylvester.

"Thank you. You look as handsome as always."

"I'm pleased to hear you say that. Now, why don't you take a seat?"

Despite his suggestion, there wasn't anywhere else for her to sit besides the empty spot right next to him. There should have been a chair in here—there normally was in these private rooms—but for some reason, it had been taken out.

As Claudia hesitated, Sylvester patted the empty spot. Her intuition had been on the mark; there really was no other choice. She took off her hat and sat as close to the arm rest as possible.

"Closer," he urged her.

It wasn't until their legs were practically touching that he was satisfied.

This is odd. I specifically went this route because I thought it would eliminate us being in such close quarters. Helen and her bodyguard were in the room, but they were wise enough to read the atmosphere. They had taken up positions against the wall and all but erased their presence.



By sitting this close, it was as if they were reliving that moment in the carriage. Claudia could almost hear him breathe. She froze, but her heart thundered violently in her chest.

Sylvester slid an arm around her waist. She squeaked, then hurriedly clapped her mouth with both hands. Why do I sound like some kind of innocent virgin?! It took a moment for the realization to hit her. Wait, that's right. I really am an innocent virgin this time.

Claudia hated her body for being so unaccustomed to a man's touch. She'd danced with Sylvester before; she'd had her breasts pressed against him and his arm around her waist. This wasn't anything new—or so she kept trying to tell herself, but his touch sparked a feverish heat that enveloped her from head to toe.

"I didn't expect this," Sylvester said with a sigh. She glanced up at him, and he looked as taken aback as she was. With his free hand, he covered his face. "This is pure torture..." Sylvester had likely only intended to tease her, but instead he'd brought himself to his knees, awakening his libido.

There was only one way to solve this.

"Prince Sylvester, please remove your hand."

If they'd sat separately to begin with, it never would have come to this.

Sylvester glanced down at her but made no attempt to heed her demands. "Why aren't you wearing a corset?"

"If I wore one all the time, it would be too constraining."

There were some ladies who were concerned enough with their body shape to wear a light corset around the clock, but Claudia's figure was plenty attractive without it.

"So, you look like this even without one, hmm?" Sylvester let out a hot, shaky breath.

"Prince Sylvester, for the moment, could you please remove your arm?"

"I don't want to." His voice was barely above a whisper.

Surprised as she was by his hushed tone, she insisted. "This will only make it harder for both of us to keep our composure. Wouldn't you agree?"

He was silent, but he finally acquiesced and removed his arm from her waist, though instead he let it rest limply around her, forcing her to remain close. Was he really that desperate to touch her?

Now that I think about it, he did mention he wanted to relax and recover.

Maybe this wasn't just about teasing her, then. There were many men who found it soothing to touch a woman's soft, pliant body. Breasts were normally their primary focus; most of her clients had wanted to bury their faces in her chest and grope her. That wasn't a service she could offer to Sylvester, however, so she decided to compromise and stay in place. He was doing his best to be respectful to her, which in turn helped her feel a bit more collected.

"I thought you were covertly coming out to the city to do your observations?"

"I entered here through a secret back door. I was just 'observing' the state of the shop, in fact," said Sylvester.

"And yet the usual merchandise has changed from women's clothing to cakes and other sweets." No matter what she asked for, she knew the shop wouldn't charge her for it. They didn't sell pastries.

"I considered converting the room into a café instead, but I thought this would be more likely to defy your expectations."

"True," Claudia agreed. "It certainly has."

How many people had worked to pull this off? Surely the prince caused the staff a great deal of trouble. Still, it was touching to think he had done all this for her. She welcomed these sorts of surprises, though she would prefer it if he avoided sitting so close that they were pressed against each other.

"I know it was originally your plan to meet here, but I hope you enjoyed the surprise," he said.

"I did. It makes me happy that you did so much for me."

The warmth in his gaze was likewise unexpected. Perhaps it was because of all the pastries, but there was an almost sickeningly sweet atmosphere in the room. If she let it weigh on her mind, she would lose her composure again, so Claudia pretended not to notice.

"Your opinions always impress me. That includes the school festival proposal. What was it that so changed you? No, I suppose everyone already knows exactly what it was, don't they?"

"My change of heart was a result of my mother's passing," Claudia explained, "but my way of looking at the world changed for other reasons." She was careful as she chose her words, knowing she couldn't honestly admit that she was reliving a life she'd experienced once before. Instead, she thought of the person who'd been the most influential on her, and her gaze naturally moved toward Helen, who was still standing against the wall. "I thought one's lineage and social status were unshakable. That way of thinking, I later realized, was nothing more than blind faith."

Through her own foolish behavior, she saw how easily all that could crumble. It wasn't until she began taking customers at the brothel that she truly realized common men and noblemen were no different. Everyone had their own worries in life. Everyone wanted an escape.

"That made me start to wonder: what can I do?" What could she accomplish within the boundaries that confined her? What was needed to be productive? She'd searched for answers to these questions since her days at the brothel, and she continued even now.

"Right now, it's all trial and error, trying to figure out a way to protect myself and those I care about."

"Isn't that difficult?" Sylvester asked. "Even if it's for you and the people you care about, it still means tireless effort on your part."

Claudia giggled. "There are times when it all seems like a pain and I want to slack off, I'll admit, but it's not all bad." In fact, there were many upsides to it as well. She wouldn't be able to continue if there weren't. "Besides, I'm a pretty simple person. I get plenty of motivation just from my maid praising me."

"You aren't that simple with me."

"Of course not. I don't regard you the same way I would a maid."

A wrinkle formed in his brow. "Hmm. You're complicated."

"Do you prefer women who are simple?"

He shook his head. "No, but there are times when I wish you'd respond to me more straightforwardly."

"Men's hearts are very complex, it seems."

"Not nearly as complex as a woman's."

That was ironic coming from one of the most complex, difficult people she'd ever dealt with.

"If you want to claim that, then please be more transparent with *your* emotions," Claudia said pointedly.

He stared at her. "I am, aren't I?"

"No, you're very hard to read. Don't you ever blush from embarrassment?"

"Don't ask for the impossible. For as long as I can remember, it's been drilled into me not to show any emotions."

Claudia nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose if you were too transparent, it would be easy for the wrong people to catch you unawares."

"Really? That's the part that finally makes sense to you?"

It wouldn't be odd for foreign powers to send assassins after the crown prince. Such underhanded methods weren't unheard of even among the aristocracy. There were some among the sex workers that specialized in that.

"Being a person in power is no easy thing," Claudia concluded.

"That's a strange thing for a duke's daughter to say. You must be wary of the people around you as well, right?"

"Yes, I must."

Case in point, they already had a volatile individual in their midst. The moment she started thinking about Fermina and how she was going to handle that situation, her head throbbed. At this point, there was nothing concrete she could do.

"It seems Miss Fermina has the aristocratic faction backing her."

"She's an ideal puppet for them." Sylvester's assessment was harsh but accurate. Claudia smiled wryly. "But is that really something worth concerning yourself with? Surely you have people from that faction approaching you too."

"Actually, the royal faction has done its utmost to keep any political opponents at bay."

The Lindsays were part of the royal faction to begin with, but their neutral position made the royal faction wary of Claudia favoring the opposition. Their members were concentrated in her vicinity. Even when she attended large-scale parties, the only ladies in her immediate view were those of the same faction. That was why she so enjoyed her time at the academy, since it gave her the opportunity to meet a greater variety of people. That had at least given her the opportunity to connect a little with the aristocratic faction.

"So, they're worried about the scales tipping? Hmm. Personally, I don't understand why you are so concerned with Lady Fermina."

"Prince Sylvester, what—no, never mind." Claudia shook her head. She'd been about to ask him a question but decided against it. There was no point.

"Now you've got me curious. Don't stop midway. If you have a question, then ask it."

"Even if it's a pointless one?"

His golden eyes narrowed. "On the contrary, you have me interested. What is it you want to know?" He probably thought it unusual for her to ask for his opinion on something.

Claudia surrendered, realizing he would press the matter until she gave in anyway. Her voice turned fragile and weak as she muttered, "What would you do if Miss Fermina became your potential bride instead of me?"

"Has your family discussed that being a possibility?" His voice dropped, creating a tension in the air.

Claudia's whole body went cold. She frantically shook her head. "No! I already told you that it was a pointless question, didn't I?" She had expected he might

roll his eyes at her or sigh, but she never dreamed he'd get angry.

"Right, I forgot. I nearly questioned your father's sanity for a moment there." Sylvester nodded to himself. He reached over and stroked her cheek, perhaps to reaffirm that she was still here with him. "That's not a hypothetical I care to think too much about, but I would pick whoever was the best fit politically."

"Meaning that it wouldn't be completely out of the cards for her to become your betrothed?"

"I cannot guarantee it won't happen. Even assuming she were to completely align herself with the aristocratic faction, I might choose her if there was some way I might be able to use her."

"Use her?" Claudia echoed.

Sylvester shrugged. "If the aristocratic faction can make her their puppet, why can't the royal faction do the same?"

"You would use Miss Fermina to obtain intel on the aristocratic faction?"

"Hypothetically, yes. The practicality of it is a different story," he said dispassionately. Seeing how levelheaded he was, Claudia got the feeling that Sylvester would do as he said. He was far more skilled at manipulating people than she was. Not surprising, perhaps, given that he would one day be king. It also wasn't all that unexpected that personal feelings would play no role in his choice. The higher one's status, the more politics affected their potential marriage.

I'll bet that was the case in my previous lifetime too.

Only the Fermina and Sylvester of that lifetime could say for certain whether there was ever any love between them. Why had she wasted time asking such an irrelevant question? What had she hoped to gain from Sylvester's answer? Even if she was chosen as his betrothed, it would be no different. Politics would determine both of their fates.

I'm as foolish as ever, I suppose.

It didn't matter that she had gained so much wisdom or that she already had a wealth of life experience. At her core, Claudia was still the same person.

"So?" Sylvester prompted her. "What's the reason you're so overly fearful of Lady Fermina?"

"Am I really?"

"That's how it seems to me. It doesn't matter how much she plots and schemes—you have plenty of people protecting you, don't you?"

Just as Sylvester pointed out, the foundation Claudia built for herself was solid enough that Fermina couldn't shake it, no matter how many malicious rumors she spread or how much backing she received from the aristocratic faction.

"Do you think so? Have I really been that irrational?" Her eyes wavered as anxiety sank in. Lineage meant nothing. And trust? That was so fragile, it could crumble with one mistake.

"Claudia, everyone has moments of irrationality. Everyone makes mistakes. But you can correct yours, can't you?"

"The foundation I've built is so weak it could give out from under me..." It was like a dam had burst. All the feelings she kept locked away came pouring out of her. This was probably because Sylvester had accurately guessed she feared Fermina.

Claudia shivered even though the room wasn't the least bit cold. Honestly, she'd been terrified this entire time. It didn't matter that she'd sworn to be a better villainess, or that she thought of Fermina's scheming as amateurish and crude. The image of Fermina's euphoric smile was permanently etched in her brain. She wondered, when would she find herself facing it again in this life? And would she be able to retain her sanity if that happened? This was supposed to be her chance to redo everything, yet the trauma refused to go away.

Her vision blurred. By the time she realized it was her tears, Sylvester had tucked her against his chest.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to back you into a corner." His arm tightened around her back. He held her close, murmuring into her hair, "I only wanted to understand you better. I apologize."

"No, I'm the one who got too emotional. So please, don't be sorry." Claudia pressed a hand against his chest, but he refused to move. Instead, he

strengthened his embrace, pulling her body flush against his. His bangs tickled the upper edge of her ear, his hot breath caressing her lobe.

"If she makes you that uneasy, should I just get rid of her altogether?"

His voice sent a chill through her. Claudia's stomach flipped, her eyes going wide. She was so shocked by his proposal that her tears stopped. "Prince Sylvester...?"

"With her out of the picture, you would have more time to spend with me, right?"

"That's a frightening suggestion to make. Why bring it up?"

What was motivating him to say such a thing? Claudia was still so emotional that it was hard for her to keep up with the conversation.

"Lady Fermina preoccupies more of your mind than I thought. That's why."

Claudia furrowed her brow. "So, you want to get rid of her?"

"She's an eyesore to you, isn't she? If she were gone, you'd feel more at ease too."

If he could so easily do away with her, it wouldn't soothe Claudia's nerves at all. There would be no guarantee she wouldn't be next.

"It's up to me whether to make enough time for you," she insisted.

"Still, what benefit is there to keeping her around?"

"Miss Lilith and Father would be devastated if she were to simply disappear. Please, calm yourself for the moment."

"I'm perfectly calm."

She sighed. "That's even more terrifying! Please don't speak so calmly about 'getting rid' of someone!"

"Hmmm. So that terrifies you. Seems my offer isn't having the intended effect, then."

Much to her relief, he finally retracted the offer. This was a man who could turn a private room in a clothing shop into a tiny café in the blink of an eye. Getting rid of Fermina would be easy for him, and that was what made it so unsettling.

Is he that upset that he can't have his toy all to himself? Is that what prompted this? Claudia never dreamed he would hold such intense animosity toward Fermina.

Their conversation at least got the gears in her head moving. Would everything really be solved if Fermina were out of the picture? Claudia's current position was advantageous, but she was still worried. What was stopping a second or third Fermina from appearing after she dealt with the first one? Would she have to live in constant fear of shadows she couldn't see?

Maybe there's something I'm overlooking here—something extremely important.

But for the moment, Claudia had no answer to the problem that plagued her.

Chapter 16:

The Villainess Faces a Problem Head-On

Only three days of preparation remained until the school festival was upon them.

"Elder Sister, what is the meaning of this?!"

Claudia was attending to her regular duties of patrolling the academy and intervening in squabbles when Fermina bellowed at her, waving a document in the air. She was joined by a number of students who lagged a step behind her. They were all glaring at Claudia.

When did she have the time to gather so many minions for herself? Claudia had memorized the faces of all the high-ranking nobility, regardless of which faction they were affiliated with. Those who accompanied Fermina were unfamiliar to her, which could only mean they were lower-ranking members of the aristocracy.

Claudia studied the paper Fermina shoved in her face and cocked her head to the side. "A delivery receipt?"

"That's right. A delivery receipt for two of the instruments that the orchestra is supposed to use in their performance for the student council! See here? It's your signature!"

As Fermina indicated, Claudia's name was scribbled in the margin at the bottom. The handwriting was similar to her own. Still, she had no memory of ever signing such a document, nor had she received the delivery of any instruments. The instruments were supposed to be carried into the ceremonial hall. Claudia hadn't even been there.

What, is she trying to frame me for a crime?

Fermina's voice had echoed so loudly through the corridor as she tried to grill Claudia that a small crowd had formed around them. They just happened to be standing right in front of one of the lower classes too. Claudia couldn't help but

think her half-sister planned it all. The aristocratic faction was more concentrated in these classes, which gave Fermina the advantage of having more allies here.

"This must be a forgery. I've received no such deliveries."

Fermina frowned. "Please don't play dumb with me! Two of the instruments delivered to you have gone missing!" She went on to explain that the deliveryman personally attested to handing it off to her and that she had already reported the issue to the student council. "What did you do with the orchestra's extremely valuable instruments?!"

She really hasn't changed a bit, has she?

Claudia could already guess where Fermina was headed with her one-sided allegations. This was no different than what happened at the tea party. The truth was irrelevant. All she cared about was giving the impression to those gathered that Claudia was evil. At least she wasn't making someone else do her dirty work this time, like she had before in the classroom.

"Miss Fermina, this is a serious matter. The student council will need to investigate."

"What, have you forgotten where you placed it? Just like you always conveniently forget about the cruel things you do to me?!"

This was going nowhere. Fermina was completely dominating the conversation. Unfortunately, she seemed to understand that the louder one's voice was, the more people tended to listen.

When Claudia turned to leave, Fermina shrieked after her, "Are you running away?!"

"I'm not running. Aren't you coming along?"

"Prove that you're innocent!"

This wasn't even a proper conversation at this point, but that was hardly surprising. Integrity meant nothing to Fermina.

Right as Claudia determined that retreating was her best option, a voice rose from the crowd around them. "Lady Fermina, are you claiming that she carried

these instruments all by herself?"

Brian's voice was loud enough to carry through the corridor even with all the whispers that had erupted among the spectators. "Admittedly, I'm only a baron's son. But knowing you, I believe you'll answer my question honestly despite my inferior status!"

"Y-yes," Fermina answered after casting a brief glance at her followers. "From what I understand, she did carry it by herself." Claudia was the only one she cared to pin the blame on.

"You honestly claim that a duke's daughter like Lady Claudia would carry something like that all by herself?" Brian turned to one of the ladies in the crowd. "Lady Scott, do you think such a thing is possible?"

"Not at all. It's a deliveryman's duty to carry packages to wherever the receiver indicates, yes? If Lady Claudia wanted it moved elsewhere, she would instruct the deliveryman to do so for her. Besides, she's well known throughout the school. Someone would notice if she were to lug something that big around all on her own."

Their way of tag-teaming to come to her rescue suggested they were still on good terms after she'd mediated their quarrel.

Brian continued, "Lady Fermina, I propose we retrace Lady Claudia's steps to see where she's been! She stands out enough that someone besides this deliveryman must have seen her if she moved such a bulky package!" His voice boomed through the corridor. "And that way, we can locate the missing instruments too!"

He made a valid point; wherever Claudia appeared, people stepped to the side to make way for her. The crowds at any squabble in the lower classes always split to give her room so she could walk straight to the center. It was natural for them—a duke's daughter was on a completely different level, as unreachable as the moon in the night sky. Thus, Brian's suggestion would have seemed perfectly rational to the rest of the crowd. Fermina couldn't complain about it either, since Brian was trying to resolve the situation.

"Hey, knock it off! This is totally one-sided!" someone shouted at him.

"Look at how troubled Lady Fermina is! What's wrong with me trying to help her?!" Brian snapped back. By acting as if he was on Fermina's side, none of her followers could argue. In fact, those who supported Fermina and were completely oblivious to her true aims were supportive of Brian. They believed in Fermina so blindly that they were eager to uncover Claudia's supposed crime.

Fermina, meanwhile, was growing increasingly flustered as the situation took a drastically different turn than she anticipated. All she wanted out of this was for the crowd to believe Claudia was evil. She didn't need an actual investigation into the matter.

"Everyone, calm down!" Fermina cried. "I'll prove my elder sister is responsible, I promise!"

Brian shook his head. "There's no need for you to bear such a burden all by yourself! We should resolve this fairly!"

The crowd voiced their agreement. Brian had taken complete control of the situation. Claudia was inwardly grateful to him, but she scowled to keep up the ruse. Her reaction only heightened the other students' support for Brian. Having yanked the rug out from under Fermina, Brian snuck a glance at Claudia and grinned.

That settles it! As soon as he gives me a finished sample of that moisturizer, I'll do everything in my power to advertise for him and his company!

Claudia was almost on the verge of tears. She hadn't expected anyone to come to her rescue, so Brian's intervention touched her. She had other allies—Helen and Virgil chief among them—but Brian was different. She'd merely intervened in one spat he had. Somehow, that was all it took for him to defend her. A tidal wave of emotions hit her. Claudia swore to herself that she would thank the young Lady Scott later too.

It was then that a head of silver hair followed by a shock of red locks appeared in Claudia's periphery.

"In that case, I shall take personal responsibility for this and see that a fair judgment is made," Sylvester declared as he arrived on the scene.

All the murmurs and whispers that had been rippling through the crowd

vanished. Everyone was silent in his presence. Virgil must have taken this situation seriously enough that he'd sent Sylvester out to investigate.

After a long pause, the onlookers let out a cheer. This appeased both sides; to some, this meant Claudia's evildoing would be brought to light, and to others, it meant Fermina would be revealed for the liar she was. There was no longer any reason for anyone else to be involved since the crown prince had promised to resolve the situation personally.

Fermina flew to the prince's side, face contorted in panic. She swore to him up and down that she had witnesses and proof. Sadly for her, the deliveryman she named as her witness would later disprove her claims in front of the entire student council.

Sylvester took charge of the investigation into whether Claudia stole one of the orchestra's instruments or not. Two instruments were indeed missing, so either way, the issue needed looking into.

The only proof that existed was the document Fermina held, which called her whole accusation into question. It was fortunate that the deliveryman in question was still doing his job at the academy when the issue cropped up. They were able to summon him to the student council room.

Fermina and Claudia were excused from the room so as not to sway the witness during questioning. The deliveryman confirmed that Claudia was the one who had accepted the delivery. However, there was something suspicious about his statement.

"You mean to say you don't remember what Claudia looks like?" Sylvester asked.

Cold beads of sweat trickled down the man's face as he hesitantly nodded. "Th-that's right. Gotta say, all I remember is it was a gal who accepted it. I just assumed it was Duke Lindsay's daughter, since that's the name she signed."

"But all you recall is that she had long black hair?"

"Y-yes, sir!"

"If you saw her again, would you be able to recognize her?"

The man tilted his head, uncertain. "I dunno. She didn't have a very memorable face, so..."

Everyone in the student council room exchanged glances. All of them were thinking the same thing: he couldn't have met the real Claudia.

"Then let's have you meet Claudia face-to-face and confirm whether it was her."

The deliveryman shrank back. "Huh? But I ain't sure if I can tell you either way!"

"That's fine," said Sylvester. "If you're still unsure after seeing her, just tell us."

One of the officers rose to summon Claudia, who was waiting in a separate room. When she entered, the deliveryman's eyes went wide.

"Well?" Sylvester urged him.

"Th-th-this isn't the girl I saw! There ain't no way it could be! I wouldn't forget seein' a beauty like this, I promise you that!"

With that, their suspicions were confirmed.

There wasn't a person at the academy who could claim Claudia "wasn't memorable." She worked tirelessly to enhance her beauty, and Sylvester's recognition of her appeal confirmed her efforts were paying off. Even if they assumed this deliveryman hadn't seen her face, the sensual shape of her body would have been enough to stick out in his mind.

"This proves that someone was masquerading as Claudia. Hard to believe someone would do such a thing. Pretending to be a duke's daughter is a serious crime."

The aristocracy held considerable power. As a duke's daughter, Claudia had enough influence to change the direction of an entire merchant company with only a single signature, if she so desired. Hence forgery and impersonation were classified as such a grave offense. And here, the perpetrator managed to copy Claudia's signature as well.

"I'll take this deliveryman into custody to ensure his safety. He's a witness to this false evidence," said Sylvester. Although most incidents at school weren't taken too seriously, this was a different matter.

Claudia's expression turned pensive as she studied the deliveryman. Why wouldn't Fermina win him over to her cause before doing this? If she wanted to pin this on Claudia, it would have been better to make it so her one and only witness couldn't betray her.

Her suspicions were soon validated when one of the officers returned with Fermina.

"I'm so sorry, Elder Sister! I never dreamed someone was impersonating you! The deliveryman swore it was you, so I took him at his word."

Ah. She did this for plausible deniability.

Fermina was trying to present herself as a victim of deceit. Perhaps she'd suspected the truth would come out from the very beginning. If that were the case, then her true intention was simple: to accuse Claudia and paint her in a bad light in front of the students of the lower classes. Fortunately, Brian had taken control of the narrative and changed it. Once he heard the truth, he would probably spread word of Claudia's innocence on her behalf.

"Fermina," Virgil said sternly, "this doesn't change how shortsighted you were. From now on, you shall be restricted to staying in the office during student council activities."

"Of course, Elder Brother," Fermina answered obediently, shoulders slumped.

They couldn't pursue any further punishment for her since there was no proof she was involved with the forgery or impersonation. I have no doubt she's the one who leaked my signature to the perpetrator, but I doubt there's any way to establish that either.

The impersonator would need a sample of Claudia's signature in order to recreate it. One's signature was important enough that it was only used in limited instances. Being of the upper echelons of noble society, Claudia had been taught how to make her signature difficult to replicate as well. Fermina had plenty of opportunities to see it and mimic it, but she wasn't necessarily the

only one. Without anything to substantiate she was the culprit, anyone who frequented the Lindsay household was a suspect.

"Now we have two issues on our hands: the female student who impersonated Dee and the missing instruments." Virgil sighed. He leaned back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling.

None of them could even begin to guess who this mystery student was. They'd probably done a solid job concealing their identity; otherwise, they wouldn't have dared commit such a serious crime to begin with.

"For now, let's report this forgery and impersonation to the academy and request an investigation. The missing instruments are a stain on the student council's reputation, but we'll continue the search until we have no other recourse."

It would be less of a blow if they could locate the instruments themselves. That would prove that even when problems arose, the student council could handle it themselves. The academy would insist they revise how they keep custody of items since this one was lost, however.

Claudia nodded. "Finding these two instruments is our top priority, then. Are all the other ones located in the ceremonial hall?"

"Yeah. I had one of our officers open the packages to confirm. Other than what's missing, all of them have been delivered safely. Only one crate hasn't—it had a flute and trumpet in it."

Supplies for the school festival had been delivered in crates. The rest of the officers left to patrol the school and see if the instruments were accidentally stored in a crate with other equipment. Only Virgil and Fermina remained in the office.

The student council enlisted the teachers to help their search, given the gravity of the situation, but ultimately, they didn't find the instruments. Their search continued again the following day.

It was inevitable that Virgil would carry the brunt of the blame for the misplaced instruments because he was the student council president. The bigger issue was how deeply it would wound his reputation.

Thankfully, Brian had gone to work, loudly spreading word that the evidence against Claudia was a forgery. This quieted those who'd demanded justice, but it didn't completely resolve the situation.

"Why haven't we found the instruments yet?!" Virgil was growing increasingly panicked the more time passed.

They had managed to confirm that the package made it to the ceremonial hall. The flute and trumpet were disassembled for transportation, but their storage crate was still enormous. It would be no easy feat to hide such a thing, yet they still hadn't found it.

The officers running around searching on the student council's behalf were baffled by the situation. Some of them started offering up possible explanations.

"Could it be that the culprit already carried them off school grounds?"

"If they removed the instruments from the crate, it would be pretty easy to make off with them."

The flute was a long instrument, but it was separated into three components. One could easily tuck those parts into their bag and take them home.

"But that wouldn't work with the trumpet. I mean, unless they completely destroyed it and broke it into tiny pieces."

Something about what they were saying niggled at Claudia's brain. "If they completely destroyed it...? Oh, that's it! Why *didn't* the culprit destroy the instruments?"

"Huh?"

The rest of the officers were taken aback by her sudden question, but as they turned over her words, they realized where she was going.

"She's right. Destroying them would be the fastest way!"

"Yeah. Even if they couldn't do it right there at the ceremonial hall, they could have still destroyed the instruments and left them out in the open for people to find, right? That would be the best way for them to prove the student council is incapable, if that was their motive!"

Claudia would certainly prefer if that didn't happen, but she agreed with their assessment.

Virgil pressed his index finger against his lip, contemplating. "That means they must have some reason to hide them rather than destroy them. In other words, they're still here somewhere."

There was no point in someone carrying them off the school grounds and hiding them forever. It would send a greater ripple through the student body if the instruments were destroyed and exposed. While Virgil and the others found hope in this revelation, Fermina stood frozen, her eyes wide as saucers.

Of course. She's acted as though this matter doesn't affect her the entire time.

The girl had been unfazed watching the other officers and even the teachers searching desperately. She hadn't blinked twice as Virgil received the reports and gritted his teeth in frustration. Since Virgil sentenced her to confinement in the office, she'd occupied her seat looking the very picture of calm.

It would be as detrimental to Fermina as to anyone else if the instruments remained missing. She was an officer of the student council too. It struck Claudia as odd that she would act so nonchalant about something threatening her reputation; Fermina wasn't the type to ignore such a thing. That was especially true if she was aiming to be Sylvester's betrothed. Fermina wouldn't sit idly by and let the tables turn in favor of the other bridal candidates.

"But where could it be? We've searched all the classrooms, haven't we?"

"We even had all the empty crates carried out to keep us from getting confused."

There was only one explanation. While the other officers groaned and racked their brains, Fermina's expression remained unchanged.

She knows something. She must. The student council wasn't making any progress, but Fermina didn't look the least bit worried. Claudia already assumed she had a hand in the forgery and impersonation incident, but this proved to her that Fermina was involved in the missing instruments case too. Someone else—a collaborator—had likely done the actual dirty work, but Fermina was in on the scheme. She wouldn't have been able to escape culpability so easily

otherwise. That's right. She's handled this situation far too intelligently.

The setup of framing Claudia was essentially the same as the tea party debacle. Her every action was as amateurish then as now. She didn't have the foresight to prepare an escape route for herself. This inconsistency suggested Fermina had an accomplice. It would explain, *finally*, how Fermina managed to bring Claudia down last time.

If I were in her shoes, how would I do this? Claudia tried to look at the situation from Fermina's perspective. If she had capable help, how would she scheme to take down someone in her way? And in a way that wouldn't seriously harm Virgil's reputation. I would do everything I could to milk the situation, to make him feel indebted to me.

Unlike in their previous lifetime, Fermina had few allies this time. What if, before the situation caused irreparable harm, Fermina used her brainpower to miraculously deduce the instruments' location?

Claudia wasn't the only one who suspected her. Virgil and Sylvester didn't believe for a moment that she knew nothing about either incident. Still, on the surface, Fermina was also a victim the mystery culprit had deceived with their machinations. There was no evidence to connect her to the missing instruments. So, what would happen if she found the trumpet and flute when none of the other officers or professors could? Everyone would be grateful to her, and it would prove how capable she was.

Her reputation has been supported only by questionable rumors. By doing this, she earns herself a concrete accomplishment to bolster her influence.

Claudia would do the same in her shoes.

There was only one way to turn the situation around: find the instruments before Fermina did. All of this was pure speculation on Claudia's part, but assuming she was on the right track, this was a solid hint as to where Fermina had hidden the instruments.

But where would be most ideal? Somewhere they couldn't easily be found. Somewhere she could hide them away temporarily without having to move them. Transferring the instruments anywhere increased the risk of someone discovering her or her accomplice.

One possibility came to mind. Is it possible it's there, though? If someone else were to discover them there, it would only make her look suspicious. But I suppose...that doesn't matter since there's still no proof.

Without anything tying her to the incident, Fermina could make any number of excuses to get out of facing the consequences. It meant little to her if the atmosphere among the student council members was bleak. As long as she netted the accomplishment of finding the missing instruments, that was all she cared about.

Even if my deductions are all wrong, the worst that could happen is that Fermina ends up finding them after all. It gave her strength knowing the ramifications weren't steep.

Claudia exhaled and pointed her finger at the wall, specifically toward the area where Sylvester's gifts had been piled. "Have you searched over there, Elder Brother?"

"Over where?" Virgil turned to look where she was pointing. His jaw dropped. "It can't be. Tristan!"

"Huh?! I swear, I checked the catalog before moving any of them over there!"

"Where's the inventory list?!" As soon as Virgil got his hands on the documents, he searched through them. While he was busy scanning the pages, Sylvester gave the other officers permission to open every single one of the crates his gifts were stored in.

"Uh, um, uh..." Fermina was visibly rattled.

Claudia was even more confident she was correct. Fermina and her accomplice had stowed the missing instruments in the student council room.

It didn't take long before one of the officers cried in delight, "They're here! The flute and the trumpet both!"

Although everyone had seen the crates stacked in the office, they overlooked them because they were all supposed to be gifts for the prince. Tristan had checked and double-checked the catalog, once when he received them and then again before he moved them. He, like all the others, knew they were not to touch those boxes. They were for Sylvester.

Relief and joy filled the room.

"We all just assumed they couldn't be there," Virgil muttered. His expression was still stormy. He wasn't alone; Claudia's face was similarly drawn.

Virgil discovered that someone had tampered with the catalog, altering the number of gifts listed. Only a member of the student council could have done such a thing. They both suspected Fermina's involvement, but like always, there was no proof. All the officers frequently came and went while they were busy preparing for the school festival.

"Wait," said Tristan. "Does that mean I put that crate there without even realizing it?!"

"The catalog was incorrect. It's not your fault," Virgil assured him.

The delivery service compiled a catalog for each customer. It included several details about the gifts for Sylvester, such as how many things were sent and who sent them. That was what made it easy to compare the company copy with the one in the student council room.

There were times when Tristan managed the deliveries, but sometimes other members would do it too. They were always careful to check the catalog twice: once when receiving it at the entrance, then again when moving it to the wall. These packages came frequently enough that it was a hassle to move them to the wall each and every time they arrived. Oftentimes, they would leave them at the entrance for a while before transferring them.

It was probably while multiple packages were already sitting there, waiting to be moved, that the culprit tampered with the catalog and added the box of instruments to the pile. Only members of the student council would know when boxes had been left sitting at the entrance. Tristan was normally pretty quick about moving them in between sorting paperwork.

Virgil shook his head. "The important thing is that we found them! I'm glad you realized where they were, Dee."

"Oh, it was nothing special. I simply noticed those boxes sitting there and started to wonder."

"Yeah, but none of us thought to question it. The credit for this belongs to

you." Virgil's gaze wandered to Fermina as he praised Claudia.

While everyone else was rejoicing that the instruments were found, Fermina was staring at her lap. Virgil must have found her suspicious, but he didn't shout her down or blame her for it. Like Claudia, he knew there was nothing they could do without evidence.

The officers formed a circle around Claudia, showering her with compliments.

Sylvester leaned toward her ear and whispered, "I knew I was right. She's not worth the fear you feel toward her."

He was right. Even in Claudia's eyes, Fermina looked small and insignificant.

Fermina's schemes ended in failure once again.

There was a new shift taking place within Claudia's heart. She lay on her bed, eyes closed. The lights were all turned out, and darkness hung thick around her. She pressed her hands over her ample bosom, feeling strangely restless. This time, it wasn't out of anxiety or panic. *I understand now. I lacked confidence in myself.* Elated to finally make this discovery, she let out a long breath.

For as long as she could remember, Fermina had always impressed her. The girl remained steadfast no matter how many times she slipped up. Their father sending her off to the countryside hadn't even been enough to diminish her spirit. She still came at Claudia, relentlessly trying to take her down. Her actions weren't commendable at all, of course. She was an enormous thorn in Claudia's side.

I never believed in myself. That was the issue.

Fermina was like a weed. No matter how much Claudia stomped on her, she came right back up, as if she had absolute confidence that she was just.

Claudia had thought herself confident. She'd toned her body and enriched her knowledge, but those were all outward accomplishments. *I was terrified of accepting myself, knowing how foolish I'd been in the past.*

That much was true. She'd been ignorant and irrational, which caused her fall from grace. The trauma of it kept her in a cycle of self-rejection. She kept

swearing to herself that she would never repeat the same mistake. She couldn't accept everything about herself—not about how foolish she was or had been.

"Claudia, everyone has moments of irrationality."

What was important was recognizing one's flaws and correcting them. As long as she could do that, she was fine. Sylvester had taught her that, but she hadn't entirely grasped it until now. No matter how much time passed, she simply couldn't accept herself.

But no more. Even if she was foolish or irrational, she would acknowledge those parts of herself and work on them. This was why she could never have peace of mind—why she could never escape her fear of Fermina—why she could never overcome her past trauma.

It's all right now. I'm all right now.

Claudia wouldn't have reached this point if not for Brian stepping in to help her. The two only shared one brief encounter, but he still spoke up on her behalf. It brought her such joy that tears stung her eyes.

Brian made her feel like she was accepted—like she was in the right. Like she had the power to change things for the better. All she'd done in his situation was act the way she wanted. It hadn't necessarily been for his benefit. Claudia was simply carrying out her duty, living her everyday life, doing what came naturally to her. But that had been enough. It had been enough for him to help her later when she needed it. That brought her such comfort and courage.

Claudia wasn't the same person as she was in her first lifetime.

I'm not afraid anymore. Not of her own foolishness, and certainly not of Fermina. Plus, I have some incredible people in my corner. She could rely on her allies, so why not do just that? Somewhere in her mind, she knew to turn to them for help if she ever needed it, but because of her utter lack of confidence, she'd unconsciously refused to take that route.

She decided she was going to consult them immediately. As soon as morning came, she would start making plans. Night had only just arrived, but the darkness in her heart lifted to reveal a dazzling ray of hope. Claudia drifted off with a serene smile stretched across her face.

First thing the next morning, Claudia requested Helen and Virgil's cooperation. Both eagerly agreed. In fact, they seemed relieved that she was finally going to make a move. They'd apparently been anxious, watching Claudia passively take whatever Fermina threw her way. They had chosen to defer to Claudia's judgment, however, and waited quietly until she was ready.

Virgil confided that he actually planned to act soon if she didn't. Helen had been so delighted, she threw her arms around Claudia in a hug. Their reactions warmed her heart—but there was one whose reaction troubled her instead.

"This is embarrassing, Prince Sylvester."

"Why? All I want is to be by your side forever." The prince had scooted his chair close to her in the classroom and looped his arm around her waist. With the fingertips of his other hand, he caressed her cheek.

Claudia's long, luscious lashes trembled as she shifted her gaze. "Everyone is watching us."

"Good. Let's show them how close we are."

She elbowed him softly in the side, warning him not to get carried away. It did no good, of course.

You do realize this is all part of our plan, don't you?! Claudia got the feeling Sylvester was just having fun playing with her.

There was a reason they were fawning over each other in front of all their classmates: they were trying to rile up Fermina. Once she saw how close the two were getting, it would strengthen her sense of urgency and compel her to act. Claudia had always waited idly for Fermina to come at her, but this time around, she was going to make her play and force Fermina's hand.

"But this is improper! People will be upset."

Since they weren't meeting in private, this wasn't technically a violation of the equality Sylvester was expected to observe with the bridal candidates, but they were still pushing the limit. The prince's voice sounded sugary-sweet even though he was merely putting on a show, so Claudia assumed he was teasing

her again. Yet his actions were so easy to misinterpret, and thanks to him, her cheeks were feverishly hot. It didn't sit well with her that she was the only one suffering this disgrace.

If that's how you want it, two can play that game!

"Ah!" she gasped dramatically.

"Are you all right?!"

Claudia pretended to lose her balance and fell against Sylvester—chest first. Her breasts were just the right size: a man couldn't completely hold them in one hand, but they had enough volume for someone to enjoy caressing them, Claudia would've been proud to point out.

When Sylvester caught her in his arms as she predicted, Claudia pressed her breasts flush against him. *Hah! Take that! Now you can sit there aroused, all the while knowing you can do nothing about it.*

Sylvester's mouth fell open. The softness of her breasts was palpable even through the bra and uniform separating them. A dangerous glint appeared in his golden eyes.

Oh dear. Did I take it too far? Claudia was starting to regret what she'd done.

"You aren't trying the same tactics with other men, are you?"

His low, rumbling tone made her stomach flip. On instinct, she tried to flee, but his arms kept a solid hold around her, refusing to budge.

"O-of course I don't!" she squeaked.

"You mean that?" He still wouldn't let her go. Worse, he continued whispering seductively into her ear until their morning lesson finally began.

Chapter 17:

The Younger Half-Sister Rendezvouses with Her Accomplice

 $D_{\text{URING A FREE PERIOD}}$ after one of her classes ended, Fermina snuck away to meet with her accomplice. When she relayed how things played out the day before, the other girl scowled.

"If I'd known this was going to happen, I would've just destroyed those instruments."

"No!" Fermina cried. "You can't do that. I'm going to be Prince Sylvester's fiancée!"

It was one thing to pull the rug out from under Claudia, but she didn't want to destabilize the entire Lindsay house. Without her current position, Sylvester would be out of reach. The last thing she wanted was to create an opening for one of the other bridal candidates.

That said, she did want to get back at Virgil for always taking Claudia's side, which was why she'd agreed to this plan in the first place. She knew it wouldn't cause any permanent damage so long as they were found in the end.

"So you claim, but everything you've tried so far has ended in failure," her accomplice quipped. "And after I went through all the trouble of breaking the law and forging that signature for you."

Fermina glared at the other girl. "If you've got a problem with how things went, you should have planned things better! I did my part perfectly with the forgery!"

By flagging Claudia and accusing her in front of the lower classes, Fermina had hoped to rile the crowd into joining her in rebuking her older half-sister. It was a perfect plan. Everything would have gone smoothly if not for the appearance of some male student with an annoyingly strong sense of justice. Still, she had anticipated the forgery would be discovered. She had no issues playing the part of the victim. But then, much to her chagrin, Claudia just happened to figure out

that the missing instruments were in the student council room, thwarting the last step of their scheme.

"So," Fermina continued, "don't blame things not going to plan on me! Also, you're acting way too cocky!"

"Cocky? That's rich coming from you, especially when you used to be a commoner."

"I was never a commoner! I was a baron's granddaughter!"

The other girl snorted derisively. "Your grandfather is a single-generation baron. The only reason you were able to live so luxuriously is because your father is a rich duke who financed everything for your family."

"My father loves me, so it's only natural he'd provide for me. Don't forget that I'm a duke's daughter now!"

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say." The girl shook her head, crossed her arms, and stared at Fermina menacingly. "Well? What next?"

Fermina shrank back, intimidated. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"What are we going to do from here? In case you haven't noticed, the academy has people investigating which student was involved with the forgery and impersonation, and you're one of their suspects."

"I had nothing to do with it! And besides, there's no proof!"

"Maybe not physical evidence, but they could gather enough circumstantial evidence to seriously doubt your innocence. Do you think they'll just overlook your actions then? In case you've forgotten, you're not *currently* the prince's fiancée, nor are you even in the running."

Fermina bristled. "I'm a duke's daughter! There's no way they can do anything to me unless they've got solid proof to back up their allegations!"

Plus, she would be Sylvester's fiancée soon enough. All she had to do was paint Claudia in a bad light for everyone to see, then the prince would surely trade her out for Fermina.

Her accomplice sighed. "Anyway, neither one of us can afford to continue taking this easy. Now's not the time to be hesitating. As long as the ends justify

the means, that's all that matters."

"I-I know that. We just have to wait for another opportunity, like with the instruments, right?"

It was Fermina's accomplice who came up with the idea of hiding the crate of instruments among Sylvester's gifts in the student council room, but had Fermina not leaked information about the student council to her, she would never have hit upon such a plan. Not to mention it was also Fermina who kept an eye out for the perfect opportunity to sneak the instruments in.

"We need to do it as fast as possible," said the other girl. "They found the instruments, so as long as the rest of the festival goes off without a hitch, it won't just be the student council who gets lauded for resolving the matter quickly. That older half-sister you so detest will have solidified her position even further."

"I know that!" Fermina raked her hands through her hair as she recalled how Sylvester and Claudia had been hanging all over each other in the classroom. She was the one who was supposed to receive praise yesterday for finding the instruments. That was her chance to have Virgil reassess his opinion of her, to make Sylvester fall in love with her.

It was supposed to be me! Me! And in spite of that...that rotten wench has stolen my Sylvester! Audience be damned, they'd had their hands all over each other. Fermina felt like she would go mad watching them.

Claudia didn't understand. Sylvester didn't show his true self to anyone. Ignorant of that fact, she was letting herself get carried away.

Fermina had noticed that no matter how sweetly she herself sidled up to him, he gave her no response. The poor thing. He didn't even know what love meant. That was why he needed Fermina—because *everyone* loved her. Claudia was out of the question. She couldn't even obtain her own father's love.

Just you wait, Claudia. I'll bring down the hammer of judgment on you soon enough!

Her lips curled as she imagined Claudia's devastation at being betrayed by everyone and everything she believed in.

Fermina snuck a glance at her accomplice. Once I finish dealing with Claudia, you're next. You're completely disposable to me.

The grin on Fermina's face was one of utter euphoria.

Chapter 18:

The Villainess Has No Time to Enjoy the School Festival

At LAST, the school festival would be upon them tomorrow. Although classes ended early in the morning, Claudia was still utterly wiped. She had Sylvester to thank for that. *Urgh, this is more wearing than I anticipated.* These public displays of affection between her and the prince were draining, even though it was all an act.

The worst part was that Sylvester had found a way to get back at her for agitating him earlier: sneaking caresses when no one was looking. It was only a casual brush of the hand, but that was more than enough to stir the heat inside of her. She wound up being the one suffering from arousal.

Perhaps I'm not the only one, though. Sylvester's expression was the same unreadable mask it always was. The only real difference, in addition to the loving words he lavished on her, was that his tone and gaze were softer than usual.

Claudia had no way to unleash all the heat built up within her, so her cheeks were still rosy even now. Her eyes were half-lidded and dewy.

"L-Lady Claudia, a noblewoman should have more dignity!"

When she lifted her gaze, Claudia found Louise standing in front of her, blushing furiously. A professor had summoned Sylvester, so he wasn't glued to her side at the moment. Moreover, Louise was entirely correct.

"My apologies," Claudia said.

"No, um, I mean...do you have a fever?" Louise glanced over her worriedly. She'd taken Claudia's outward appearance to indicate she was ill.

When Louise's emerald eyes met hers, Claudia was overtaken by the urge to claim the other girl's lips, but a voice interrupted her.

"No need to worry. I'll look after Claudia."

"Oh, Your Highness..." Louise ducked and shuffled away now that Sylvester was back, her expression filled with anguish.

No doubt we've caused a grave misunderstanding. Sylvester hadn't actually decided on Claudia as his fiancée. That was a decision he would make only after he graduated. It was easy for Louise to be confused, though, with the way they had been today. They were purposefully giving that impression. I'll need to set her straight and explain the situation later.

As Claudia was lost in thought, Louise took her leave.

Sylvester grabbed Claudia's hand and pulled her to her feet. "You have an eye for women as well as men, I take it?"

"I was almost tempted with Lady Louise, I'll admit."

He frowned. "So now I have to be wary of women who approach you too?"

"Let's be clear about one thing: I wouldn't actually do anything without the other party's consent!" Claudia was offended. He acted like she was some ravenous beast who would attack anyone. Whose fault do you think it is that I'm so aroused to begin with?

"You looked like you were about to take your chance just now without any consent."

Claudia shook her head. "Youthful indiscretion is a terrifying thing."

"At least try to deny it." He paused. "You and your brother have a habit of shrugging off things I would much rather you insist aren't true." It was unusual for him to complain like this. Nevertheless, he held out his hand and began to escort her out of the room.

"Do you disagree with me?" Claudia asked him.

"Don't ask that. There are times I want to immediately discard this tradition of bridal candidates and jump past the whole engagement year. Why must I be nineteen before I can marry?"

They would be eighteen when they graduated. His engagement to his chosen bride would last another year after that. They would only marry once he was nineteen. While they were at the academy, they had the opportunity to meet

all sorts of people without the fetters of rank. This allowed the prince to narrow down the candidates he was seriously considering. The woman who came out on top would spend her final year being scrutinized for crown princess qualifications. This process was normally more about her house than it was her individual qualities. There were instances in the past of houses recklessly wielding the new power that their connection to the royal family afforded them.

"The royal family has it rough," Claudia agreed.

"Don't act as though it's no concern of yours."

He was right. It concerned her too since she was one of his bridal candidates. All the other noble ladies were free to marry at any point after their societal debut.

"There are times when you exceed my expectations and times when you fail to meet them," said Sylvester.

"Oh, really?"

"I told you, there are times when all I want is a simple, straightforward reaction. This is precisely that time."

Before she could discern his meaning, they arrived at the student council room. The situation had cooled since the missing instruments were found, but there were still regularly issues between other students. Claudia somehow knew that today—and the day of the school festival itself—she would be constantly on the go, trying to resolve this and that.

Sylvester had his paperwork waiting for him. Tristan, who was looking drained after all the fawning he'd been exposed to throughout the day, had his share as well. He had done an admirable job concealing his presence even as he followed the prince closely. Claudia suspected he had suffered more than anyone from their act.

"Everyone, you did admirable work today!" Virgil declared. "Tomorrow is the school festival. I have no doubt unforeseen problems will crop up, but it's nothing we can't overcome! Go home today, rest as much as you can, and prepare for tomorrow. I'll be counting on you all!"

The student council officers responded in unison, like soldiers preparing to head off into battle. All of them were ready for tomorrow.

Claudia watched as the others left. When they were down to five, Sylvester grabbed her by the hand and drew her close. "Tomorrow, after the festival is over, will you meet with me?"

She moved toward him, purposefully angling her hips so her skirt swished dramatically around her legs. The way she played it up, they may as well have been acting onstage rather than in the student council room. "Gladly. Shall I wait here for you?"

"No. I'd prefer to see you behind the ceremonial hall. There's a large tree back there. That's where we'll meet." He placed a chaste kiss on her hand. "I'll see you then." With Tristan in tow, he strode out of the room. His behavior was a little more exaggerated this time, but he acted practically the same way the entire day with Claudia.

When the door closed behind the two and the room filled with silence, Virgil stepped up behind her and clapped her on the shoulder. "You did it, Dee! I bet it's going to be a private proposal!"

She stared up at him. "A private proposal?"

"Yes, for your hand in marriage!"

"But Prince Sylvester won't make the final decision on his bride until he graduates, right?"

"That's why I said private. Or would it make more sense for you if I called it an unofficial proposal instead?" He paused for a moment and then continued, "It's not something they will publicize, but it will mean that both the king and queen approve of you."

"Then that means..."

Virgil nodded emphatically. "That's right. If he proposes, you'll be his fiancée! You can rest at ease knowing your marriage is guaranteed."

"That can't be," Fermina muttered under her breath. The color drained from her face, and her entire body trembled.

"It can," Virgil insisted. "There's precedent for it, although the last recorded case was many years ago. His Majesty must have decided there would be no issue moving forward with the prince's engagement since you're his partner, Dee."

The engagement process and waiting period was all for the purpose of evaluating the chosen bridal candidate and her family. As long as the king and queen saw no issue with either, there was no reason why they couldn't make a decision sooner. The engagement would, however, be kept secret to uphold tradition in the eyes of the aristocracy.

Claudia clutched her chest, eyes full of emotion. She was touched her brother would even come up with such an elaborate backstory to further agitate Fermina.

"The king and queen approve of me? It's like a dream come true."

"But you can't let your guard down just yet," Virgil warned her. "Things will only be done and dusted after the prince makes his proposal and you accept it. No one at the estate knows about this."

"Will they send our family a notice of my engagement once it happens?"

"To the head of our household, at least, but that will only happen the day after tomorrow at the earliest."

That was why he said their marriage would be guaranteed. It wasn't only an agreement between her and Sylvester if it was official enough for her father to be notified.

Virgil continued, "I'm sure you'll be busy tomorrow with your duties as an officer, but I'll do my best to make sure your load is light at the end of the day. It's practically a blind alley behind the ceremonial hall. You should get there early and prepare yourself mentally for what's to come."

"Thank you. I appreciate you being so considerate of me."

He smiled. "This is proof the royal family approves not just of you but the entire Lindsay family. Hold your head high and go see the prince tomorrow."

Claudia could walk around unattended within the halls of the academy. There

would be workers coming in and out tomorrow, delivering things and helping with miscellaneous tasks, but they would all be gone by the time the school festival ended. Still, she had never gone somewhere so deserted by herself before. She always kept herself out in the open where multiple people could see her, even when she was assisting with preparations on her own. The academy was relatively safe, but that didn't mean all the students here were upstanding people. She had enough sense to know that. With this plan, she was intentionally deviating from her common sense.

I wonder if Fermina will really fall for this? Virgil still hadn't lifted her confinement, so she wouldn't be able to leave during the school festival. Ordinarily, they attended and she could move about freely for most of the day, but tomorrow, she would be stuck in the student council room all day. Granted, Virgil did intend to give her a chance to sneak out at some point.

Virgil had already begun his investigation into the student who'd impersonated Claudia and forged her signature. They had yet to discover the culprit, though, and there was no proof that the person had any connection to Fermina. All they had were their suspicions that she was involved.

Regardless of hard evidence, the case of the missing instruments clearly demonstrated she had some accomplice behind the scenes. Thus, they were creating a prime opportunity for her—so they could catch her in the act, and so she'd leave behind proof of her crime. It didn't matter if they didn't have physical evidence. As long as they had a link between her and the other culprit and enough circumstantial evidence, that would be enough to corner Fermina.

It would be even better if she gave up, of course, Claudia thought.

She still didn't know why Fermina held so much animosity toward her. Now that she had self-confidence, she wasn't afraid of Fermina anymore. While part of her still resented Fermina for what happened in her past life, she knew her own ignorance and foolishness were to blame. If Claudia had stopped her despicable behavior, her father would never have disowned her. She never would have been sent to a nunnery, nor accosted by bandits who sold her off to a brothel. Since her downfall was partly her own fault, Claudia saw no reason why Fermina couldn't repent and change.

Claudia glanced at her half-sister, who appeared to be lost in thought. Where would Fermina end up after all this was said and done? The capricious gods had seen fit to let Claudia live her life all over again, but she was still an ordinary person. She couldn't predict the future.

Beneath the clear blue skies and the brilliant rays of the sun echoed a lively symphony, the sound of the music carrying on the wind. The orchestra's performance brought rapture to the students. Even the officers who were tasked with dispute resolution were anxious to see their labors bear fruit.

It was finally here—the beginning of the school festival!

Although the scale was modest compared to the Advent Festival itself, the student council had called in workers for assistance. This only added to the students' enthusiasm. They were still just teenagers, regardless of their status as nobility. Many joined together in laughter, whereas some flushed with anger, and others raced around the halls. Any time a problem arose, Claudia and the other officers would swoop in to smooth things over. Sadly, this meant she and the rest of the student council had no opportunity to enjoy the event.

"Lady Claudia! Thank you for all your hard work." Brian scurried up to her, looking for all the world like an enormous dog eager to see its master.

Claudia tilted her head. "Oh, Lord Brian," she greeted in turn. "Are you sure it's wise to speak to me?" At least on the surface, he was part of Fermina's faction.

He nodded. "When news of the forgery broke, I used that opportunity to express my open support of you! There are many other students who are trying to see the situation for what it is, rather than take all the rumors at face value. In fact, everyone in my class is on your side, my lady!"

That could only be because he had incited them to shift allegiances.

"In that case, you needn't use any titles with me. 'Claudia' is fine. I will refer to you simply as 'Brian' myself."

His whole face lit up. "Wait, you mean it?!"

Brian's happiness was so infectious that she smiled too. "Of course. I don't mind at all. It seems like the two of us will remain acquainted for a long time to come, after all." Namely through cosmetics, such as that moisturizer she so desperately wanted, but she didn't say that part out loud.

"Th-th-thank you so much! I'll be your loyal follower for as long as I live!"

"You can sell me any of your merchandise for whatever price you deem appropriate."

"Your patronage is most appreciated!"

Perfect. This means I'll be able to get my hands on more than just the moisturizer, then.

It was very time-consuming to change the ingredients of a product to suit individual skin types. However, with the loyalty and favoritism Brian was showing her now, she suspected he would be willing to fulfill any request she made of him no matter how troublesome.

Claudia was in high spirits as she opened the door to the student council room, knowing that her skin would soon be even clearer and suppler than it already was.

"Good work out there, Dee," Virgil said. He was the only one inside. "That girl's out running an errand for me. I've got someone tailing her."

Incidentally, Claudia also had a group of bodyguards secretly following her. They had obtained permission from the academy ahead of time to use members of their own personal army for this endeavor. Disguised as students, they were blending in with the rest of the crowd as they kept an eye on her.

Fermina had been with Virgil since this morning. This was her only opportunity to contact her accomplice.

"I wonder if she'll show her hand," said Claudia.

"I pray that she does. What she did before was over the line."

Virgil had been more furious than Claudia about the recent incidents. Forgery and impersonation were serious crimes, but had Fermina made the wrong move and destroyed those instruments instead of hiding them, it would have

brought dishonor on the entire Lindsay household.

Fermina's mistakes were dismissed because they'd occurred among their own family. Her mischief couldn't be overlooked if it caused trouble for other people, though. Claudia had already informed her father of their plan. If Fermina did anything after the school festival today, her fate was sealed. Even their father wasn't going to cover for her. He understood from their previous conversation that both Claudia and Virgil were looking out for their house's best interests.

"It would be nice if she reflected on her actions..." Claudia's voice trailed off. "By the way, where is Prince Sylvester?"

"Syl went to greet some visitors. We haven't let regular people visit for the festival, as you know, but the event has gained quite the reputation around the capital. The palace sent some people to observe the festival, including Her Majesty. In disguise, of course."

Her jaw dropped. "That's the first I'm hearing of this!" The room was suddenly spinning.

"You'd best be ready. I expect you'll be summoned while she's here."

"If I hadn't returned to the student council room so you could tell me all this, what would have happened?!"

Virgil shrugged. "I would've sent someone to fetch you."

"One needs to mentally prepare themselves for these things!"

Claudia had some familiarity with the queen from joining the parties Her Majesty occasionally hosted, but they weren't close enough that she could casually greet her.

She realized none of her maids were present at the school to help her tidy her appearance. "T-tell me, please, do I look all right? There isn't a stray hair out of place or anything?!"

"You always look beautiful, Dee. There's no need to panic. The king and queen will be your family in the near future."

"That's not set in stone yet!" Claudia decided Virgil wasn't going to be of any

help. Panicked, she started searching for a mirror. It would be unbearable if she had dust or dirt on her after running around the school to help the other students. Thankfully, someone had just walked through the door, so Claudia whirled to them for help. "I'm so sorry, but could you tell me how I look?!"

"Pardon?!" the man squealed in surprise. "Oh, um... Huh?" He was an upperclassman.

"Do...do I not measure up in your eyes?" Her hair was probably disheveled. Maybe there was even some dirt on the back of her uniform. That was her only guess, since he didn't immediately offer the words she'd hoped for. Her sapphire eyes shimmered, tears welling up.

The officer stared at her wide-eyed for a moment before his body began to pitch forward. Virgil slipped between them to stop the man from touching Claudia.

"Dee," he said pointedly, "you're causing an enormous misunderstanding right now."

"Whatever do you mean, Elder Brother? All I was doing was—"

"It's all right, Dee. You're stunning. There is nothing off about any part of your appearance. The *crown prince* will surely love the way you look." He added emphasis on the "crown prince" part, which seemed to jog the other officer's memory that she was indeed one of the prince's bridal candidates. His face paled, but the fault this time lay with Claudia for inviting such a misunderstanding with her actions. Virgil had no choice but to talk her down, lest her desperation for validation create any further casualties.

Her Majesty was striking in those pants.

The queen had donned something similar to a riding outfit to blend in with the rest of the palace personnel. It did nothing to detract from her beauty, which was unsurprising, what with her being Sylvester's mother. Even age couldn't diminish her charm. Nor did she lose any of her charisma or grace when busily attending to her queenly duties. Claudia was enthralled by her.

She let out a long, heavy sigh, unleashing all the pent-up excitement she'd

suppressed during their brief meeting. When she turned her head, she locked gazes with an exasperated Sylvester. They hadn't returned to the student council room after Claudia paid her respects to the queen, instead ducking into the school's empty drawing room to take their break.

"Don't you think the way you treat us is a little too different?"

Claudia shook her head. "Oh, please. Don't compare Her Majesty and yourself."

The queen was the mother of the realm, a female figurehead, a symbol of the kingdom. She and her son weren't even in the same category. Claudia carefully explained as much, adding that the admiration she held for the queen was entirely different from any feelings she held toward him. She rambled on so long that she forgot to breathe.

Sylvester finally held up his hands in surrender. "All right. I understand you hold a deep respect for my mother."

She nodded mournfully. "Please also understand how dejected I feel about not being able to prepare properly for our meeting."

"You knew you were meeting her beforehand, didn't you?"

"That didn't give me enough time to summon my maids from home."

Sylvester shook his head. "As if you needed it. You always look amazing. Mother even complimented you."

That wasn't the point. Since she and the queen were both women, that was all the more reason she wanted to look as beautiful as she possibly could for their meeting. Sylvester couldn't possibly understand that. Claudia wanted to dress to impress those she admired, not just men.

"Anyway, there is something more important you should be thinking about right now, isn't there?" Sylvester said.

"And what would that be?" It took a moment before his meaning sank in. "Oh, right. It seems Miss Fermina has taken action after all."

The person Virgil had assigned to tail Fermina had come back with his report. Aside from fulfilling the errand he'd given her, she also met with two other

female students. One of them—or perhaps even both—had to be her accomplice.

"It's unfortunate we don't know what they discussed," he said.

"The person we had tailing her wasn't skilled enough to pick up that much."

The men at their disposal were soldiers. They didn't specialize in surveillance.

"You should've used the royal family's Shadows."

At that, Claudia pulled a face. "We can't use the royal family's Shadows to solve our family quarrel."

As the name implied, Shadows specialized in clandestine activities, such as surveillance. The issue with Fermina was largely a domestic dispute, so Claudia and Virgil wanted to settle things as privately as possible. The academy shared that sentiment. They didn't want a public organization to encroach on their grounds to investigate the forgery and impersonation incident, but they also couldn't simply ignore such a crime. Thus, they were willing to cooperate.

"Our only objective this time is to keep me safe," Claudia reminded him. They did need to sniff out who was helping Fermina behind the scenes, but since her half-sister had already made a move, this was practically checkmate. If anything happened to Claudia after the festival today, it would be clear that Fermina was the mole. Whatever perpetrator appeared would likely also lead them back to her accomplice.

"Virgil and I will be doubly sure to keep you safe, but stay vigilant."

"Of course. While I volunteered myself as bait, I have no intention of sustaining any injuries in the process."

Soon enough, the festival would be over and all would be revealed.

When Claudia peered out the window, the sun was still high in the sky. She clasped her hands in her lap. Sylvester reached over and cupped his hand around hers. His palm was rough and calloused. She recalled the sword at his hip from their secret clothing-shop rendezvous. The blisters on his skin were likely from his sword training.

The atmosphere in the room shifted. Claudia turned her gaze to find his

golden eyes staring back at her with utmost sincerity.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll protect you."

"You're someone who needs to be protected as well."

"At least let me pretend, why don't you?"

She giggled. "All right."

If they were being completely realistic, his royal status meant his life was too precious for him to personally defend her. He couldn't be the prince on a white horse that so many girls dreamed about. When someone swooped in to rescue her, it wouldn't be the prince himself but someone he'd ordered to go on his behalf. Nonetheless, she knew he was earnest. It embarrassed her so much that she had to play it off by stating the obvious.

"Thank you," she said. "I trust you'll have my back."

"Yes. I will." Sylvester seemed to sense exactly what was in her heart. He nodded and flashed a smile at her that was blindingly bright, especially from up close.

Claudia hurriedly turned away. His beauty made her pulse quicken. She tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ear, thoughts flitting to other matters in hopes of distracting herself. "If I were to name an issue with our plan, it would be—"

"Lady Louise?"

One of the female students Fermina met with had indeed been Louise, another of Sylvester's bridal candidates.

As dusk settled over the school, Claudia made her way to the space behind the ceremonial hall. The people had already been ushered out, their enthusiasm gone with them. Students didn't frequent this area to begin with, but Virgil had made extra sure to restrict entry today.

There was an enormous tree at the back of the hall that had stood proud since the academy's founding. The headmaster apparently thought it would be a waste to cut it down, so it had been left here. When Claudia stepped into the

tree's shadow, darkness enveloped her. She brushed her hand across the base of the tree as she waited.

The area behind the ceremonial hall was a dead end due to the other buildings. It made it easy to know where to keep her attention focused. Leaves rustled overhead, but no breeze reached her. The wind was probably only blowing up above.

A head of long blonde hair entered her vision.

"Lady Claudia? What are you thinking, coming to such a deserted place?" "Oh, Lady Louise..."

Louise's shoulders rose and fell sharply as she struggled to regulate her breathing. She must have run here in a hurry. What did Fermina say to her? Or perhaps she was here as Fermina's accomplice. Claudia still couldn't be sure either way.

"Someone of your rank must surely realize how foolish this is!" Louise thrust her closed fan in Claudia's direction. Silhouetted by the setting sun, she looked absolutely enchanting. She conducted herself with pride and dignity. It brought a gentle smile to Claudia's lips.

"Did you come here because you were worried about me?" Claudia asked.

"D-don't get the wrong idea! I came here to warn you, that's all!"

That confirmed it, then. She was here out of concern for Claudia. *That means Fermina must have said something to her again.*

Claudia couldn't discount any possibility, but she'd never suspected Louise from the outset. Given what had happened in their classroom, it was reasonable to assume Fermina had spurred Louise to action. That meant the other person Fermina met with was the real accomplice.

"Did Miss Fermina say something to you?"

"I heard you were here conspiring something," Louise answered. "And so we are clear, I didn't come here because I took your sister's word as the truth!"

"Oh, really?"

"I already told you: I only came here to warn you. There was something off about that girl. When I saw you headed this way all by yourself, I hurried after you."

"My apologies for taking up your time." She was sorry for worrying Louise as well.

Louise shook her head. "What are you planning to do? You're lucky I happened to come after you, but who knows what could have happened if you'd been here alone."

Claudia forced a smile. She couldn't tell Louise that this was all part of her plan. She didn't want to make the issue with Fermina public. But if Louise didn't leave soon, she would likewise get caught up in this—provided something did happen. Claudia couldn't know for certain, since she was only the bait.

While she debated convincing the other lady to hide in the shadows of the tree, a shadow appeared immediately behind Louise.

"Lady Louise, this way!"

"Eek!"

Claudia yanked Louise by the arm. She stepped forward and hid the girl behind her back. The people who appeared at the end of the alley weren't students at all.

"Well, well, wouldja look at what we've got here? She's a real babe."

"You said it. I ain't seen beauty like this before."

There were five men, each covered in filth. The muscles on their arms were bulging, suggesting they did this kind of dirty work for a living. Their crude faces and distorted, smarmy grins sent a chill down Claudia's spine.

"P-people like you aren't allowed here!" Louise bravely piped up, but it was obvious how terrified she was. There was a tremor in her voice.

"Ooh, yeah! I like what I'm hearin'. Ain't nothin' wrong with a girl who's got some backbone."

"The girl with the black hair's more my type. Can't wait to sample that body."

They were taking their sweet time encroaching, step by leisurely step. Claudia couldn't be sure if it was because they thought they had the advantage since it was just two young women, or if it was because they enjoyed cornering their prey.

Far from being afraid of these disgusting hooligans, Claudia was incensed. A student had led them here, that much was certain. She could feel Louise's terror behind her. Her face pinched; she knew exactly what Fermina's thought process was.

That dirty she-devil wants to take Louise down with me.

The worst possible scandal a noble lady could face was one that involved her chastity. Even if the lady made it out of the situation unscathed, people would make assumptions if word got out that some thugs attacked her. In high society, a lady's chastity was prized above all else. Losing that was equivalent to death. Claudia was Fermina's true target, but she roped in Louise just so she could thin the competition. Fortunately, this was staged so no scandal would occur.

Claudia's blood boiled at her half-sister's shortsightedness, the rage making her vision flash. In her prior lifetime, Claudia hated her half-sister. The way Fermina shrank every time their eyes met infuriated her. She, too, had enlisted some thugs to attack Fermina.

This is absolutely irredeemable.

Now that the situation was reversed, she realized the depravity of committing such an act. She was so disgusted that her skin turned to gooseflesh. The previous Claudia truly had played the role of the villainess before. It was her choice to employ such dastardly means to achieve her goal.

I deserved the condemnation I received. Despite how horrible she thought she'd been, her past self had only ever targeted Fermina. All Lady Louise did was worry for my safety!

If Louise hadn't come, she would never have gotten wrapped up in this mess. She had done nothing to warrant it. Fermina merely included her in this because she could. That act revealed the ease with which the girl could resort to criminality.

Fermina had kept her sights solely on Claudia before. She may have caused trouble for others during the missing instruments incident, but no one had suffered any lasting damage. Claudia thought that Fermina could still change. She could still mend her ways. Surely she could acknowledge her foolishness and correct her mistakes, if given the chance.

But no. That wretched girl... Claudia's long, raven-black hair billowed around her. Instead of repenting as she should have, she pulled an innocent bystander like Lady Louise into this!

Louise was innocent. Innocent! Claudia couldn't let this go unpunished. Not something like this. Her blood came to a rolling boil. A vein on her forehead bulged. If not for clenching her fists at her side to restrain her wrath, Claudia would have probably thrown her head back and screamed.

She'd promised to be a worse villainess. She'd told herself that if Fermina wanted to fight, she would respond in kind.

How stupid of me. Claudia hadn't understood the depths to which those without morals would sink. I have no intention of falling into depravity along with you.

Her fingernails sank into the soft skin of her palms. Claudia's vision turned red as she seethed, but her heart went cold as ice.

Fall by yourself. Claudia bid farewell to Fermina in her heart. No matter how irrational or foolish she was, she was not going to walk the same path Fermina had. This was where their roads diverged.

With renewed resolve, Claudia smiled calmly. The tension in the air around her brought the encroaching men to a screeching halt.

"Do you men realize who I am?" Claudia cocked her head ever so slightly, her hair swaying with the movement. She seductively placed a hand to her cheek.

One of the bewildered thugs audibly gulped. *Poor fools.* They had no idea such a sensual young lady was waiting here for them. They were already stuck in the spider's web.

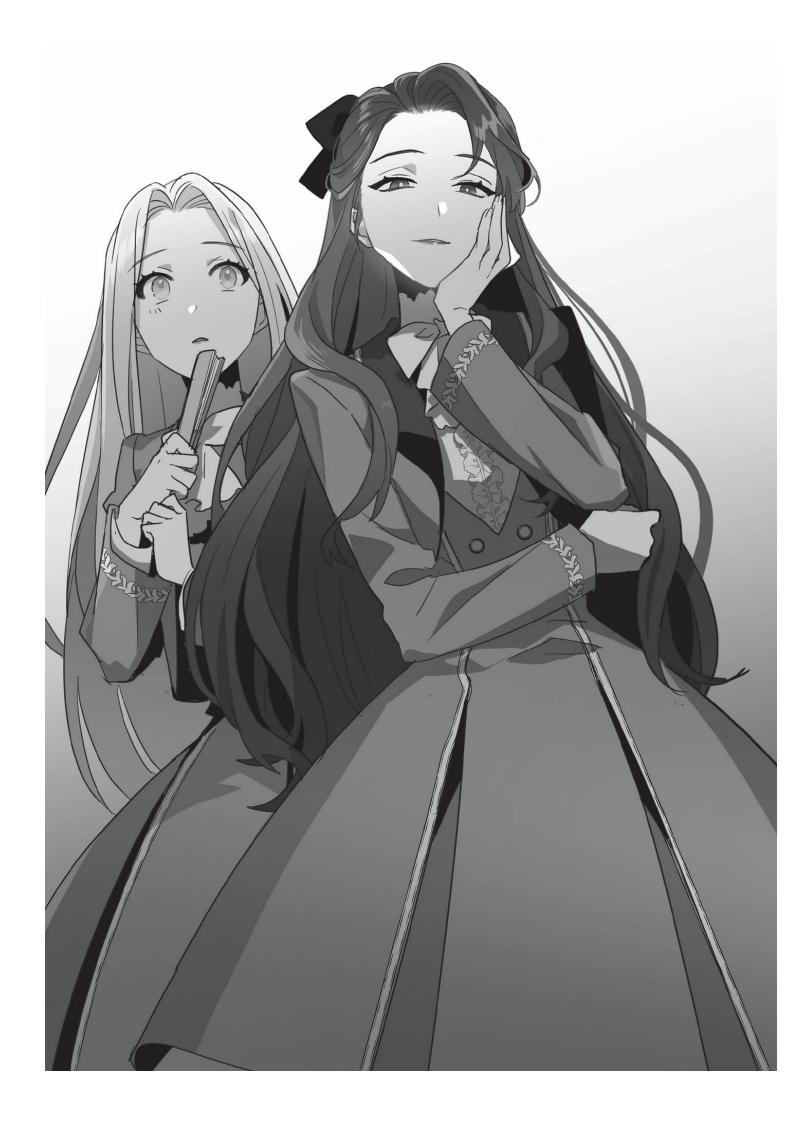
"L-Like we care!" one of them stammered. "Hmph! You act brazen now, but just wait!"

None of these men deserved any of her pity.

Claudia straightened her posture. A fire raged in her sapphire eyes. "I am Duke Lindsay's eldest daughter, Claudia Lindsay. I swear on my name that every last one of you will pay dearly for threatening Lady Louise and me!"

They wouldn't be the only ones. She would hold Fermina accountable. Fermina's accomplice too. The men recoiled now that they knew how important and powerful she was. Unfortunately for them, there was no way to escape from here.

"And I swear on my sword that you will not get away with threatening my fiancée." Sylvester appeared behind them, holding his blade aloft. She recognized it by its hilt, which was embossed with the royal family's emblem. Claudia was more surprised by the fact that he was actually wielding it, however.



"Prince Sylvester?!"

What is he doing with a weapon in hand? His life is too important—he's supposed to be the one being protected, not the one doing the protecting! And what happened to the bodyguards hiding nearby?

Before she could verbalize these doubts, Sylvester charged at the men. Claudia sucked in a breath.

The scene soon descended into chaos. Some bravely tried to meet the prince head-on, others kept their distance, and others still panicked and frantically searched for a retreat. One man tried to make a dash for Claudia and Louise, but the moment he turned his back, someone cut him down. There was a flash of red between all the bodies, which Claudia soon realized was Tristan's fiery hair and not blood—thankfully.

Of course. Prince Sylvester wouldn't be alone...but still, what's going on?!

The men fell to the ground one by one. Sylvester's sword skills were impressive even to the untrained eye. He showed no hesitation, his movements smooth and dexterous. Combined with his beauty, it looked like he was dancing. The crescents he carved through the air left those brawny thugs with no way to defend themselves or fight him. The moment they faced the prince, he effortlessly rendered them unconscious.

Claudia clenched her hands again. Her palms were sweaty. She watched the entire time, praying the prince would stay safe, until at last every man was felled. It had felt like an eternity for her, but Sylvester didn't even seem winded as he returned his sword to the sheath at his side.

"Hmph. That's all?" he said.

"Hmph? What do you *mean*, 'hmph'?! What were you thinking, charging out in front?!" Tristan bellowed at the prince, voicing what the rest of them were thinking.

Her bodyguards finally appeared once everything was settled. Their pitiful expressions explained everything. Sylvester must've forced them to stand back while he handled things.

"Claudia, are you all right?" Sylvester asked.

"I don't want to hear it!" Claudia snapped at him. "But yes, I'm perfectly fine!"

There had been no opportunity for her to sustain an injury in the first place. She knew this place was a blind alley, so she'd had it thoroughly checked to ensure it was safe before she entered. She'd also hidden her bodyguards in the nearby undergrowth so they would be close at hand to help her. Moreover, she had discussed the situation with Virgil ahead of time to borrow some of his people as well, making sure that they could pincer the enemy if anyone entered the alley with her.

Oh, that's right. Remembering her brother's men, she quickly beckoned them over to take custody of Louise. She hadn't stopped trembling this entire time. Her cheeks turned rosy, and she had a dreamy look in her eyes as she gazed at Sylvester. Claudia, meanwhile, couldn't stop herself from reprimanding him for his recklessness.

"Why would you expose yourself to danger like that?!" she demanded. "What would've happened if you had gotten injured?"

"These were no professional fighters. I would never be outdone by some artless goons."

"There was still a chance you could have been hurt, though!"

Yes, the prince was strong. The blisters on his hands as they held hers were proof of his intense training. Even so, she never dreamed he would appear brandishing his sword.

"It's the prince's duty to save a damsel in distress," said Sylvester.

"In storybooks! This is reality!"

"That's odd. Don't women ordinarily want a prince to rush into their rescue, even in reality?" Sylvester cocked his head to the side. This wasn't at all the reaction he'd anticipated from her.

Perhaps what he said was true for some people. He did look dashing, the way he swooped in, sword in hand. Nevertheless...

"I was worried sick that something would happen to you!" she said. Her heart

thrummed furiously. The battle had ended quickly, but the fear still gripped her, strongly enough that it almost drowned out her anger toward him. Claudia dropped her gaze.

"I'm sorry." A sudden warmth enveloped her. "It looks like I messed up again." The tension melted away when he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

This was the second time he had ever apologized to her. *Perhaps the prince is more awkward about expressing himself than I realized.*

He'd been inscrutable and almost enigmatic during their first tea party alone together. It unnerved her at the time; she thought that if she made even one wrong move, he would take her to task. She learned only later that he was simply amused by the way she reacted to everything. It was impossible to read him when he put his mask on, offering everyone the same lukewarm smile. Sylvester had slowly started to take it off around her, though. It became easier to guess what he was feeling.

Sylvester disliked it when she pretended to be someone she wasn't. He could see right through her act. Lately, she was behaving more and more like herself around him. It wasn't as if she had exhausted her entire repertoire of skills; she just let her guard down was all.

Is it really possible that he doesn't know how to handle women?

If he only put a little thought in, surely Sylvester could see that while she enjoyed fantasy as much as the next young lady, she was more realistic than most people her age. Yet Sylvester had incorrectly guessed what would make her happy. To her, it looked as though he was working off advice someone else had given him. It wasn't like him at all.

As the possibilities ran through her mind, she studied the prince. He still had his arms around her, trying to placate her, but the atmosphere around him conveyed how uneasy he was.

Her lips pulled into a smile. Of course. I should've realized. Prince Sylvester is still an adolescent—only sixteen years old.

Claudia was the exception. She was the only person reliving this timeline.

Sylvester's profound wisdom didn't necessarily mean he was experienced with women. Like her, this year marked his entry into high society. Most of his interactions up until this point had been with other boys his age. Being part of the royal family, he would've had opportunities to attend societal events before his debut, but that had nothing to do with his ability to accurately assess what a woman wanted and act on it.

"You were only trying to make me happy, right?"

"Yes, but it looks like it backfired. I guess I didn't look as impressive to you as I'd hoped."

Claudia pulled herself away and peered up at him. He normally looked like a prince wise beyond his years, but right now, he looked like the young man he was—discouraged that he wasn't able to charm a girl with his smooth sword skills. It warmed her heart seeing such a simple, transparent side of him. It soothed her frazzled nerves—nerves that would never have been frazzled if not for Fermina's dastardly actions.

"You looked dashing to me," Claudia told him.

"You say that, but it didn't seem like you were bewitched at all."

She shook her head. "I had no time for that. I was too worried about you."

"I guess I'll take that. At least you were worried." Seeing that she'd finally composed herself, Sylvester regained his spirits. He exhaled a breath and then, without warning, knelt in front of her. It was obvious to anyone what he intended to do. "Lady Claudia Lindsay, would you do me the honor of being my fiancée?" The area was silent save for the clear sound of his voice.

The sunlight had grown dim around them. Night would soon cast its curtains of darkness across the land, making it near impossible to see. This was the brief in-between, where only a few sparse golden rays illuminated the sky. Beneath them, Sylvester's golden eyes gleamed. And as she gazed at them, she knew she had fallen for him.

Claudia knew her answer already. It didn't matter whether he only liked her for how entertaining she was, or if he was only continuing this as part of their ruse. Her lips trembled. She'd fallen in love with him—fallen deeply. She only

realized it now.

"I must refuse your offer." Claudia spun on her heel and dashed away. She couldn't bring herself to do anything else.

Afterward, Claudia had no memory of how she made it home. The next thing she knew, she was in her bedroom sipping a cup of tea that Helen had poured for her.

"I knew it. I'm a complete fool," she said.

"Oh? I don't know of a person wiser than you, Lady Claudia."

"That's because you simply haven't realized my true nature yet." Her throat was dry. She let out a shaky breath.

Claudia's head throbbed when she tried to stop and think about the horrible mistake she'd made. What am I doing? All she had to do was be honest with him and agree to be his betrothed. Sylvester would have been happy with that answer. Instead, she had wounded his pride yet again.

She knew Sylvester had only played out the role of a fairy-tale prince as part of his role in their little act. He was trying to comfort her after seeing the evils Fermina had stooped to. His way of doing that was playing out the scenario that Virgil had described to her and proposing. Virgil probably knew the prince was going to act out a proposal. That had to be the reason why he'd brought it up to her.

But I stomped all over his goodwill.

"Aaaah!" Claudia shrieked. "This is my second chance at life, why can't the irrationality in my heart just disappear?!"

Chapter 19:

The Knight Captain's Son Hopes for a Smooth Resolution

 ${}^{\prime\prime}G_{\text{OOD MORNING, Your Highness."}}$

"Morning," Sylvester responded, smiling kindly.

Few people had the privilege to observe the prince from as close up as Tristan did. He wondered, though, when his best friend started faking his smile. The prince's expressions had been genuine back when it was just the three of them —Sylvester, Tristan, and Virgil—running around the palace together.

Before I knew it, he started plastering this same stiff smile on his face all the time.

Although he spent more time with Sylvester than nearly anyone else, he still wasn't sure exactly when things changed. It made him feel like a worthless friend. It was probably a trivial matter to the prince, but Tristan wanted to be sensitive enough to catch these sort of shifts in his friend's behavior. Especially since it was like there was a wall between them now that Sylvester rarely showed his emotions anymore. Part of him wondered if Sylvester wouldn't suffocate from holding everything in all the time.

It's a good thing he has Lady Claudia.

When Sylvester was around her, he lit up. There were times when he exuded a dark, oppressive aura, but that was usually because she'd triggered his possessive nature. Either way, Sylvester's emotions were easy to read when Claudia was around. That brought Tristan peace of mind.

"Good morning, Prince Sylvester."

The moment Claudia's lustrous black hair entered their view, Sylvester's eyes filled with a gentle warmth. "Morning," he replied, his voice sounding—at least to Tristan's ears—much softer and more affectionate than usual.

Tristan wondered how many other people were perceptive enough to pick up such subtle changes from the prince. There were sure to be few, and as the

prince's friend, that restored some of his confidence. Not even Claudia noticed, and she was normally more sensitive to those sorts of shifts in people than Tristan.

It's basically a done deal. She's going to be his fiancée.

They were bright and beautiful together, so perfect that they belonged in a painting. They could be a masterpiece, as far as Tristan was concerned. There was no room for anyone else to squeeze between them. He, more than anyone else, had had the opportunity to watch their relationship grow and develop, which made it feel all the more precious.

When Tristan heard Sylvester would be proposing, he inwardly rejoiced. He was as happy for his friend as he would be if it were his own engagement. The two of them getting together officially would make it worth suffering having to watch them dote and fawn over each other all this time.

And yet, things hadn't worked out as planned.

"This is unbelievable," he muttered to himself.

What about Sylvester wasn't good enough for her? Certainly, the prince made a careless move by charging in and leaving her bodyguards behind. Tristan never dreamed Sylvester would pull a stunt like that, even knowing that the prince planned to propose today. Still, that didn't justify her rejecting him.

Tristan stared after Claudia as she ran. He was too shocked to do anything else—and honestly, he didn't want to. The chill of night was already sweeping in with the sunset, but the downright frigid air enveloping Sylvester sapped any courage Tristan might have plucked up to face his friend directly.

Instead, he looked away. He needed to conserve his mental strength in case anyone happened upon them and chanced facing Sylvester's inevitable wrath. Frankly, Tristan was pretty dejected himself.

"Miss Louise," he said. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Yes, what is it?" Her blonde hair fluttered in the breeze. It shone in the dim light, even though the sun had largely receded. She looked as composed as ever standing there, her expression conveying her anticipation for his question.

I thought she had a thing for Syl.

Louise was one of the prince's bridal candidates, but even if she hadn't been, it was obvious to anyone who cared to pay attention that she had feelings for him. Tristan hesitated. Maybe he was off the mark. Maybe his assessment was wrong.

As the silence stretched on, Louise forced a smile, seeming to read his thoughts. "I was prepared for this to happen eventually. It just happened sooner than I expected. Lady Claudia must have declined on my account."

"On your account, you say?"

"She probably felt she had no other choice since I was present. It would be in violation of the equality the prince is supposed to afford all his candidates. She seems to be a stickler for rules and tradition. After all, she scolded the prince quite harshly."

So that was the reason for it? Claudia's response had seemed like a complete mystery until Louise's convincing explanation.

"Embarrassed though I am to admit it, I was too taken by how gallant His Highness looked to say anything." Blood rushed to her cheeks as she recalled how dashingly Sylvester had stepped onto the scene. She exhaled, letting out all the feverish excitement that had been rekindled by the memory. Only sorrow remained in her emerald eyes. It was like a dagger to the heart, seeing how her gaze darted like she was holding back tears.

"You did nothing wrong, Lady Louise." The words spilled out of his mouth unbidden, but he meant them. She had been at the wrong place at the wrong time. She was a victim. On top of it all, she'd had her heart broken. "No matter what anyone else says, I promise, no fault lies with you. If anyone deserves any criticism, it would be me. I failed to stop Syl." He loudly thumped his fist against his chest. "So please, blame me instead."

Louise gawked at him for a moment before bursting into giggles. It was comforting to see her looking more at ease. The tension in the atmosphere had softened as well. Tristan desperately hoped that Louise could keep smiling like that forever.

"Thank you," she said. "I think the person who needs to repent the most here is His Highness for being so reckless."

"You are exactly right. By the way, the royal family has decided to preside over this matter personally. Could I ask you to keep quiet about everything that has happened here until they're ready to go public?"

Louise nodded. "Very well. If that is the royal family's wish, I have no objections. I suppose I had best not say anything to my family either?"

"Correct. The royal family will send someone to speak with them later. Please keep it a secret until then."

Tristan finished communicating all he needed to, but strangely, he couldn't bring himself to pull away from her. "Um..."

A hand clapped him on the shoulder, interrupting his conversation with Louise. "Tristan, where did I go wrong?" Sylvester's voice lacked all emotion.

Cold beads of sweat trickled down Tristan's back. He was reluctant to look the prince in the eyes, but he couldn't just ignore him. Although, more than that, he'd wanted to continue his conversation with Louise—to enjoy the atmosphere between them.

"Y-you didn't do anything—"

The second he saw those golden eyes, completely devoid of light, Tristan regretted ever turning his head. Sylvester looked as though he had no life left in him, like a porcelain doll tucked away in someone's dark, dingy attic. He was perfectly groomed, but the chill that hung around him made Tristan's heart shrivel.

"If that's true, why isn't Claudia still here?" Sylvester's voice was hollow.

Tristan vigorously shook his head. "I think the only way to know for sure is to ask her yourself." He also wished to understand it. Louise claimed Claudia had refused on her account, but was that truly why?

"Hmm." Sylvester nodded to himself. "Should I visit Virgil first, then?" He apparently didn't want an answer because he left, dragging along the bodyguards that had been standing by.

The fact that he's not going straight to see Lady Claudia must mean he's pretty hurt. Sylvester would normally ask the person directly if there was an issue.

As Tristan watched the prince leave. Louise spoke up behind him. "Do you think those two will be all right?" Seeing how devastated Sylvester was must have worried her.

"I want to believe they will be, at least."

Please let this just be a minor misunderstanding. That was all he could hope, for his own peace of mind.

Sylvester was a dear friend. Tristan thought his relationship with Claudia was a precious thing. But honestly, he didn't want to get wrapped up in their romantic issues any more than he already had.

Chapter 20:

The Marquess's Daughter Learns Warmth

LOUISE WAS A PROUD WOMAN. Like the Lindsays, the Saviles were a historic family whose beginnings dated back to the founding of the Harland Kingdom. But what distinguished an aristocrat? How should they behave?

The Saviles had their own answers to that question. Louise dedicated herself, putting in twice the average person's effort to make sure she never brought shame to her ancestors' legacy. That was also what made her so proud. The hard work she put in gave her unwavering confidence.

Her whole world changed when she saw Sylvester for the first time.

He's so beautiful.

As a marquess's daughter, Louise did her best to keep up her appearance, but compared to Sylvester, her labors seemed puny and pointless. It was as if all the complimentary words in the world existed solely to describe him. She strongly believed that. She would never measure up to the prince.

Sylvester was utterly flawless, at least as far as Louise was concerned. If he smiled at her, she shrank back, feeling undeserving. Even so, she dreamed of being able to stand by his side. She didn't think she was worthy at all, but that didn't stop her imagination.

"Rejoice, Louise! You've been selected as one of His Highness's bridal candidates!"

"Have I really?!"

When her father gave her the news, she was so overjoyed she almost jumped in the air—which would have been entirely inappropriate for a noble lady like herself. It was wonderful, though. She was one step closer to realizing that dream.

Louise redoubled her efforts to be the perfect noble lady. Being with Sylvester was no longer a pipe dream, but something within her grasp. She believed her

tireless persistence would be rewarded.

I still have plenty of time, she reminded herself. The prince had four candidates, including herself, but only one besides Louise was the same age and able to spend a significant amount of time with him. That's fine. She may be of a higher rank than me, but I still have a chance.

Louise didn't want to lose. She told herself she wouldn't. But still, there was a chance she might. The other bridal candidate that was the same age as her was Claudia Lindsay.

When she saw Claudia for the first time at a banquet, Louise immediately looked down on her. Resentment grew in her heart. Claudia was a duke's daughter—a more honorable position than her own—but she was nothing more than a spoiled, selfish brat.

That lady there is a duke's daughter? You must be kidding.

At the time, Claudia displayed a complete lack of decorum, putting her far below all the other ladies her age. That changed when Claudia's mother passed away. Louise had heard the rumors, but even after seeing Claudia with her own eyes, she could scarcely believe it.

She's like an entirely different person!

The image of Claudia's smiling, willowy figure and the wavy tresses of ravenblack hair that fell around her shoulders and billowed as she walked was burned into Louise's mind.

Claudia was breathtaking. When their gazes met, those sapphire eyes would pull Louise in and refuse to let go. It was like gazing into the depths of the ocean. Louise looked so much more beautiful when reflected in those eyes. Her voice was pleasant too. Anyone would find themselves captivated by her.

I can't give in to self-defeat! No matter how much she tried to encourage herself, the enmity she tried so desperately to hang on to melted away like a sugar cube doused with water.

Louise couldn't bear to watch Claudia and the prince together. Standing side by side, they looked perfect for each other. The only way Louise could resist accepting the truth was by ignoring reality. She still didn't know for sure.

Yes, you do.

There was still time.

That time is pointless.

Claudia was obviously the strongest contender. Louise knew she was pathetic for clinging to Fermina's words.

"Your audacity knows no bounds. You should feel ashamed!"

Say that to yourself.

Another voice whispered to Louise inside her heart, causing her fingers to tremble as she clutched her folding fan.

Regardless, she wasn't going to give up. Not yet. She still wanted to believe that dream could be reality. Sylvester was her first love, someone she deeply admired. Louise wanted to enjoy the longing had for him, however fleeting.

But the beautiful woman who stood in front of her wouldn't allow her that.

"Lady Claudia, do you really think I'll have a chance to ride home in a carriage with His Highness?"

"Prince Sylvester is well aware of how important it is to maintain fairness among his bridal candidates. If he sees the opportunity, don't you think he'll invite you along?"

It would have been better if Claudia crushed her hopes and told her no. Louise knew she was being unfair, though. It was selfish to expect that. Still, she wished Claudia stayed the spoiled brat she'd once been. If Claudia had derided her as a fool and laughed, it would've been easier for Louise to feel hostility toward her. It would've triggered her fighting spirit, something like: I'll never lose to someone like you!

Instead, Louise was captivated by those eyes—eyes as blue as the depths of the sea—and the raven hair that bounced with each movement. Her empathetic response spoke to the strength of her character. It was as if, by her very actions, Claudia was showing Louise how a noble lady was supposed to behave.

A perfect person like her suits someone as flawless as him. Louise knew that. She just lacked the courage to accept her own broken heart.

Claudia was as human as anyone else. Like Louise, she was young and immature. Faults could be found in her if one looked hard enough. But seeing the discord between Claudia and her younger half-sister brought Louise no consolation at all. If anything, she was vexed by how kind Claudia was to avoid outwardly rebuking Fermina for her misbehavior.

Each time Louise caught wind of malicious rumors about Claudia, her temper flared, causing heat to build beneath her temples. Since when had the aristocracy's dignity fallen this far? Was it the negative influence of the newly established nobility?

No, she decided. I'm no different from them. She had taken advantage of what Fermina told her to admonish Claudia before. But do I really have any right to criticize her?

Louise had always been proud. She always kept her head up and her shoulders back. But right now, her confidence had deserted her.

"I am Duke Lindsay's eldest daughter, Claudia Lindsay. I swear on my name that every last one of you will pay dearly for threatening Lady Louise and me!"

Why was Claudia so beautiful? The way she stood her ground, dignified and proud, shook Louise to her core. All her fear evaporated, leaving not a trace behind. It would soon be nighttime, but Claudia's visage was so blindingly bright that she shut her eyes and couldn't bring herself to open them again. The way she comported herself displayed an unshakable inner strength, her grace and elegance unmatched. She was the embodiment of perfection.

Next to her, Louise felt small and insignificant. What had she been so proud of? She wasn't the only one putting in effort. Everyone else was too. The scene before her was straight out of a fairy tale, and the very depths of her heart began to freeze over, slowly but surely.

His Highness truly is amazing. Every bit as amazing as Claudia, in fact. They fit together so perfectly it made her dizzy.

When Claudia later ran off after rejecting the prince, she was relieved. Louise felt too immature to occupy the same space as her right now. Her eyes followed Claudia, watching as she faded into the distance.

I wonder if she refused him on my account? Louise was a fellow bridal candidate. If Claudia really was trying to keep things fair between them by doing this, then she was more than fit to be Sylvester's bride.

As the wind blew and the leaves rustled overhead, Louise sensed someone approaching. She and Tristan exchanged some words. All she could do was reflect and admit her mistakes. But then...

"You did nothing wrong, Lady Louise," he told her firmly.

She glanced up. His eyes, orange like the sunset, perfectly conveyed his sincerity. Combined with his fiery red hair, it gave him a flashy appearance; yet somehow, he was always in Sylvester's shadow. There were many who fancied the prince—like Louise—but Tristan had his own share of admirers. He never stood out to her because he always hovered behind the prince, never straying from that position.

I never realized he was the type to speak so frankly. Her shoulders jumped when he thumped his chest. His words were like an ember that melted the ice in the depths of her heart, filling her with warmth. Her whole body felt lighter, bringing a smile back to her face.

"Thank you," she said. "I think the person who needs to repent the most here is His Highness for being so reckless."

Ordinarily, Louise would never criticize Sylvester's actions. It was only after Claudia had already done so and Tristan reassured her that she felt something within her change. Finally, she could look ahead. A light of hope shone through the darkness. It flickered like a flame, rippling through her body like the ocean's waves.

What a warm person.

She recalled Tristan's words. A laugh spilled from her lips, at her own simplemindedness. Louise had thought she lost all her confidence, but with those few words, Tristan lifted her out of the depths of depression she'd been

mired in for some time.	

Chapter 21:

The Villainess Cuts a Path Forward

 $C_{\text{LAUDIA COULDN'T REMEMBER}}$ how she returned home from the academy. She thought the tea would help calm her nerves. On the contrary, all she could do was reflect on the horrible thing she'd done. Unable to scream at the top of her lungs about it, she clutched her head in her hands.

"Lady Claudia, what is the matter?!" Helen demanded worriedly. She had never seen Claudia this shaken up before.

Claudia grabbed Helen's hands. "Helen, please listen."

She couldn't process her emotions by herself anymore. The only person she could turn to was Helen. After all, Helen was like an older sister to her. She launched into an explanation of how irrational and foolish she'd been. By the time she finished, Helen's face pinched, and she put a hand on her forehead.

"So that's what happened... I see. That is very unlike you, Lady Claudia."

Claudia shook her head. "Just tell me honestly that I'm a fool."

"I admit, the way you handled it was uncalled for. It's not my place to say such a thing, I realize, but I feel sorry for His Highness."

"You're right. I trampled on his kindness."

In the same instant that she realized her love for him, she did something grave enough to make him hate her. But there was no going back now. Regret ate at her, but she hadn't wanted to accept his proposal, not even if it was only meant to be part of their act.

"I wanted his heart," she told Helen.

Marriage was a political tool to Sylvester. There were no emotions in that. Perhaps he would grow fond of her if they lived together, but Claudia had seen for herself how poorly a political marriage could turn out. Maybe that was why, even though she knew it was foolish, she wanted him to truly *feel* for her.

Claudia sighed, growing more and more despondent.

Helen knitted her brows. "Um, Lady Claudia, what do you mean when you say you want his heart?"

"I want him to feel real affection for me. To view me not as a duke's daughter but as an individual."

Helen's eyes restlessly darted back and forth as she digested her mistress's answer. When she realized that mulling the matter over would get her nowhere, she rushed to the door. "I must go confirm something with Lord Virgil. I shall return immediately!"

She sped out of the room in a blink of an eye.

Was there really something so important that she needed to leave? Claudia hoped that maybe Helen had come up with an idea for mending her relationship with Sylvester. What Claudia did was a cruel betrayal of a sensitive young man's goodwill, after all. He'd probably only gone through with that part of the act because he thought she would agree to it. If he chastised her for her inability to read the atmosphere, she couldn't really complain.

The more she thought about it, the more she considered everything she could have—should have—done differently. *Now that I think about it, I believe I fell for him a while ago.*

She simply hadn't noticed it. Claudia had run from her feelings, chalking everything up to her body's youthful naivete. But the truth was clear to her: she'd been in love with him for a long time.

I have no idea what to do. Sylvester was her first love.

In her past life, Claudia had had feelings for him, but she couldn't say for certain whether she was drawn to him or the *idea* of him at the time. Whatever the case, she hadn't been as head over heels as she was now, racking her brain over what to do. Her animosity toward Fermina had trumped all else. She kept sighing over and over. All she could do was put her faith in Helen. She should be back soon, hopefully with some kind of answer.

Just as Claudia was about to let out another listless sigh for the umpteenth time, the door swung open. Her head shot up. She assumed it would be Helen,

but...standing there was none other than Sylvester.

It had to be a figment of her imagination. There was no way the prince would be there. Worse yet, far from being cross with her as he rightly should have been, he had a miserable look on his face. She'd never seen him look so young and lost before. If this wasn't an illusion, then what was it?

"I was visiting with your brother to discuss what happened when your maid came in. I couldn't believe what she told me. Nor could I just sit around and wait. I hope you'll forgive me for coming here so suddenly."

He talked. *I didn't know illusions could talk*. Not only was he speaking, but he was also walking toward her. Her hallucination of Sylvester crossed the entire room and took her hand. It wasn't until she felt his warmth on her skin that she realized he was real.

"Did you think that proposal I made you was only political? That it wasn't how I really felt?"

She blinked at him. "Wasn't it...just your way of trying to cheer me up?"

"No. I did want to cheer you up, but I was speaking from the heart about wanting you to be my fiancée."

"That story about there being a precedent for this isn't actually true, is it? I thought it was something my elder brother made up."

"Virgil told you there was a precedent?" Sylvester said. "That part is true. Why do you think my mother came in disguise with the rest of the observation party from the palace?"

Come to think of it, Virgil never said that was made up. Claudia only assumed it was.

Sylvester went on, "My parents never opposed our engagement to begin with, but my mother wanted to at least meet you before I made my proposal to you. She went home pleased that we would be a good match. Neither her nor my father have any objections to us moving forward. I never dreamed that you, of all people, didn't realize how I felt." Still gripping her hands, he knelt before her for a second time.

She glanced down, meeting his golden eyes—the very eyes she had fallen for.

"I love you, Claudia. I couldn't bear it if someone else took you from me. Please, save my fragile heart from that devastation."

Her logical side told her it was impudent to think for even a moment that she could save someone as important as the crown prince, but this wasn't logical. Her vision blurred, tears threatening to fall at any moment. Passion swelled inside her. It was like magma, coursing through her body.

"Is...is that something I can really do?" she asked quietly, voice trembling.

"It's something *only* you can do." Sylvester dropped a chaste kiss on the back of her hand. "I want you. I won't let anyone else hold a place in your heart." His lips traveled next to her fingertips, moving from one finger to the next, offering up all his affection.

Her body burned hotter. "Prince Sylvester..."

"Syl," he corrected her. "And I'll call you Dia. My beloved Dia, please save my poor heart."

Their physical contact was brief. If she searched through her memories, this was child's play compared to every one of her experiences in the matter. But now that she knew what love was, even this little bit was much too stimulating. Her whole body flushed, as if none of the knowledge or skills she'd cultivated as a sex worker meant anything.

"I will save you, Syl, I swear it, so please..." She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence and tell him to release her hand.

Sylvester captured her mouth with his, his grip on her hand unyielding. "I love you, Dia. I wouldn't kiss someone like this if I felt nothing for them." He was chiding her for misinterpreting him this entire time, but her mind was too feverish to digest the meaning.

The door burst open, ruining the moment. The passion evaporated so fast, it was like they'd had a bucket of ice-cold water poured over them.

"No...this can't be. It can't!" Fermina stood in the doorway, breathless. She must have run all the way here.

Sylvester hid Claudia behind him. "Do you want me to cut you down as well?"

Claudia couldn't see his expression from this position, but his voice sent a chill through her. It wasn't any lower than normal, nor did he sound cold at all. No, the issue was that it was utterly devoid of emotion, to the point one might wonder if the speaker was human.

Timidly, she reached for him. "Syl," she said. "I don't want that."

Those thugs appearing in the blind alley were proof of Fermina's involvement. Once Claudia reported this to their father, he would have no choice but to pass judgment on her. Claudia's fingers brushed against his hand.

"If that is how you feel, Dia, I won't harm her." The emotion returned to his voice. "Regardless, she will pay for what she has done." He glanced back at her. There was a warm light in his golden eyes, which brought her immeasurable comfort.

Claudia was furious with Fermina for her actions as well, but this wasn't the time to punish her for them. "Miss Fermina, return to your room," Claudia ordered.

"What, so you can lock me away?!" Fermina snapped at her like a beast baring its fangs. "Your Highness, that woman is deceiving you! I ran away as fast as I could to make it here!"

Ran away from whom? But Claudia didn't have to wonder for long—the head maid, Martha, appeared behind Fermina. Apparently, she had been the one saddled with keeping an eye on her.

"My deepest apologies, Lady Claudia. She shook me off and made a run for it. I will escort her back to her quarters promptly!"

"No! You're nothing but a lowly servant. Don't touch me!" Fermina shrieked. She struggled against Martha's hold, trying to force her way into Claudia's room.

Several bodyguards had accompanied Sylvester here. They turned to the crown prince, awaiting his orders.

"Give her a helping hand," Sylvester said.

One of them stepped forward to carry out the prince's command. Fermina thrust out her hand toward Sylvester, but she was unable to close the distance between them. The bodyguard caught her before she could get any closer. It all happened in the blink of an eye, yet to Claudia, it played out in slow motion. The shape of those innocent doe eyes transformed, her pink-brown hair fluttering in the air. The bodyguard knocked Fermina to the floor, pinning her arms behind her back.

"Y-Your Highness!" she cried desperately. "I haven't done anything wrong!" "If not you, then who?"

"It was a female student—part of the aristocratic faction. I have proof!" Fermina continued struggling, shouting the entire time in hopes of bargaining her way out of this.

"Oh? That is most intriguing. The royal investigator should be arriving soon. I'm sure he'll want to hear that." Sylvester gave his bodyguard a look. "Take her away."

"Wait! This isn't what you think. I didn't—I mean, it wasn't me! It wasn't, it wasn't, it wasn't!" Fermina shook her head erratically as she screamed at the top of her lungs like a madwoman, her expression distorted into something ugly and unrecognizable. Something *pitiful*. She looked worse than Claudia must have when her family condemned her.

"I suppose she's proof of how far one can fall if they let themselves," said Sylvester.

Claudia nodded. "She certainly is. Um, is there really an investigator coming?"

"Yes. We may have instigated this, but she was the one who allowed those thugs onto the academy's grounds. Her and her coconspirator will be duly punished." He then added, "Don't worry, we'll think of the best way to frame the situation before it goes public."

Sylvester took his seat in the unoccupied chair at her little table. Helen, who had also returned, quickly prepared them some tea.

"By the way, I recall telling you how much I was longing for you. Why did you doubt my feelings?" Sylvester asked.

Claudia's shoulders leapt to her ears. "What?! We're revisiting that topic?"

"Dia, who is sitting in front of you right now?"

"Um, you are, Syl."

He smiled. Though he didn't say as much, he apparently wanted to wipe Fermina's existence from her mind. This was probably his show of consideration. Her mind was too much of a jumbled mess to realize it at first.

"I'm not afraid of her anymore."

"Glad to hear it, but remember I told you how fragile I am? Tell me honestly, why did you doubt my feelings?"

It doesn't seem like he'll be satisfied until I give him an answer. Claudia did recall him mentioning that he longed for her. It was as she was trying to leave the tea party where she'd introduced Fermina.

"I thought you were only teasing me."

He frowned. "I was being entirely sincere with you, though."

"Perhaps you were, but you were also constantly amused by my reactions to things as well, right?" He'd sounded so imperious when he'd called her "interesting" before. That impression had had a lasting impact on her. She assumed he was always playing around with his words. "Wait... Don't tell me everything you ever said was genuine!"

"When addressing you, of course I was. Do you mean to tell me none of it got through to you?"

The two stared at once another, frozen. Neither could believe what they were hearing. Claudia was utterly flabbergasted.

Sylvester slapped his hand over his face as the realization dawned on him. "That's right. Now that I think about it, you warned me before that my ways could land me on the other end of an assassin's blade."

"Yes, when we were in the carriage together," Claudia recalled. He'd volunteered to deliver her home in his carriage that day. She warned him because he had a tendency of teasing a little *too* much.

"So that's it. You were cautioning me not to derive such amusement from *you* specifically."

"Which means you were deriving amusement from me from the start, hmm?" Claudia fixed him with a look.

"I was growing tired of how immature all the other noble ladies my age were, then you walked in—the source of all these rumors. Why wouldn't I find you to be a breath of fresh air?"

He didn't deny it. That still left one question.

"When did your feelings change?" she asked.

"To be honest, I'm not sure. I found you entertaining during our first one-onone tea party together. Seeing how easily you left, as if you were wholly unfazed, also made me desire you."

Yes, back then, I was eager to get home as quickly as possible. It had been so uncomfortable that all she wanted was to get away from Sylvester. Apparently, she hadn't hidden that itch very well. It was a fatal mistake for a bridal candidate, but perhaps it had been a good thing since it garnered his interest.

"Before I knew it, my eyes were constantly following you, but you wouldn't even glance my way."

"That's not—" Claudia started to say, but stopped herself. She never realized he'd been that focused on her. Moreover, she couldn't deny that she'd purposefully avoided looking at him.

"The first time I kissed you, all I wanted was to grab your attention, but the second time, I was certain we both felt the same way. Or was I wrong?"

No, Sylvester was exactly right. Claudia had also felt a spark back then. The only reason she hadn't realized it was because she tried to dismiss it as youthful innocence. Guilt gripped her, and she looked away.

"Dia, I love how mature you are. You can always keep up with me in a conversation. But there are times when you seem a little too experienced with the opposite sex. That makes me jealous. Since you agreed to save my heart, won't you put to rest my doubts about that too?"

No sooner had he rattled her than he hit upon the truth. Claudia held her breath. This was why she could never let her guard down with him. He was too perceptive.

"Th-the only man I spend any time with besides you is my elder brother," she said.

"I know. I asked Virgil as well, and he confirmed that you have never had any involvement with men, and you prefer to spend your time with your maid instead."

Claudia nodded quickly. "Precisely. So that should answer your question, shouldn't it?"

"No, that's what makes it all the more suspicious. Where did you learn such coquetry?"

Strange. Up until Fermina interrupted them, the atmosphere around them had been perfectly romantic, but now, Sylvester refused to let up. Claudia could already picture how poorly it would go over if she told him honestly that she had served in a brothel in her past life. The only choice she had was to play it off.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean. What part of my actions came across as coquetry to you?"

"The way you would tug on my sleeve and look up at me with those pleading eyes, for one. You also pressed your chest up against me as well, if you'll recall."

"Oh, that? Even maids employ those sorts of tricks to gain a gentleman's attention."

Claudia was relieved that all his examples were overt. Apparently, none of her other actions had left the same impression. She swore to herself then and there to exercise more caution in the future.

"So you claim to have received this knowledge from a maid, then?"

She nodded. "Don't you also seek advice from others when you want someone to notice you?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I do..." His lips pulled into a flat line. Apparently, he

wasn't entirely convinced.

His intuition was so on point that it didn't just impress her—it sent a chill down her spine.

"I promise you, no man has ever touched me before, nor will any man besides you do so from now on. Family excluded, of course." Claudia reached across the table to take his hands in hers. "I will swear it upon my late mother. Surely you know how serious I must be to say that."

"Of course. After all, it was with her passing that you had such a dramatic change of heart." He paused for a moment, then asked, "Must family really be excluded from that promise?"

"I have faith that you aren't *that* fragile." She gave him a look. *Surely you can't mean to exclude my elder brother too.*

Sylvester averted his gaze. Apparently, he was more possessive than she realized.

The duke solemnly accepted the investigator's report. "Very well," he said. "I will disown Fermina and send her off to a nunnery."

In the end, Fermina was meeting Claudia's original fate from the first timeline. The only difference was that she'd ushered her end much sooner, well before Virgil's graduation party. Lilith's eyes glistened with tears as she listened to her husband's verdict, but she made no protest.

The only reason Fermina wasn't being thrown into prison was the royal family's kind intervention; they couldn't allow a criminal to be linked to Sylvester's future bride. Her life at the nunnery would be miserable enough. Sylvester assured her as much with his trademark smile, so Claudia knew it must be true.

"Please assign extra bodyguards to escort her carriage," Claudia said.

"You're still worried?"

She shook her head. "Not for myself, but for her safety. She could be accosted by bandits on the road."

The bandits who attacked her in her previous life may not have done so at Fermina's behest. There was no way of knowing. Sending extra bodyguards would give her peace of mind that Fermina would safely make it to the nunnery. The last thing Claudia wanted was to feel guilty for something happening to her half-sister.

When Claudia closed her eyes, she was no longer haunted by the image of Fermina's euphoric smile. All she saw was darkness. And when she opened her eyes...

"What's the matter?"

A head of silver hair shone brilliantly in front of her. He was all she could think about.

"I was thinking of Miss Fermina, that's all."

"She left yesterday and yet she's still taking up space in your head?" A wrinkle formed in Sylvester's brow. He always made the same face whenever she mentioned someone else, not even attempting to hide his jealousy. With any other man, Claudia might have found that annoying, but with Sylvester, it pleased her. She knew she'd fallen hard.

"Oh, please don't worry. She's so insignificant to me now that she's on the verge of disappearing from my mind completely."

"Very well, then. That said, how much longer are we going to have to continue meeting in secret? We're engaged already."

"Yes," said Claudia, "but as far as everyone else knows, the other bridal candidates are still in the running."

Sylvester had reserved the entire theater for them today and transformed the stage into a café. Claudia sipped her tea and gazed out at the empty seats. The space was so unimaginably vast. She was too daunted to really appreciate the taste of her drink.

I wonder exactly how much money he's spending on the pretext of "observing the city and its people."

Claudia had enjoyed a relatively luxurious life as a sex worker, so she didn't

have the modest sensibilities of a commoner, but she still knew how to balance an account. She swore to herself that she would contact the theater later to make sure every member—not just the owner—was properly compensated for the work they were missing today.

"I should think you would be pleased since we're allowed to skip the engagement period."

"Yes," Sylvester agreed. "At least we'll be able to marry as soon as we graduate."

Per precedent, even when an engagement was agreed upon in secret, the couple still observed tradition and waited the extra year after graduation before marrying. It was only by Sylvester's desperate wish that they had been absolved of the extra year. Apparently, they were already maneuvering behind the scenes to placate the rest of the aristocracy so no one would be too up in arms about this breach of custom.

"Only two more years. I can only hope nothing else happens in the meantime," said Claudia.

"Don't jinx it. The evidence Lady Fermina provided has been enough to put the aristocratic faction in their place for now. I'm sure we'll be fine."

Fermina's accomplice, as it happened, was indeed a female student of the aristocratic faction. When Fermina claimed she had proof of this girl's involvement, she'd been telling the truth. Unfortunately for her, that girl also had evidence of Fermina's involvement. The two betrayed each other, and the investigation wrapped up surprisingly fast.

A pitiful conclusion, but deserved, Claudia thought. That student was one of my followers in my previous lifetime.

In fact, she was the same person who'd coaxed Claudia into sending thugs after Fermina. Back then, she colluded with Fermina to do Claudia in. This time, they had backstabbed one another.

Past Claudia held no interest in her lackeys. All she knew about the girl was that she was part of the aristocratic faction. She hadn't even known her name. That was why she'd never realized who the accomplice was this time. Thinking

back, it was clearly that girl who incited her own heinous acts against Fermina.

That's no excuse, of course. I was the one who made the final decision. Claudia shook her head. Still, it seems the rift between the royal and aristocratic factions runs deeper than I realized.

The student was motivated by her hatred of the royal faction. She resented the old blood. To her, they enjoyed lavish lives that were handed down generation after generation. They put no effort in, had no skill in management or business. It filled her with rage.

On the surface, that had nothing to do with Claudia, but the Lindsays were a part of the royal faction and enjoyed strong connections throughout the aristocracy. The girl must've thought it unfair that Claudia enjoyed such a prestigious position simply by being born into the right family. She approached Fermina in hopes of forcing the Lindsays out of their neutrality and firmly into the aristocratic faction.

The one saving grace for the academy was that the actual perpetrators—including the person responsible for forging Claudia's signature and impersonating her—were not of the student body. All those involved in such grievous crimes were harshly punished.

"It's a relief that I didn't ruin Lady Louise's impression of me," said Claudia.

It was bad enough that Claudia had accidentally drawn the poor girl into that whole mess, let alone that she turned down the crown prince in front of her. Louise was a trueborn aristocrat and part of the royal faction. She and her family prized tradition above all else. Claudia racked her brain for some way to excuse her actions to Louise, certain that it must've seemed intolerable to her.

Louise had interpreted the situation differently. She assumed Claudia had rejected the prince out of concern for her and to maintain the fairness of the bridal selection process. When Claudia heard that, she nearly swooned. She was tempted to take Louise as her bride.

I may have promised I wouldn't touch any other men, but I said nothing about women, right?

Since learning that Sylvester returned her affections, she'd found herself with

a surplus of lust. Tempting though it was, she wouldn't actually channel it. Sylvester would be cross with her if he found out. In fact, she could already feel his gaze boring into her right now.

"You and Lady Louise seem awfully close lately."

Claudia plastered a smile on her face. "That's because she's a formidable rival."

"It seems more to me as though—"

"You know, Syl," she cut in, sensing something dangerous in his gaze, "something occurred to me."

Curiosity piqued, Sylvester reluctantly said, "What's that?"

"I once thought that if Miss Fermina could be considered a villainess, then I wanted to surpass her as the greatest villainess of all."

Claudia had assumed that was the only way to achieve revenge. But how did one define evil, anyway? And what about Fermina made her evil? She hadn't given that much thought at first.

"There is no need for you to sink to the same level," Sylvester told her.

"Yes, you're right. I finally realized that."

The prince arrived at that conclusion so easily. Claudia hadn't found that answer until she confronted Fermina and her accomplice's hired thugs. She wasn't sure if that was a result of his keen intellect or the objectivity of a third-party perspective. Whatever the case, it had taken her significantly more time.

"Your way of thinking has changed, then," the prince surmised.

She nodded. "Yes. I still have my flaws, but I will not sink to her level."

Seeing the unscrupulousness of Fermina's actions taught Claudia something: Fermina had no awareness that what she was doing was evil. Claudia hadn't either, in her former lifetime. That lack of self-awareness kept one from realizing how foolhardy they were, and it was impossible for a person to address a problem if they didn't know it existed.

If I really want to be the bigger villainess, I cannot let myself succumb like she

did.

It was important for Claudia to understand the nature of evil and to master it herself. After considering long and hard what she should do, she discovered an answer that took her back to her roots.

"That's why," she went on, "I shall aim to be the perfect noble lady, as my mother always wanted."

"You're already a role model for all other noble ladies. You still wish to aim higher?"

Claudia grinned. "One should aim for the heavens, no?"

"Well, I can't really argue with that."

"I'm pleased to hear that you agree. I'll take that as a promise."

Sylvester furrowed his brows in suspicion. She could easily imagine his brain working at top speed to suss out the meaning behind her words.

"Surely you must also know how much high society treasures a woman's chastity, right?" Claudia said.

Now that he knew where she was going with this, the edge of his lip twitched. "You don't mean to tell me to hold off on consummating our relationship until marriage, do you?"

"Know that it pains me every bit as much as it does you." Claudia wanted nothing more than to be physical with the man she loved, but she'd made her decision. She was going to be disciplined, to learn what was correct and proper, and thereby become wiser as to what was truly evil. In so doing, she would arm herself against any other opponents like Fermina.

It'll mean asking Syl to be patient for a while, but I don't want anyone to claim victory over me. There were people she wanted to protect—people she loved. Those feelings only grew stronger as his golden eyes, more beautiful than any gems in the world, gazed back at her. No one else had been exposed to as much envy and enmity as Sylvester, yet he gave no outward indication of all he endured.

The two were drinking tea on a stage in a theater, but they weren't actors.

They were living, breathing human beings. And I'll need to surpass all other villainesses if I'm going to spend my life with you. She was going to rise to the next level.

Claudia knew she could never be a saint. I don't have the power to correct every wrong in an honest and fair way.

She was only a single person among countless others. She couldn't afford to be a paragon of righteousness. Claudia would go to any lengths to achieve her goals and protect both herself and the people she cared for. She didn't care if people called her a villainess for it.

Still, I'll never let myself sink into depravity the way Fermina did. She would understand evil and become someone capable of correcting it. Her experience as an irrational fool had helped widen her perspective in this life.

"Dia, you know, there are times when men like bad girls." Sylvester reached forward, cupping his hand over hers.

Claudia had no intention of denying him chaste touches like this.

"I'm well aware of that. You need only wait two more years." She flashed him a smile, one so dignified and elegant that it would send she-devils like Fermina running for the hills, while at the same time belying the perfect villainess beneath who was aiming to be the most malevolent of all.

Chapter 22: The Future That Lies Ahead

Winter Arrived, and soon it was a new year. Auspicious news arrived in Harland from the southern kingdom of Bali: the birth of the king's first son. This sent waves throughout the neighboring nations.

"That means the king's younger brother has been demoted to second in line for the throne," Sylvester remarked, his thoughts wandering to the man in question, who was the same age as him. He enjoyed a similar position as Sylvester, being first in line until the king's son was born. "What will you do now, Raul?"

He pictured the man in his mind: the dark, earthy skin and the unwaveringly cheerful smile. Sylvester couldn't imagine him ever lowering his gaze in deference. It was an unpleasant thought.

Sylvester drew his brows. "I doubt we'll be able to sit idly by for this."

The letter included more news: starting this spring, Raul would be an exchange student at Harland's academy. It was a cover story; in truth, they were ousting him from his own homeland.

Chapter 23: The Time Before Time Rewound

Hetraveled through the network of back alleys in the high-end district before finally arriving at an area known as the night district. Pubs lined the street as he continued onward. Women in revealing outfits attempted to flag him and any other passersby down, hoping to sell their services. He ignored them and kept walking. It was right as the clamor of the city began to grow quiet that he spotted a brothel. This was his destination.

The man showed his letter of introduction to the doorman, who allowed him through. Inside, the sparkling chandelier nearly blinded him. He had to squint for a moment. It was late into the night, but with this brightness, it might as well have been midday in here.

"Welcome to our humble establishment. Shall I have a room prepared for you?" The person who greeted him was the brothel's owner. Apparently, the doorman had sent word along.

"It might sour her mood if she heard I visited someone else, and I would hate that," the man said.

The owner laughed. "Dee's not normally that small-minded, but with a man of your caliber, perhaps she would be." He guided the man to the top floor of the building. This entire upper level was reserved for a single sex worker. "I informed her that you would be coming. Please enjoy your time together."

After motioning for the bodyguard that had been silently following him to stand by, the manager excused himself. His parting words were: "Opening the door yourself is part of the experience."

The man stared quizzically after the proprietor before turning back around and twisting the knob himself. The sight that greeted him stole his breath away. It wasn't the room that had so stunned him but the woman inside who turned his way.

"You are a first-time customer, I see." Her voice was pleasant, neither too high nor too low.

The interior of the room was serene. In contrast to the gaudy entrance hall, this seemed like it belonged in a different building entirely.

As for the woman herself, he could see why she sat at the top rank in the brothel. Raven-black locks fell in gentle waves around her shoulders, shrouded by a veil. The dark color of her hair stood in stark contrast to her porcelain skin. The woman looked like a goddess of the night, captured on canvas by a genius painter. Her dark dress clung tightly to her curves. It was designed to draw a man's gaze to her exposed skin.

The man was captivated. It was a while before he realized he'd been staring.

Now I get it. So this is what he meant by "part of the experience."



Opening the door gave them a natural first encounter. There was something profound about opening the door himself rather than letting someone else do it for him. That could be taken as an obscene metaphor for something, but he would ignore that.

"Please, come on in."

Beckoned by her words, the man finally took his first step inside. He was restless; a sweet scent tickled his nose and stirred his heart. Careful not to let his voice waver as he spoke, he took out a bundle filled with the local currency and said, "Take this and let everyone think I spent the night here with you."

As soon as he said his piece, he plopped himself on a couch. He kept his back turned to her. He was afraid of her reaction. After all, he'd inadvertently said he had no need of her actual services. She'll probably refuse me the next time I come.

A diplomat from his homeland—one with whom he'd long been acquainted—had recommended her, assuring the man that he could trust her. She was more tight-lipped than the rest of her fellow sex workers and capable of keeping secrets. The rumors that she was formerly a duke's daughter captivated his interest too, so he came on a whim. The king had relieved him of his royal status. He was no longer part of the royal family. That made him feel a sort of kinship with her.

The man hoped she would be pleased to have a customer who required nothing of her, but he also risked ruining her pride as a sex worker—or perhaps even as a woman. She struck him as someone who was proud. He doubted she would let an affront like this slide.

For some reason, he felt compelled to meet her. It was an unusual urge that he didn't often experience. That didn't mean he had enough confidence to share a physical relationship with her, though.

I hope she'll allow me to come here again.

All she had to do was think of him as easy money. He was fine with that, if it meant he could visit her again. Meanwhile, Claudia stared blankly at the man who had his back to her. He was curled up and fast asleep.

That was how Claudia and Raul first met.

Chapter 24:

The Battle Between the Villainess and the Crown Prince

ONCE THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE of the school festival ended, Claudia returned to her ordinary, peaceful life. Nearly four months passed in that manner.

One morning, she slid her legs off the bed. The floor chilled her bare feet, crawled up her spine, and seeped into the rest of her body. She shivered. She was eager to dive back into bed, but Helen kindly draped a robe over her shoulders. She steeled herself and ignored how a part of her longed to tumble back into those warm sheets.

"It's frigid," she said.

"Shall I add more firewood?"

Claudia glanced at the fireplace. Flames already danced within. "No, it's all right. The floor was just a little chilly."

The temperature would bother her less once she got up and moving, largely because Helen had already heated the room for her.

"It seems the cold has come in earlier this year," Helen observed.

Claudia nodded in agreement. "The leaves haven't all fallen yet, but it's freezing."

Ordinarily, the real cold didn't settle in until the northern winds blew in and the trees turned bare.

"I suppose the chocolate will settle quickly with these temperatures..."

"So, you plan on making chocolate after all!" Helen's face lit up. Her countenance had been dreary up until a moment ago, thanks to winter's arrival.

There was a celebration called Confetti that took place as autumn gave way to winter. It originated from a custom of passing out sweets during celebrations. With time, its modern form became women offering handmade sweets to men. Chocolate was the preferred item among the aristocracy.

If I recall correctly, the name originates from the scraps of colored paper they throw into the air during stage performances.

Perhaps the name was meant to represent how festive the event was.

As one of the continent's agricultural powerhouses, the Harland Kingdom possessed vast swathes of farmland. Winter was a harsh season for farmers who relied on their stockpiles, as they had to let their lands lie fallow. Claudia rather thought Confetti was meant to be a break from all that dreariness. Helen's sudden change of mood seemed as good an indication as any.

"There are many women who fall in love with baking after taking part in Confetti," Helen told her.

"I can see that. We have no reason to visit the kitchens otherwise."

The kitchen was considered dangerous due the usage of fires and sharp knives. Entry was typically restricted for anyone other than the cooks. Confetti was the one time of year a young lady was permitted to enter.

"When will you be making your chocolates, my lady?" Helen asked.

"Whenever is most convenient for the kitchen staff," she said. "After all, I'll do little more than watch as they do all the work."

"You won't pour the chocolate into the molds?"

"Oh, well, I think I can do that part, at least."

This was how most noble ladies "made" their sweets. So as not to screw up, they only participated in the simpler portions of the process. The intensive labor was left up to the cooks. During their brothel days, Claudia and Helen would purchase chocolates from a chocolatier and switch out the wrapping paper to make the sweets look more personal.

Being able to take part in Confetti was something of a status symbol. Making chocolate took more time than cookies or other flour-based sweets, which also merited higher price tags. The only people who could afford to pour their chocolates by hand were those who employed cooks. For noble ladies, participation was a demonstration of wealth.

Giving cookies is more typical of common folk, though.

Claudia's family had been in mourning this time last year, so they abstained from participating back then.

This year, I want to make enough to give to Syl, Elder Brother, Helen, and Lady Louise as well.

While the event was generally meant to give women an opportunity to present men with chocolates, it wasn't uncommon to present them to friends as well. In fact, people often exchanged chocolates at tea parties.

Claudia grew restless as she pondered designs for the chocolate and their wrapping paper. Who could blame her for being excited? This was her first Confetti with a romantic partner.

"I wonder if Syl will be free?"

"It's good you said that. A letter from the prince just arrived for you today," said Helen. While she set about grooming Claudia's hair, Claudia eagerly opened the letter and started reading through it.

This is awfully convenient timing, she thought. The letter mainly consisted of Sylvester giving her a schedule of his observations—in other words, their dates. He also mentioned he could adjust if needed. Perfect. She wanted to deliver chocolates to him anyway.

Confetti had no set date. It lasted until the seasons changed, so there was still plenty of time. She was just starting her preparations earlier.

Still, what an odd coincidence that they were just discussing the topic and then a letter containing Sylvester's schedule arrived, as though it had all been planned. Claudia shuddered at the thought.

"This time it's an art gallery, hmm?"

For security reasons, Sylvester always determined where their dates took place. The gallery was off-limits to the public for the day due to the prince's reservation, so Claudia entered from the employee entrance. She had the chocolate that she'd prepared for him, carefully tucked away in a box and wrapped with fancy paper.

One of Sylvester's bodyguards guided her through the building.

"Such a luxurious venue, just like every time before." Awestruck, Claudia sighed as she reached her seat. She'd dreamt of enjoying a cup of tea while admiring works of art.

I never imagined Prince Sylvester would make that wish come true so easily, though.

Her father had an impressive number of paintings hanging in the halls of their estate, but even they couldn't compete with the immense diversity of works on display at the gallery. There was an enormous mural in the middle of the building's main hall depicting the numerous miracles the capricious gods created. There normally wasn't anything in front of this centerpiece as that would block the flow of foot traffic.

Of course not. This is too large for anyone to sit in front of it and admire it.

The mural was three or even four times Claudia's height. Its length was more difficult to measure.

Claudia continued gawking at the mural as she plopped down on the sofa before it, when Sylvester's silver hair appeared in her periphery.

"Good afternoon," she said. "I'm impressed the gallery's curator gave you permission to rent this place out for the day."

"A good afternoon to you as well. I did everything in my power to win him over. Of course, this mural pales when compared to you...or so I'd like to say, but it's a rather impressive work of art. Hard not to look."

Although he'd gone out of his way to prepare the venue for her, it wasn't exactly what the prince intended. The sheer, colossal size of the mural outweighed the beauty of the scenery within, at least from this close up.

"It definitely leaves an impression," she admitted.

"I thought it would be more interesting to sit up close where we could see the exact brush strokes."

That made sense. One couldn't normally get close enough to a painting to notice such minute details. This was a rare opportunity. And although the mural

was enormous, it was obvious that the painter paid careful attention to every fine detail.

"It's impossible to view its entirety from here, but it has its own charm," Claudia said.

Maybe Sylvester made a bad call at first, but the more she grew accustomed to their seating arrangement, the more she saw the positive in it.

"If it pleases you, Dia, then nothing makes me happier."

His relief was palpable. She smiled. Who wouldn't be overjoyed to have someone like him go out of his way for their sake? Claudia stared into his golden eyes, warmth swelling in her chest. The atmosphere around them turned romantic. She was too captivated to tear her gaze away. This was the one thing that could distract her from the mural that otherwise dominated their view.

The tip of his nose brushed against hers. Claudia closed her eyes. Tempted as she was to savor the tingling that came from their tips touching, she pulled away to limit their physical contact.

"Dia..." His strained voice tugged on her heartstrings.

I can't. I already decided I would protect my chastity.

Somehow, Claudia managed to turn her face away and resist her body's urges. That didn't last long. Sylvester wrapped his arm around her waist. Feverish heat flooded her system.

"I love you, Dia." His hot breath caressed the shell of her ear. She had no choice but to surrender. Her eyes grew dewy. Summoning the last of her willpower, she glared at him.

Sylvester was the first to break away. He collapsed against the other side of the sofa, clutching the armrest as he desperately battled his impulses. "Can't I have my way with you yet? Surely I can."

"It's disquieting how you answered your own question. Stop. The answer is no, you can't."

They were already straddling the line by kissing. In fact, if she was honest with

herself, they were completely crossing it. Sylvester wasn't the only one suffering. Claudia lifted her hand, intending to stroke his back to comfort him, but he stopped her.

"Please don't touch me right now. I mean it."

She nodded. "All right, I understand."

Sylvester drew a deep breath. She pretended not to notice, reaching instead for her tea.

He's incredible, the way he can control his own sexual desire like that.

Claudia was impressed with his force of will, which he'd demonstrated before by holding back when they were in the carriage. She'd heard from customers during her brothel days that adolescent men had difficulty controlling and subduing their physiological responses. That was a sweeping generalization, granted; all men were different. But it did seem that Sylvester was in anguish.

Women don't have the same trouble when aroused. We don't openly show it. Women's skin might heat and color, but there was nothing particularly unpleasant or painful about that.

To distract herself, Claudia turned back to the mural. She had come to this art gallery many times, so she'd seen it before. Among all the miracles depicted, there weren't any that resembled her situation of time reversing.

There's no way to deny such a miracle exists, though. I am living proof.

And if it wasn't the work of the gods, then who?

I wonder if I should leave some kind of record of what I've been through. Claudia would have to leave out certain details, of course. While she mused this, Sylvester finally recovered.

"My apologies for the wait," he said.

"Don't mention it. More importantly, would you do me the favor of accepting this?" She held out a box decorated with golden and silver ribbons.

Sylvester smiled. "Absolutely."

Claudia had given him a gift like this before, during their first tea party

together when they met one-on-one. Mostly one-on-one, anyway. The difference between now and then was that, at that time, Tristan had taken the package from her and delivered it into Sylvester's hands. There was something more meaningful about being able to give it to him directly.

Perhaps he'd sent that letter hoping it might coax me into giving him chocolates. The timing had unnerved her at first, since it seemed more than coincidental, but it was more likely that Sylvester was simply excited to receive a gift from her. That makes sense. He has feelings for me, and he must be as aware of Confetti as anyone else. Still, she figured he didn't want to seem like he was begging her for them.

The more she imagined how Sylvester must have felt while penning her that letter, the more it warmed her heart.

"Do you mind if I open it?" Sylvester asked.

"Please, be my guest."

His long, pale fingers neatly unfastened the bows. Captivated, Claudia watched him. When Sylvester lifted the lid, the ribbons fell fluttering across his lap. A sweet but mellow fragrance wafted through the air. There were six bite-sized pieces of dark and milk chocolate nestled inside, split in half and arranged so that they alternated. They sat perfectly unmoved where she placed them before wrapping the box. Claudia had reduced the sweetness of the milk chocolate to better suit Sylvester's tastes. They were all shaped as half-spheres and probably seemed extraordinarily simple at first glance, but Claudia paid special attention so that the ones she selected had an extremely smooth and sleek surface. She'd conducted one strict selection process after the next to narrow it down to these six. She wouldn't allow any that had even the slightest mark or bubble.

Claudia sighed a breath of relief, seeing they were all still intact after transporting them.

"Our head chef guarantees the quality of the chocolate is top-notch," she assured him. "The shape itself may not be entirely perfect, though, since I was the one who poured the chocolate into the molds..." Claudia only said that to inform him that she had partaken in the process of their creation; after all, she

spent a painstaking amount of time to ensure they were perfect.

"So you were involved in making them too. It's a shame I can't enjoy them right now."

Due to his status, Sylvester required a food taster to sample everything before he could eat. He'd become so accustomed to this that he wouldn't normally comment on it, but this time, he knew perfectly well that the chocolates weren't poisoned. It vexed him to let someone else sample something she'd made for him first.

"Oh? In that case, allow me to test it for you."

Cooks and the like weren't ordinarily permitted to taste-test their own creations, but technically, pouring the chocolate into the molds didn't distinguish Claudia as the maker. So, she pinched one of the bite-sized morsels between her fingers and popped it into her mouth. To be honest, she wasn't too keen on having someone else sample these chocolates for the prince either.

Sylvester's jaw dropped. He stared at her.

"It will melt if you don't take it," she warned as she held out the rest of the chocolate for him.

"R-right." He was so caught off guard that he was still dumbstruck as he took the proffered morsel into his mouth.

Claudia realized belatedly what a mistake she'd made. That's right, one would normally have a plate and cut off a small portion for testing, not take a bite from the piece directly.

If Martha were here, she would've wailed in despair at how ill-behaved and discourteous Claudia had been.

This was how she had done things as a sex worker, so it came to her naturally. It was common practice to feed things to clients. Though, admittedly, there were some who preferred to keep our presents as keepsakes.

Having recognized her faux pas, Claudia didn't think it wise to lick the melted bit of chocolate from her fingers. She pulled out a handkerchief with her free hand, but before she could wipe it herself, Sylvester seized her wrist.

"Huh?" Claudia blurted in surprise.

Something wet and moist enveloped her fingertips. It took a moment for her to register that it was his mouth.

"S-Syl?!"

"It would be a shame to waste such delicious chocolate." He stuck out his tongue and drew it mischievously across his lips. His golden eyes flashed with heat. They looked as sweet as candy in the light, framed by long silver eyelashes. Everything about his expression was so seductive, her brain threatened to malfunction. His beauty was richer than the chocolates she'd given him. Claudia's head spun.

The sex worker still inside of her raised the white flag of surrender. *That's it. I've lost.* As for what she'd lost, she couldn't clearly explain.

Sylvester kept his grip on her wrist as he lifted himself off the sofa. "Dia," he said, his low voice sending a chill down her spine. Her vision went dark.

Claudia didn't remember what they discussed after that. All she knew was that she was so out of it by the time she got home that she worried Helen sick.

That was foul play, she thought.

That image and sensation of him licking chocolate off her fingers was permanently etched into her mind. Each time she recalled the moment, she swooned.

Chapter 25:

The Villainess's Gift to Her Lady Maid

To prepare chocolates for Confetti, Claudia made her way to the kitchen with Helen in tow. It was no exaggeration that they kept the fires going constantly there, making it easy to forget that it was already winter. When preparations were fully underway and cooks were scurrying to and fro, they found themselves sweating despite the season. Claudia spotted condensation on the windows out of the corner of her eye, but she ignored that minor detail in favor of addressing the nervous house chef.

"I'll be counting on your expertise today."

"Of course. If you require anything, you need only say the word." He bowed his head low. The rest of the cooks standing behind him followed his example.

Tension hung thick in the air. They were on pins and needles, worried that any misstep might be interpreted as disrespect.

I suppose that's only natural.

As the duke's daughter, she didn't have many opportunities to interact with the staff—not even with the head chef. The butler normally acted as an intermediary for her. For that very reason, she had decided to leave most of the directing to Helen.

"As you've already been informed," Claudia said to the head chef, "I would like to entrust you with the chocolate-making process. But I'm curious about it, if you wouldn't mind offering an explanation for me."

All Claudia knew about making chocolate was that it took a lot of time.

When I exchanged chocolate with others in the past, Mother always saw to its preparation for me.

In fact, the more she considered the matter, it occurred to her that this was the first time she had ever set foot in the kitchen. It was little wonder why the cooks were so nervous. The only person acquainted with all parties present was Helen. Still, thanks to her telling the chef ahead of time about what questions Claudia wanted answering, he was able to give a simple and straightforward explanation.

"I'm impressed you prepared the ingredients and separated them out so you could illustrate every step," she said.

The chef nodded. "I thought this would make it easier for you to understand." "Oh, it most certainly did. Thank you."

The chef had separated the cacao beans into small bowls to represent each step of the process, from bean selection to the roasting, peeling, and mashing. This served as the perfect illustration for how chocolate was made. Seeing how many of the bowls there were and hearing how long each step took gave Claudia a greater appreciation for how much of a time investment this was.

It looks simple at a glance, but hearing the explanations makes my head spin.

The need to control the temperature on top of everything else made it clear an expert had to be on hand. No amateur could handle this all by themselves.

The cooks and chef had already prepared the main chocolate she would be using. It was just waiting for her to pour into the molds.

"This whole process must have been so difficult and time-consuming for all you," said Claudia. "Thank you again for taking the time to do this for me."

"Your words bring us more honor than we deserve. We are already privileged enough to be able to work in the duke's household, so please don't think you need to go out of your way to thank us. As you've requested, we've already prepared all the chocolates. Would you like to sample them?"

Chocolate was ordinarily split into two basic categories: milk chocolate and dark chocolate. For the milk chocolate, the cooks prepared two separate batches. One was sweet, the other less so. The latter was a better gift for those who weren't fond of anything *too* saccharine.

"Yes, if you don't mind." She accepted the proffered spoon and poured the melted chocolate onto her tongue. In its liquid state, it had a different consistency than she was accustomed to. Her face flushed. The aroma in the air

was richer than hot cocoa, and the taste that spread through her mouth was like happiness in edible form.

Claudia had appreciated the sweet fragrance from the moment she walked into the kitchen, but it was much more concentrated now. The flavor was pure perfection. She would expect no less from their chef and cooks, but she knew that even the most high-quality cacao beans could be wasted if not processed correctly.

"Thank you. The consistency is on point. You're all so incredibly talented!" She meant those words from the very bottom of her heart.

The chef stared at her for a moment, dumbstruck. When he finally processed her praise for him, he dropped his head and let out a strangled sob.

"Please don't overreact," Claudia said with a small giggle. But when she looked around at the rest of the cooks, their eyes were shimmering too.

Helen leaned over and said, "My lady, your acknowledgment means the world to them."

Flipping through her memories, Claudia realized she never directly offered them compliments before. "How silly of me. I've always been impressed by the deliciousness of our meals, but I never relayed that to any of you." Through the years, she'd grown so accustomed to how masterful their cooking was that she'd never thought to appreciate it like she should. "Allow me to thank you all for everything you've done all these years. Our house takes great pride in your skill."

This was a bit of a digression from the original subject of chocolate, but Claudia was pleased she could convey her gratitude directly to all of them. By the time the cooks regained their composure, the tension had disappeared, leaving a much more pleasant atmosphere in the room.

Oh? Is that...? Claudia spotted a tuft of black hair poking out from the hallway leading into the kitchen.

"Lady Claudia?" said Helen.

She placed her index finger against her lips and said, "Shh."

Tiptoeing, Claudia made her way closer to the wall. As soon as she was sure the presence in the corridor hadn't disappeared, she thrust her head out to surprise him.

"Elder Brother, spying like this is rather unbecoming of you!"

"No, I didn't—I mean—it's not what you think!" His voice hitched. Virgil obviously didn't expect to get caught.

"What part, hmm?" Claudia had definitely caught him in the act of spying. He'd barely peeked his head around the corner to get a glimpse at them.

Virgil fidgeted under the power of her gaze, blurting, "I smelled something sweet and followed it here."

"Let's say I believe you, then."

Their mansion was so vast that one needed to be close to the kitchen in the first place to get a whiff of the chocolatey aroma. Virgil's normal route never allowed him to skirt the kitchen, which laid his lie bare. I bet a little bird informed him I'd be here making chocolate today.

"Were you worried I wouldn't make enough for you?" Claudia asked.

His shoulders jumped. "N-no, I wouldn't say that...but you're mainly making them for Syl, right?"

"I won't deny it."

It was the truth, but she planned on using the same chocolate for everyone, so it didn't make much of a difference.

"I'm still in the process, so if you would kindly..." Her voice trailed off as an idea hit her. "Oh, that's it!" Claudia clapped her hands together.

Virgil quirked a brow at her.

"Elder Brother, would you be so kind as to offer some praise to our cooks? I should think you rarely have an opportunity to meet with them, right?"

Their mother's teachings were still deeply ingrained in Virgil. He remained aloof with their servants. At Claudia's insistence, Virgil readily accepted, likely because he felt guilty for peeping as she worked. The cooks were in high spirits.

Not only had the duke's daughter praised them, but his heir had come to offer similar sentiments as well. Virgil looked quite pleased at their delighted reactions.

As much as she hated to put a damper on the mood, Claudia told her brother, "Since you peeked before I was finished, you'll be receiving your chocolates last, after everyone else."

"Wha-?!"

Claudia hadn't reprimanded him for the indecency of his behavior, but she still wanted to make it clear that she didn't appreciate what he had done.

Virgil left the kitchen with his shoulders slumped and his back hunched forward, utterly dejected.

"With that out of the way, why don't we begin the molding process?" said Claudia. She requested the chef provide them with extra molds for Helen.

Helen furrowed her brows. "Pardon me, my lady, but what's this about?"

"I'd feel awkward molding the chocolate all by myself while everyone else watches. Please join me." She went on, "You can take all the chocolates you make and keep them."

Helen's eyes widened. "Are you certain?"

"Positively. You're welcome to send them to someone if you like. Oh, but if you plan on sending any to a man, you must tell me, okay?"

The way Claudia's teasing brought scowls to the faces of the male cooks was telling; Helen was popular.

Since Father has vetted all our staff, I would assume no one unscrupulous works here, at least.

Nonetheless, she would need to do a thorough investigation on whomever Helen decided to send chocolates to.

Helen let out a strangled laugh and shook her head. "The only man I'll be sending chocolates to is my father. Though I will say that even when our family still had its noble status, we never received any chocolate from a duke or his family." She bowed her head. "I just wonder whether a mere maid deserves to

have something like this."

"Of course you do," Claudia insisted. "I planned on distributing any leftovers to the rest of the staff anyway."

In fact, she'd purposefully requested enough be prepared for precisely that purpose.

Helen's resistance to the idea faltered. She smiled. "It brings me such joy being able to make chocolates with you, my lady!"

"I feel the same. This is my first time making chocolates with someone, after all."

Granted, all they were doing was pouring the completed mixture into molds, but Claudia enjoyed any time spent with Helen. The cooks would later whisper about how close the two looked working together in the kitchen, as if they were true sisters.

Once they finished, next came the meticulous process of selecting the finest hardened chocolates of the bunch and placing them in palm-sized boxes. Wrapping the boxes was the final step. Claudia brought out an assortment of ribbons, intent on doing this with Helen as well.

"Lady Claudia, I only require enough to give to my parents," Helen said. "There's no need to wrap them."

Claudia shook her head, unwilling to acquiesce. "Oh, Helen, haven't you realized yet? I want to do the entire process together. If you care about inconveniencing me, spare a thought for my feelings, please." She hunched her shoulders and glared for added effect.

Tears welled in Helen's eyes. Claudia suspected she was still under the illusion that Claudia was only being nice.

"It's lonely doing all this by myself, as I told you when molding the chocolate," Claudia explained. "It doesn't matter if people are watching. It's not the same."

She still remembered their time together at the brothel. While the other girls would offer store-bought chocolates as they were, Claudia and Helen would

always diligently remove them from their original packaging and rewrap them. No matter how grueling a task was, nothing was insurmountable if she had companions to help see her through. That was a lesson she had lived through, which was also why she refused to back down.

"So, as I said, this is my own selfishness asking you to participate. Understand?"

"Yes," Helen said finally. "I apologize for not realizing sooner."

"Good." She arrogantly lifted her chin in the air, and they both soon dissolved into laughter together.

After lining up all the ribbons on the table, Claudia began contemplating the best way to tie them. "I wonder if a wavy ribbon would suit Syl," she murmured.

"I think so. A curled one would be splendid as well, but I think it would look a bit too cutesy for a man his age."

Claudia tried testing that theory by curling the ribbon and holding it up to his box, but as Helen rightly assessed, it didn't suit him at all. It's good to be able to discuss these sorts of things together.

That said, she would have to prepare Helen's in secret so that she didn't notice.

"I didn't expect you would make enough for other noble ladies besides Lady Louise," Helen commented.

"I've been invited to several tea parties." It was customary to offer chocolates to the tea party's host during this season. Similarly, the host would include a selection of chocolates among the sweets they provided their guests.

"I'll be preparing some extra just in case. You should do the same, Helen."

"I should?" She tilted her head. As far as Helen was concerned, her parents were the only people she needed to send any to.

Claudia shrugged. "I simply have a feeling you should," she said vaguely.

As the excitement for Confetti heated up across the capital, her prediction came true.

After their evening workout one night, Helen set about pouring them some tea while Claudia reached for the presents that had been delivered. She was sifting the ones for her from the ones that were meant for Helen.

"Here you are, Helen. These are yours."

Helen's former friends had sent them. There was a time when they lost contact with her since they had no idea where she'd gone, but Confetti provided them an opportunity to reunite. The only issue was the aristocracy could only offer charity to commoners and nothing else. Helen's friends had to mask their gifts by addressing them to Claudia. Or rather, as the truth of it was, Claudia made the proposal after one of them inquired after Helen at a tea party. Claudia received daily gifts from some people as a symbol of friendship. It wouldn't be all that unusual if she were hardly acquainted with one of the senders.

"Thank you," Helen said. "And my apologies for making you do this."

"I'm delighted to be of service. I was right to recommend you prepare some extras, wasn't I?"

It would be difficult for Helen to return the favor by sending chocolates to them, but no one would bat an eyelash if Claudia did it for her.

"Still, I feel terrible about putting you out like this."

Claudia sniffed at that. "Don't be silly. Which of us is doing the hard work here?"

If Claudia sent the chocolates by regular mail, it would invite rumors about her relationship with the recipient. No one would think anything of her receiving them, but it was a different story if she were the one sending something. She was a duke's daughter, after all. She had to consider her status and the repercussions of her actions. Thus, when returning those gifts, she would have Helen deliver them directly to the recipient's maid with the excuse that it was from her.

Just as noble ladies acquainted themselves with one another at parties, their maids became familiar with one another while waiting in the drawing room for

their mistresses. It wasn't unusual for ladies to send packages directly through their maids rather than through the post. Privacy was an unspoken rule in these exchanges, so the maids wouldn't breathe a word to anyone outside their own house.

"Still," Helen said, "it doesn't change the fact that I'm borrowing your name."

"I suppose."

It was a trivial matter for Claudia. During her sex worker days, Helen was the only reason she was able to make it at the brothel. If she considered how much she owed Helen, this was hardly a drop in the bucket.

But doing any more for her than I already have would just be selfish of me.

After all, this Helen had no memory of all the favors she'd done for Claudia in her past life. It would be one-sided charity to her. That would only be a burden.

Although I'm not just doing this because I owe her.

More than anything, she wanted Helen to be happy.

Helen took a seat. Unable to think of anything else to say, Claudia reached for Helen's hair. Maids wore special hats to keep their hair out of the way as they had cleaned. Helen normally had her hair tied up and wore one of these hats, but her head was bare now since she removed it when they exercised. Claudia pulled out the band and pins keeping it in place, letting Helen's long, flowing hair fall.

"Lady Claudia?"

"Your work hours are over. There shouldn't be a problem with this, right?"

A scent filled Claudia's nose as Helen's hair fanned around her shoulders. It was a familiar scent. Strange. She isn't wearing perfume like she did when she was a sex worker. I suppose it's just her natural scent, then.

All the tension left her body. She couldn't even begin to describe the comfort this nostalgic scent brought her. Claudia ran her fingers through Helen's hair, which unlike Claudia's was perfectly straight. There was a limit to how much a maid could take care of her physical appearance. Claudia noticed Helen had split ends. Their presence was like a thorn that pricked her heart—a reminder

of how different their relationship was now.

If Claudia were honest, she wished they could be more at ease with each other. *I'm hoping for too much.* She knew that if she asked for it, Helen would comply, but that wouldn't make it any better. She wanted them to grow closer naturally.

Emotion welled up inside her. Claudia forced it down and lidded her own feelings. It was enough that Helen was happy and healthy. Helen was no less kind to her even though they were mistress and maid, and Claudia still thought of her as an older sister.

"I have been hesitating over how to convey this..." Claudia began.

"Hmm?"

There were times when Helen acted a bit embarrassed but still allowed Claudia to do as she wished. However, when she stopped combing her fingers through Helen's hair, Helen attempted to stand.

Flustered, Claudia said, "No, it's fine. There's something I need to retrieve. You stay there."

"I should be the one doing that if you need something!" Helen insisted.

Claudia held up a hand to stop her. What she wanted to fetch was a box dressed with a beautiful curled ribbon. It had been too adorable for Sylvester, but it fit Helen perfectly. Helen had a sweet tooth, so Claudia packed her box full of milk chocolate. The flavor was no different than the others, but she had used different molds for all six of the bite-sized pieces inside, giving each a unique shape, such as a rose or a heart. For the latter, Claudia had dyed some cacao butter red and painted that across its surface.

She set the box in front of Helen, then then moved behind her, looping her arms around Helen in a loose embrace.

Helen was so shocked she nearly shot out of her chair. "Lady Claudia, what are you...?!"

"I love you dearly, Helen." She could think of no other words to describe her emotions. It was vexing; she wanted to offer something more substantial, especially since Helen was always the one giving her courage and reassurance. "I really do."

There was a subtle warmth that only a woman could provide. Ordinarily, mothers did this for their daughters, but for Claudia, it had been Helen. Her eyes heated with tears, blurring her vision.

She laughed dryly. "I suppose it probably only burdens you to hear that."

"No! No, not at all!" Helen pulled out of her embrace and whipped around. When their gazes met, Claudia was stunned. It was like gazing in the mirror; all the affection she felt was reflected back at her. Helen's arms shot around her, pulling her in tight hug. "I feel the same way! I love you dearly too, Lady Claudia!"

Claudia's emotions hit her like a tidal wave. Tears streamed down her cheeks. There was a part of her that was overjoyed to hear this, and a part of her that still longed to hear Helen call her "Dee" like she once did.

"It might sound odd to say that I adore you from the very bottom of my heart, but it's true. That's how much I love you! So, it means more to me than you'll ever know to hear you say the same!"

Although Claudia knew she should respond, all her lips did was tremble. A warmth swelled in her chest. Who cares what she calls me? We can always change that in the future. That's not what's important. It might be impossible now, but at least in this life, Claudia and Helen had tomorrow to look forward to. As long as they continued being close and bridging whatever distance remained between them, there would come a day when Helen would call her by her nickname again.

"Does that mean our feelings are mutual?" Claudia asked.

"It does, yes."

The two pressed their foreheads together and laughed. In the small gap between them, their hair mingled together. Claudia savored the moment, knowing every bit how precious it was.

"Lady Claudia," Helen said, "would you mind if I offered you something as well?"

"What would that be?"

Once the two had calmed down, Helen left her chair and motioned for Claudia to take a seat instead. What she placed in front of Claudia was a box of chocolates decorated with black and blue ribbons. They were styled with curls, much like the ribbons on the box that Claudia had offered her. However, this package was also adorned with a tiny, handmade stuffed bear.

"I realize it is the same as what you gave me, but I thought these would be better than anything I could buy in a store. The chocolate is the same, so I added this little stuffed animal as a way of making it more unique and personal."

"You mean you sewed it yourself?"

She nodded. "Yes, though my needlework is no match for yours. I apologize for how haphazard it is."

"I couldn't be happier!" Claudia bounced in her seat. "This is utterly delightful! Where should I put it?" The bear was about the size of her palm, and the plush fabric felt delightful against her skin. She wished she could hold it forever, but she feared she might damage it. "Perhaps by my pillow would be best. Yes, that way I can gaze at it before I go to sleep and again when I wake up."

Blood rushed to Helen's cheeks, and she shrank in on herself. "I had hoped you would be pleased with it, but, um...it's amateur work. If you look too closely, you'll start to notice how poor the craftsmanship is!"

"It looks excellent to me. Even assuming it had any flaws, I would only find them endearing." Flaws emphasized that Helen had sewn it herself. That warmed Claudia's heart. She grinned from ear to ear.

Helen hesitated but realized she couldn't argue the point. "If you're pleased with it, then I can ask for nothing more."

Claudia giggled. "The maid who makes my bed will notice it by my pillow when she comes in."

"I don't understand where you're going with this."

"The other maids know you made this, don't they?"

"They do. Why?" Helen lifted a brow.

"If I leave it here, it will drive home the point of how much we care for each other. Don't you agree?"

"Pardon?!"

It was an opportunity for her to establish her relationship with Helen. No one could come between them. Claudia was pleased with this idea. She was *definitely* positioning the bear by her pillow.

"I have to let everyone know that you're taken!" Claudia said. Especially after she'd seen how the male cooks reacted. Helen was obviously popular. It wasn't a stretch to assume the male servants were already whispering about her. This would at least be a way to keep them somewhat in check. Planting her hands on her hips, she declared, "I won't let anyone get their hands on you that easily."

Helen stood there, frozen, the heat rising from her cheeks all the way to the tips of her ears.

Bonus Chapter: The Villainess's Gift to the Duke's Heir

Once the issue with Fermina was settled, Claudia returned to her ordinary, peaceful life. The seasons shifted from autumn to winter. As the air outside took on a chill, one event weighed heavily on everybody's mind: Confetti, the day when women offered handmade sweets to the men in their lives. The aristocracy and common folk alike celebrated Confetti, but among the former, it was customary to present chocolate.

Claudia had already distributed chocolate to everyone important in her life. There was, of course, a box marked for Virgil among the many she wrapped, but his was to be delivered last after he peeked in on her while she was making them. Last for her, that is. It wasn't necessarily the last day of Confetti.

If anyone were to see this, I fear they'd get the wrong impression.

She let out a small laugh at her brother's pitiful expression. Claudia could hardly believe her brother was known as the Ice Scion when he looked like this.

The two were enjoying tea together in Virgil's room. The large windows afforded them an abundance of sunlight. The interior decoration was sparse and subdued. It lacked any real color, save for a single vase with an array of flowers. He had apparently prepared it today in anticipation of her visit. The room was vast and relatively empty; her brother kept only the bare essentials in here.

The top of his desk is orderly, much like his desk in the student council room, Claudia thought.

Virgil served as student council president, and he kept his desk strictly clutterfree, not even leaving a single sheet of paper behind. The only exception was the school festival, when he'd been loaded down with mountains of paperwork.

The lack of any ornamentation made the space feel that much larger. I think it's less that he dislikes unnecessary items in his space and more so that he has

no interest whatsoever in interior design.

Claudia periodically felt the urge to change up the interior of her own room, but that wasn't something Virgil shared. His tidy quarters were a physical representation of his meticulous personality.

Since Claudia came to his room, Virgil kept his eyes glued to her hands the entire time. No, not her hands, precisely; he was staring at the wrapped box of chocolates she carried.

"Am I really the last person?" Virgil asked.

"You are." She nodded, then added, "In fact, I already passed out all the extra chocolate to the staff."

"I didn't want to know that!" He clutched his head in his hands.

Just a few days ago at a tea party, Claudia had given Louise her chocolates as well. Virgil really was the absolute last person. Given how distraught he was, he probably wouldn't dare to peek in on her again in the future.

"If it were Helen, I could accept it since we have an alliance, but for everyone else to have received theirs too..." Virgil cursed under his breath.

"An alliance? What's this about an alliance?"

He shook his head. "Never mind. I was talking to myself anyway."

It was human nature to grow even more curious when denied information. Claudia was no exception. But seeing how crushed her brother was, she refrained from pushing the matter.

"You may be last, but these chocolates are full of my love," she assured him.

"But less love than you give Syl."

Claudia gave him a look. "Don't pout. The love I feel for him is completely different from the love I feel for you." It would only make her uncomfortable for him to compare them. "It was touching how worried you were about whether you would receive chocolate or not, but I have to draw a line with you so you know what's right and what's wrong."

"There's no flaw in your logic, so I can't argue with you there. I was the one in

the wrong," Virgil admitted.

She smiled, pleased with his answer. "It's more than enough knowing you've reflected on your actions. Now, go ahead and try my chocolates."

"It seems a shame to even open them."

"Well, they'll still be good for a while, but..." Claudia let her voice trail off. Fruit sometimes needed time to ripen after being picked, but this wasn't fruit. It would be better to eat it quickly. If left for too long, the oil in the chocolate would begin to separate and ruin the flavor.

"Did you do the wrapping yourself, Dee?"

"I did. I even selected the color of the ribbons."

The ones on his box were black and blue, a color scheme they shared as siblings. For their shape, she'd gone with a double ribbon, giving the bow an extra layer. Unlike with Helen's, she placed all dark chocolate inside of Virgil's box.

They're all square-shaped, but they took more time to make than anyone else's.

Sylvester's had also taken some time because she was so meticulous about the selection process, but these were the most time-consuming. The reason Virgil's had been so painstaking to perfect was because she had created an imprint of the Lindsay family seal on them. Claudia had to wait for the chocolate to set before making the imprint, but if the tool she used was too hot, she would burn the chocolate. If she pressed too firmly, it would distort the chocolate's form and the seal as well.

I underestimated how much of a pain making his would be. There were numerous times along the way she thought about giving up and leaving the task to the cooks, but Claudia persevered. The cooks melted any failed pieces and reused them to create the chocolate that she later distributed to the servants.

"You're really handy," Virgil said, gently stroking the ribbons.

Claudia's chest squeezed. I never thought he'd treasure my gift this much.

Virgil may have been the Ice Scion outside of their estate, but she knew the

true warmth of his heart. The affection in his gaze was proof of that. He was overjoyed to receive her chocolates, although he was the last in line.

"Thank you, Elder Brother. For everything."

"What's this all of a sudden?"

"I simply wanted to convey my feelings to you. I cannot express how happy it makes me to be your younger sister."

Prior to her second chance at life, Claudia hadn't known anything about what kind of person Virgil was.

I never realized how much emotion was hidden beneath that cool exterior.

Virgil treasured her, of course, but he also cherished Sylvester and Tristan. He would stake his life to defend anyone he deemed worthy of his protection. That was likely why he condemned her so harshly back then.

Virgil blinked several times, then broke into a sheepish grin. His expression made her chest squeeze yet again. *He looks so utterly adorable right now!* It reminded her of when he was younger, the way he smiled so innocently.

"I feel the same. I'm happy being your older brother, Dee." He reached over and caressed her hair.

Now it was Claudia's turn to look bashful. His large hands brought her immense comfort.

Virgil furrowed his brow as he studied her and the way she leaned into his touch. "There's just one problem."

"Oh? What's that?"

"My little sister is so beautiful that I'm afraid she's ruined me for any other woman."

"Goodness!"

There was nothing she could do about that. But it was good to know that he wouldn't fall for a woman's wiles like his more gullible self had in her previous life.

"It seems the prospects for your love life are grim then, hmm?" she teased.

"Yup. So you won't mind if I get in the way of you and Syl, right?"

"Please don't test me." Why would you think that would be okay?

Virgil shrugged. "It's wonderful that you're happy, but it just doesn't sit right with me to see Syl happy, him being the way he is."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, you know... He's got some personality problems, right? Like how possessive he is."

"That's an improper thing to say, but I won't disagree." Besides, even Claudia would never be able to cure him of his habit of enjoying other people's worst qualities.

"And in spite of that, he's got himself a fulfilling love life," Virgil grumbled.

"Think of my happiness first and foremost."

"I'm always thinking about your happiness before anything else."

"Do you not hear how you contradict yourself?" Claudia let out a strangled laugh as he groaned. "I would not appreciate you getting in the way of our relationship, but as Syl's future brother-in-law, I give you permission to use that position to your advantage."

Virgil's eyes lit up. "That's brilliant!"

As much as she pitied Sylvester for having to deal with her older brother's antics, it came with the territory.

"However, need I remind you that if you keep letting your jealousy get the best of you, you will lose the opportunity to marry entirely?"

"Hrk!" He shrank back. "I'll just leave my engagement to the capricious gods."

"The capricious gods are called capricious for a reason, you realize."

Was it really all right for the duke's heir to have such grim marriage prospects? In exchange for being more discerning about women and their underhanded tricks, Claudia found her brother had developed a different problem instead.

Afterword

 $T_{\text{O THOSE WHO}}$ don't know me yet, it's a pleasure to meet you! My name is Bakufu Narayama. Thank you for purchasing this book.

I ordinarily dedicate my time to the world of BL, so this is my first work featuring a female protagonist. In the past, I produced some indie otome games as well and provided illustrations for my friend's work, but I stuck to reading rather than writing novels with female MCs.

Around this time last year, I never thought I'd be writing something like this. But there was a point where I suddenly felt this deep desire to create, and as a result of the writing process that followed, I was blessed with the opportunity to get published. It made me realize how unpredictable life can be. Some part of me is still anxious, wondering if my series really deserves such an honor.

I have packed this series full of elements that I enjoyed in the long years I spent reading. It won't be to some people's tastes, I know, but if I can share even a little bit of the love I have, it would mean the world to me.

Villainess series are awesome, aren't they? I love them. Although we often use "villainess" as a way to classify stories, there's so much variety even within the genre. It makes me so happy. Though I will say I have to be careful—it's hard to put them down once I get started. I hope you'll all be careful not to let your hunger for reading get the best of you either. As a reader myself, I speak from experience.

Ebisushi-san is an absolute god for bringing the villainess I imagined to life with the illustrations. I'm sure you'll all agree with my sentiments after seeing the cover. I experienced total cuteness overload from the very first character designs, and unable to contain my passion, I started flooding my editor with fanart. I love to draw too, after all.

It goes without saying that our protagonist, Claudia, is absolutely gorgeous—but don't you think the guys of this series are seriously beautiful too? I mean, the way each of them gaze straight out at you on the cover... Be still, my heart!

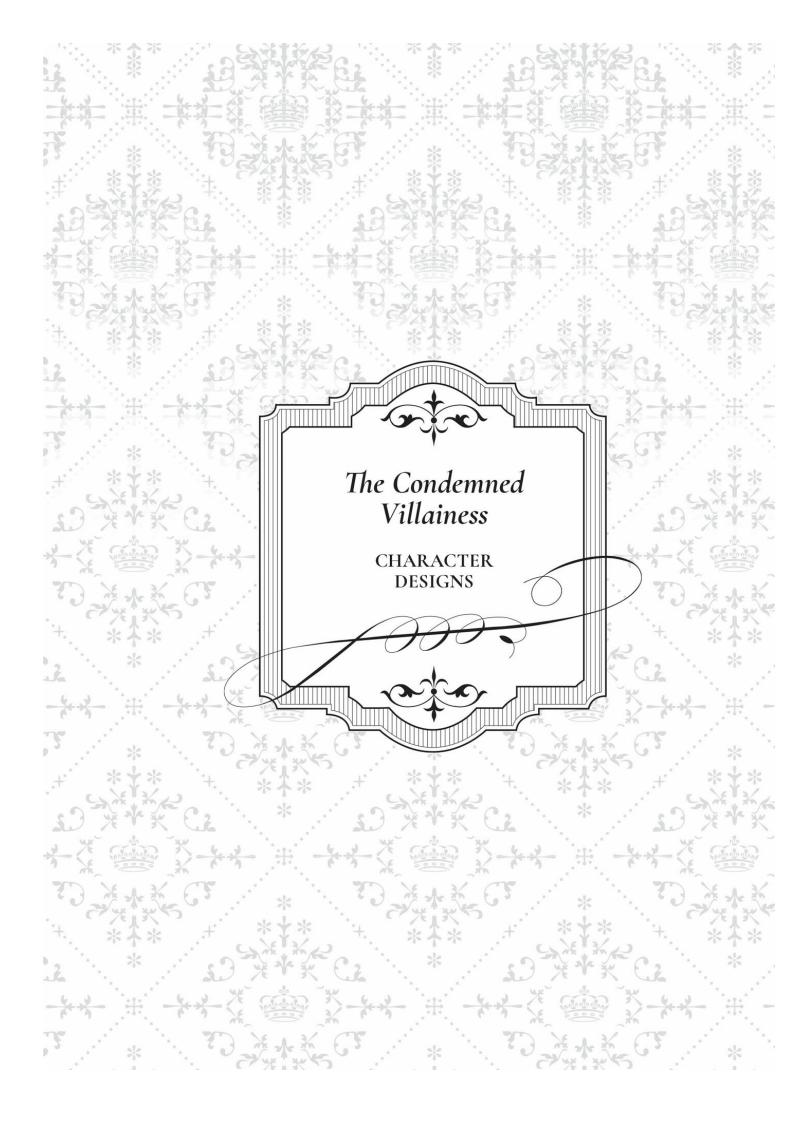
I could go on forever about the illustrations if I wanted, but I will restrain myself. If you'd like to hear my endless gushing on the matter, you can type #完璧悪女 or #condemnedvillainess into the Twitter search engine and find my Tweets. My editor came up with the original hashtag. Talk about genius, am I right?

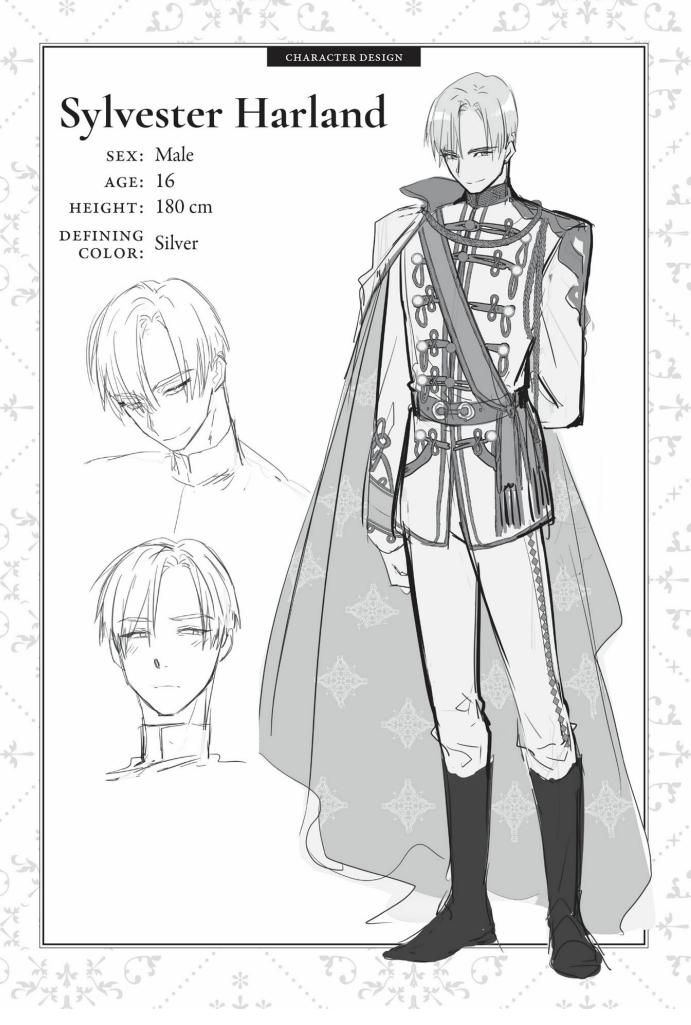
For those of you who struggle to remember the name of the series due to its length, feel free to refer to it this way instead. I would love for you to use these hashtags to share your impressions with me. Nothing would bring me more joy than all of us enjoying this series together.

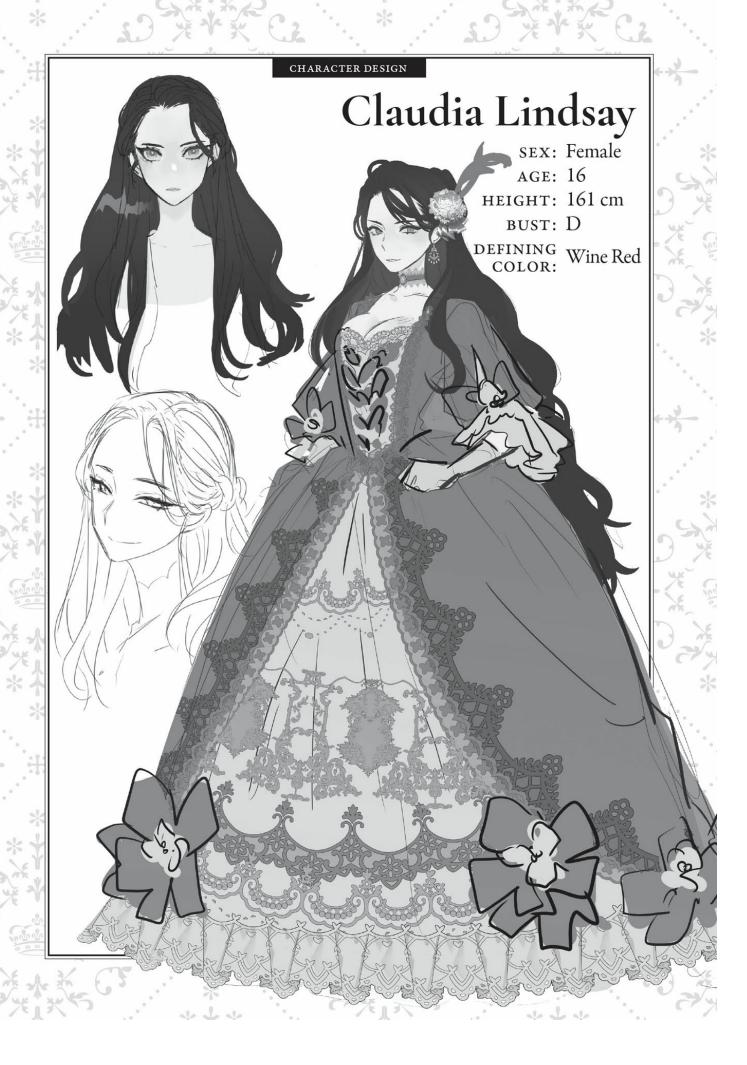
Finally, I would like to thank my family and all the readers who have supported me, as well as the publishing company who made this print version a reality. Please know you have my deepest gratitude. As for everyone else, I hope you'll continue to enjoy my work, and I pray we'll meet again in a future volume!

—BAKUFU NARAYAMA

P.S. I would love to hear your thoughts! I eagerly await your Tweets.







FROM THE AUTHOR

Bakufu Narayama

Born in Nara. Currently resides in Hyogo. This book is their debut work. Admires suave women. Loves reading, watching, writing, and drawing. Ordinarily a fan of the protagonist being the top (or more assertive person) in any relationships with other characters.

FROM THE ILLUSTRATOR

Ebisushi

Illustrator. It was so much fun designing so many brilliant dresses and uniforms! I hope you enjoy my illustrations as much as I did making them.



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